

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

October 4, 2016

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A Laureate Abroad

With a travel history that numbers 74 countries and reaches from the dense urban sprawl of Beijing to the tiny island nation of Timor-Leste, UC Santa Barbara professor of economics and Nobel laureate [Finn Kydland](#) is familiar with distant lands. But his latest destination was, in a sense, more distant than most.

Recently, Kydland had the opportunity to visit North Korea as part of an [International Peace Foundation](#) (IPF) mission to bring dialogue and what the group calls “silent diplomacy” to top universities in Pyongyang. The IPF invites academics, artists, politicians and other dignitaries to give lectures and hold workshops with the aim of promoting cultural exchange and friendship.

Kydland will share his experiences and reactions from the trip in a talk titled “A Peek Behind the Curtain: Impressions from North Korea,” Tuesday, Oct. 18, in UCSB’s Corwin Pavilion. His talk, set to begin at 5 p.m., is free and the public is invited.

“This was meant to be purely a scientific mission, not political,” Kydland said of the trip, adding that his talk will cover only incidents from his travel in and around Pyongyang, favoring vivid anecdotes over nuclear policy discussion.

Touring the city as part of an invited group of three Nobel laureates that included biologist Aaron Ciechanover, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, and biochemist and molecular biologist Richard Roberts, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, Kydland visited three universities and gave talks about his field of study and his journey to becoming a Nobel Prize winner.

“All three of us enjoyed it very much,” said Kydland, adding that language was not as much a barrier as one might expect. “At one of the universities, there were quite a few people who spoke English very well. At the other two, the faculty spoke very little English, but the students spoke quite fluently.”

The Nobel laureates were even trailed by a crew of broadcasters who tagged along ostensibly to cover the visit, but ended up going rogue. “The BBC used us as a Trojan Horse to get into North Korea and get independent footage, and I will discuss that,” Kydland said. “It turned out to be one of the most amazing parts of the trip.”

Spending a full week in North Korea, Kydland said he was surprised by the modern conveniences he encountered. High-speed internet was easy to come by, tourists were out and about and the local karaoke bars were crowded. His talk will spotlight some of the slices of everyday life he was able to enjoy, such as taking a trip to a grocery store, visiting an amusement park and observing the peculiar way the city handled traffic.

“It seemed like a normal city, with less traffic,” Kydland noted. “On nearly every corner, there was a traffic person — usually a woman — helping to guide the cars. I guess they are in charge of making traffic flow smoothly, but by our standards it wasn't obvious that there was much need for it.”

Thoughtful to avoid spoiler alerts, Kydland promised his talk will feature stories about his interactions with North Koreans, both in academic settings and in less controlled environments. He borrowed a phrase from fellow laureate Ciechanover to describe the students there: “They seemed to be hungry for knowledge.”

Kydland, of course, was eager to discuss economic policy and practice with the North Korean citizens he encountered. “One thing I found interesting was how the economy works,” he remarked. “One of the first days there, we were told by someone that North Koreans get free healthcare, free lodging and free education, *and* there are no taxes. That was a key puzzle for me over the week. I think I figured it out, and I’m going to talk about it.”

Describing how the trip compared to expectations, Kydland, even the seasoned traveler, said he brings a completely open mind to every country he visits. “I never have any preconceptions. I just take it as it comes.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.