DMZ travel report

Brief history about the DMZ
I had the opportunity to go to the DMZ, the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea during my first semester of my year abroad at Seoul National University. The demilitarized zone is an area of land which runs across the Korean Peninsula separating the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). The DMZ runs among the vicinity of the 38th parallel north and divides the two states in half. Upon the creation of ROK and DPRK in 1948, it became a de facto international border and one of the tensest fronts in the Cold War during the Korean war and the years after, however, the battlefront has been as South as Busan (picture below). The DMZ is 250 kilometers (160 miles) long, approx. 4 km (2.5 miles) wide.

My experience at the DMZ:
My day started off at 5 am. I had to get from my area, Sillim-Dong, to Hongdae, in order to take the bus. I had booked my trip with a local agency, one of the few that carries out tours to the DMZ after COVID, as the Korean government have limited the number of visitors.

The drive from Seoul to the border only lasted about 45 minutes, which feels surreal considering the current state of inter-Korean relations with the missile tests. First, the bus stopped at Imjing park, the closes park to the DMZ with many beautiful war monuments. Especially the story behind the comfort women statues made me emotional (picture 1). Comfort women or comfort girls were women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied countries and territories before and during World War II. The statues symbolize two teenagers who were
comfort women. There shadows indicate that they have an old soul due to their traumas. I also saw an art piece that contained stones from 86 battlefields in 64 different countries (picture 2).

Furthermore, we also saw the freedom bridge. One of the interesting facts I learned about the bridge was that the owner of Hyundai once took 1001 cows over the bridge in 2001 to donate it to his hometown in North Korea, as he was originally from North Korea and moved to the South before the war due a better business environment in the South. The reason why the number was 1001 was because one of the female cows was pregnant.

After spending two hours at the park, the bus took us directly into the DMZ. Here we went into the third tunnel, one out of four tunnels North Korea has dug after the war. It was apparently designed in 1978 for a surprise attack on Seoul from North Korea, and could, according to visitor information in the tunnel, accommodate 30,000 men per hour along with light weaponry. It spans over 1,635m in length, 2m in width, and 2m in height and is located 52km from Seoul. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to take any pictures inside the tunnel, and I had to leave all my belongings in a locker due to security reasons, I assume. However, I did take a picture outside the building (picture 3). It was very interesting experiencing the tunnel firsthand, as two-thirds of the tunnel is in North Korean territory and we were allowed to look directly into the northern part.

After going into the tunnel, the bus drove us to the observation deck, where we could look directly into North Korean territory. Surreal experience. The observation deck had binoculars we could use free of charge. In the binoculars, I could see what allegedly is a North Korean propaganda city or ghost town that they made in order to make the area seem like North Korea had nice buildings. The remaining pictures are from what I could see in the binoculars.

I was back home in Sillim-dong at 3:30. I am extremely grateful for the expedition fund to give me such a generous grant to visit such an important site for the Korean War. Thank you for reading my report.