



AIR SHOW DISPLAYS NORTH KOREA'S FLIGHT SKILLS, NEW AIRPORT

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North Korea opened an air festival featuring sky diving, air force demonstrations and lots of beer Saturday to promote a newly renovated and upgraded airport in the coastal city of Wonsan, an area where it hopes to draw more foreign tourists.

The two-day International Friendship Air Festival has been touted for months by the North as part of its ongoing effort to draw more tourists. The Wonsan area with its beaches and rugged mountain scenery, including a ski resort, is already popular with Chinese tourists and in the past attracted many Japanese, who came by ferry.

Japanese visits dropped off abruptly as political relations deteriorated over revelations that North Korea had abducted more than a dozen Japanese people in the 1970s and 80s and then over its nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs.

The new Wonsan airport features a sparkling terminal building with cafes, shops and an airy, glass-walled modern design. Aircraft from the national flag-carrier, Air Koryo, were lined up on the tarmac in a static display.

A Hughes 500 helicopter, modified for military use, started off the show with a low-to-ground display of hovering and aerobatic techniques. A MiG-29, a Russian fighter jet, roared over the crowd to loud roars of cheers and applause, and another Russian-made ground attack fighter flew later in the morning.

The air show grew from the efforts of British tour company Juche Travel Services in organizing trips for plane spotters to fly around North Korea on its fleet of Russian planes, said the company's David Thompson.

"We started running the aviation tours to (North Korea) in 2012, and ever since then our customers have pushed us to arrange something spectacular in this sort of style, as an air show," he said. "It's taken a number of years to put it together, but we've managed to do it."

Thousands of Koreans turned out for the opening, along with a crowd of foreign journalists and tourists invited to attend the event.

Han Chang Rim, a 38-year-old cafeteria worker from Rason, in northern North Korea, said he was most impressed by the fighter jets.

"Seeing the MiG-29 was the most interesting, both the plane and the skills of the pilot," he said. "Our guide said the pilot has actually met Marshall Kim Jong Un. I'm really enjoying this."

It is very unusual for secretive North Korea to show off its military aircraft. The MiG-29s are believed to have been acquired from Russia in the 1990s. The U.S.-made helicopter has been shown here previously, raising questions about whether the North had obtained the helicopters in violation of sanctions.

North Korean pilots are believed to get less flying time than military pilots in many other countries because of the scarcity of jet fuel - though the levels of skill at the air show were typical of such displays elsewhere.

The airport - officially called Kalma Airport - was transformed for commercial use after having previously been used by the military.

Wonsan is known for its beaches and the rugged scenery of nearby Mount Kumgang, which was popular with South Korean tourists until a brief thaw in relations with Seoul cooled as well and a South Korean tourist was shot for crossing into a restricted area. Masik Pass, North Korea's recently opened luxury ski resort, is also just a short drive from Wonsan.

North Korea has been trying to promote tourism for years, but its efforts have been severely hindered by international sanctions and political tensions over its nuclear weapons program.

The North tested its fifth nuclear weapon earlier this month, bring sharp criticism from its neighbors and especially the U.S. North Korea's foreign minister in a defiant speech at the United Nations on Friday vowed his country would strengthen its nuclear capabilities.

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