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Michael Palin: 'I'm as happy at 75 as I was on my 30th birthday'



Michael Palin: 'North Korea doesn't feel grim, it doesn't feel brutal – it's not an unhappy place' CREDIT: ANDREW CROWLEY

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By **Mick Brown**

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There is a delightful moment, which Michael Palin recounts in [his journal of his travels last year in North Korea](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/biography-books/inside-worlds-secretive-state-michael-palin-ventures-north-korea/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/biography-books/inside-worlds-secretive-state-michael-palin-ventures-north-korea/>), when he celebrated his 75th birthday.

Hungry and thirsty after a hard day's filming in the Wonsan Special Tourist Zone, at an airport totally bereft of any passengers, and at a co-operative farm where a woman brusquely dismissed Palin, and his brave attempts at hoeing a vegetable patch, as "unnecessary" – "which is not really you want to hear, especially on your birthday" – he and his crew adjourn to a restaurant.

There, they are ushered into a back room decorated with balloons and tinsel, where the stone wall of North Korean officialdom finally cracks. Enter his appointed minders, hitherto poker-faced and watchful, bearing a bouquet of flowers and an enormous cake, joining in with "a rousing Anglo-Korean chorus" of Happy Birthday.

"This," Palin writes, "has been the most extraordinary and wonderful birthday of my life, only equalled by my 30th birthday performing in a Python show at the Birmingham Hippodrome, when the entire audience sang 'Happy Birthday' at the end of [the Dead Parrot sketch](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comedy/comedians/monty-python-s-25-funniest-quotes/the-parrot-sketch/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comedy/comedians/monty-python-s-25-funniest-quotes/the-parrot-sketch/>)."

A cheering moment, then, and also a significant anniversary, marking 30 years since Palin set off on his very first travel odyssey for the BBC, [Around the World in 80 Days](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Around_the_World_in_80_Days_with_Michael_Palin) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Around_the_World_in_80_Days_with_Michael_Palin). Since then, he has visited some 98 countries around the world. But North Korea, he says, was the most extraordinary of all. "Which sounds a bit hyperbolic, but is true.

"People were very worried about my going," he says, over lunch in his favourite north London restaurant, "because of the way it's been branded – [the Axis of Evil](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/north-korea/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/north-korea/>) – but also because it's a very unpredictable country where the normal rules don't seem to apply." He smiles. "But that's why I wanted to go."

In fact, rather than being the grim, brutal place of popular imagination, he says, there are aspects that are quite pleasant. "It doesn't feel grim, it doesn't feel brutal – not an unhappy place." Although this, as he acknowledges, may not be quite the complete picture.

Palin's crew were given hitherto unparalleled access to film, albeit with strict conditions. "Part of the deal was they could, at any point, look through the camera and see what we were shooting, and view the material at the end of the day. What was surprising is that they rarely asked to cut anything."

How much this allowed him to show [“the real” North Korea](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/north-korea/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/north-korea/>) is a moot point. But, as he allows, it's a matter of compromise: you accept the limitations imposed, or you don't film at all. “I think we did get a foot in the door – just ajar,” Palin says.



Michael Palin in North Korea: 'I think we did get a foot in the door – just ajar' CREDIT: CHANNEL 5

North Korea, he goes on, is “a bubble”, in which veneration of the two Great Leaders, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, is absolute. “You couldn't talk about the history of the Great Leaders – they were just great. The total identification of bright, intelligent people with these dead leaders was something I've never seen before, not even in Communist countries. The leadership is a religion.”

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Palin's translator, So Hyang, with whom he appeared to strike up an almost paternal relationship. Over the course of two weeks, she talked candidly off-camera, about her family and the fact that she was 28 and unmarried, “which was considered a slightly shocking thing” – but clammed up at any mention of politics.

“At one point, she said in North Korea we are like a family, and the great leaders are our fathers. I said, in any family there are little disagreements and does this ever happen within the great family of North Korea? She looked very awkward and embarrassed. At that moment, she realised there was nothing she could say. She was being watched. And the people who were watching her were being watched, and the people behind them were also being watched.”

At the end of his time in the country, he showed her a clip of [the Fish Slapping Dance from Monty Python](https://montypython.fandom.com/wiki/The_Fish-Slapping_Dance) – a moment of supreme silliness in which a (very youthful) prancing Palin slaps John Cleese around the cheeks with a small fish, and Cleese retorts by whacking Palin in the face with a very large one.

“She wanted to see what job I did at home...” he says with a laugh. “Her reaction was very nice. She laughed a lot, and then she said: ‘But the fish – was it dead or alive?’ She was very concerned. ‘Was the fish hurt?’”



The Monty Python team in 1975, from left: John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, Eric Idle and Graham Chapman
CREDIT: BEN MARTIN/ ARCHIVE PHOTOS

North Korea, Palin concludes, “is like a very bright child that’s being kept in and not being allowed to go out and play”. And reading his account, and watching the documentary on which its based, one is reminded afresh of Palin’s great qualities as a traveller – his curiosity, good humour, and willingness to see the best in everyone he encounters.

At 76, the days of him doing programmes that take him away from his family for weeks on end are passed, he says. But his curiosity about the world hasn’t. “Wanting to travel and meet people from other countries and find the things that connect us seems to me so important. It’s the only way you can defy the increasing tendency to put the barricades up and demonise certain countries. And writing off countries as ‘bad’ because America or the Foreign Office say so does make me angry.”

If there is one abiding truth that his travels over the years have reaffirmed time and again, he says, it is that people are essentially the same all over the world, and what unites us is greater than what divides us.

Palin once defined success as “enjoying what you do, but remaining essentially the same person”. And by this criterion, he is very successful indeed. A man of steady habits, he has been married to his wife Helen for 53 years (they have three children and four grandchildren), and lived in the same house in north London for 51 years. He is a man devoid of self-aggrandisement, who counts himself fortunate to have been judged by his work and has politely declined any invitations to raise his profile by going into the jungle or onto the dance floor.

One of the great things about the Monty Python team, he says, was that they shared a very low opinion of the idea of stardom. “We never thought of ourselves as part of showbiz hierarchy; and most of us were able to go on to work on things that we enjoyed and entailed a certain amount of risk.”

Monty Python - The Fish Slapping Dance



The friendship between them all remains strong, he says, built on a singular foundation. “We’re the only people to have been Pythons...”

In May, John Cleese was criticised for tweeting that London was “not really an English city any more” (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/29/john-cleese-claims-london-no-longer-english-city-sparks-fresh/>), prompting the predictable cries of “racist” and “hypocrite” for living abroad.