Dining well in famine-ridden North Korea

By Christopher Torchia
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SEOUL, South Korea — Many North Koreans barely get enough to eat. But the capital of the totalitarian state is awash in good restaurants for those who can afford it, according to a guide compiled by three foreign-aid workers.

"Eating Out in Pyongyang" lists more than 50 restaurants where foreigners and the North Korean elite can sample a wide variety of Western and Asian fare: hamburgers, hotdogs, "American-style" pancakes, chicken à la Kiev, sushi, shark-fin soup, flying-fish egg salad and such Korean staples as kimchi, cold noodles and bibimbap, a rice and vegetable dish.

"Some of it was delicious," said Roberto Christen, a Peruvian co-author who left Pyongyang last year after a five-year stint. He worked on agricultural and environmental projects for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and traveled widely in the secretive North, which restricts the movements of most foreigners and its citizens.

The unpublished guide, distributed by the authors to hundreds of friends and colleagues, categorizes restaurant prices as cheap — an average-size meal for less than $6.20 a person; moderate — $6.20 to $12.40 a person; and expensive: more than $12.40. The prices are well beyond the means of most people in North Korea, where natural disasters and economic mismanagement have devastated food production.

The World Food Program has estimated that up to 3.8 million North Koreans — 17 percent of the country's population — could be deprived of critical international food aid by the end of the winter because of falling international donations. Top U.S. officials have accused North Korean leader Kim Jong Il of squandering the nation's resources.

Christen and co-authors Olof Nunez, a colleague at UNDP, and Sofia Malmqvist wrote the guide after venturing beyond the dozen restaurants that the relatively few foreign residents and tourists always visit. Carrying a map, they found a host of options.

"For the people in the elite, they do have a lot of food. You don't notice that there is a shortage of food in the capital. We saw a lot of middle-class people going out with the children to restaurants, on the weekends for lunch," Malmqvist said. She and Nunez have left North Korea.