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A Swiss Man's Bizarre Quest To Give Kim Jong-Un A Toblerone

Switzerland-born globetrotter Olivier Racine does things because he can. He wanted to give the North Korean dictator two gifts from his country, a giant Toblerone chocolate bar and a piece of the Matterhorn mountain. This excerpt from his recently published book tells the story of his misbegotten adventure.

This is part of our series: [Essays](#). Click [here](#) to read more.



PYONGYANG — It's Sept. 15, 2012. I get off the plane in [North Korea](#), carrying in my pocket an email from Sir Jong Chol that I'd printed in case I had to cover my ass. It was meant to inform any potential intermediary that the first secretary of the North Korean embassy in Switzerland, where the Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un himself had lived during his studies in Bern, had been informed of our travel and that he wished us a trip "without any trouble."

We try to reach the security gate amid the turmoil and the indefinable hubbub that is reminiscent of the Saigon airport. We have the choice between two gates. I take the left lane. The soldier on duty gives me a receipt for my cellphone, which I'll be able to retrieve when we leave. My luggage is scrupulously examined. This was predictable, considering the contents of my bags. What was less predictable was the fact that it wasn't them preventing me from going through, but indeed me refusing to move further.

They keep telling me to move along, urging me towards the exit, but I don't budge. The people behind me are starting to lose patience and make sure to let me know it, but I don't give a damn: "No, no, no! You don't understand. You first give this to [your big chief, Big Supreme Dear Kim Jong-un!](#)"

I made sure I knew how to pronounce his name to be understood. But judging by the dumbstruck expression of the soldier in front of me, I'm not sure he understands what I want to say. And you can't blame him. But no way can he [open my Toblerone](#) to make sure it doesn't contain a rifle or something, even if the exaggerated length of the packet renders his suspicions reasonable. My mission would be immediately aborted if he did.

Except they absolutely want to open the Toblerone. "No, no!" They pull it towards them, I pull it back, asking myself how this unlikely situation will unfold. I put it down one moment to defuse things, ready to grab it back at any suspicious sign. We don't understand each other the slightest. I don't speak Korean, and they [don't speak English](#). But I hold on. There are now five soldiers around me, who eventually start arguing about what they should do with me.

One of them has a stroke of genius and shifts the waiting line to the right to unjam the queue.

I considered this scenario and prepared with a very demonstrative, explanatory speech, along with detailed gestures to make myself understood. I then got out the letter I had personally addressed to [Kim Jong-un](#) to go with my presents:

"Would you be so kind as to accept, Supreme and Dear Commander of the Korean People's Army and Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, this modest gift, a symbol of my country, in the form of this chocolate Toblerone, as well as this piece of rock which I personally brought back when I climbed the Matterhorn in your honor on Aug. 21, 2012, together with a detailed fact sheet and a certificate in my name to prove this ascent. I can barely express my appreciation and gratitude for such a wonderful opportunity. It will indeed be an enormous honor for me to be received in [your fascinating and beautiful country](#), which I am greatly looking forward to visiting. With my most sincere and heartfelt thanks. Yours most respectfully, Olivier Racine"

I spared no effort. Yet it had no result whatsoever, apart from astounded looks and frowns. I start losing hope, not knowing what to do to get myself out of this jam. I'm almost about to give up and concede defeat. Then a miracle happens: An interpreter shows up.

— My name is Mr. Ryu. Good heavens, what's going on here?

— Thank God you're here! *Par Toutatis*, you speak French?

— Yes, yes! But why you not go? They say you go and they ask why big rock and big packet?

He starts reading the letter that he eventually translates, frightened, bowing down in the humblest and most respectful way in front of a military man, seemingly a senior officer, who remains skeptical about what he's only beginning to understand. After an endless debate in Korean, no one seems able to cope with this unlikely situation. Until two additional soldiers turn up with a scale, a measuring tape and a camera. Orders are given, the rock is weighed, measured and photographed, as is the Toblerone. My terrified savior is very heavy-handedly solicited to translate the thousands of questions from the senior officer, as well as my answers:

— Where did you buy this big chocolate? Do you have a receipt? Have you left this packet alone, out of your surveillance since the moment you bought it? Has it already been opened? Is this the original wrapping? Is this rock indeed a gift for our Great and Very Dear Leader Kim Jong-un? And why? Did you really bring it down from the mountain you climbed in honor of our Very Very Dear Leader? How high is the mountain? Are you alone here?

All of these questions are, of course, asked three or four times, even though I answer them perfectly clearly, while my documents are thoroughly examined — my passport, my travel itinerary, my hotel reservation, my plane ticket, etc.

Finally, my rock and giant chocolate are taken away by two soldiers, and I'm told that what should be done will be done and I'll be informed when the time comes.

— Welcome to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mr. Racine. You can go now!



"Olivier Racine is the Lausanne-based author of [Cervin et Toblerone en Corée du Nord](#) ('Matterhorn and Toblerone in North Korea').

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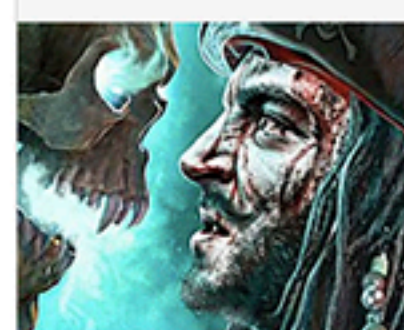
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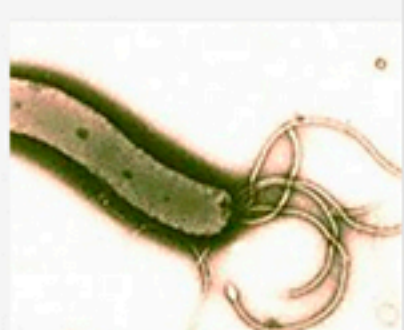
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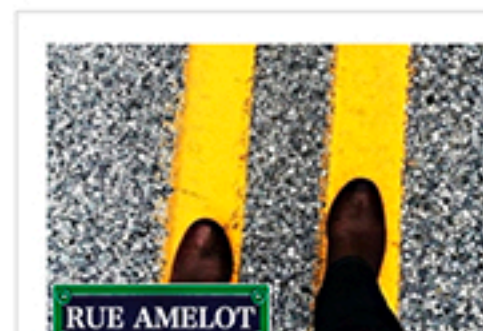
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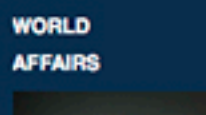
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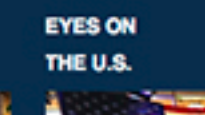
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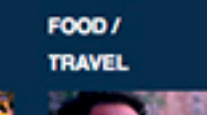
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