

Winter Wonderland

Get covered in snow with APPLE MANDY as she tours us around the chilly streets of Harbin, China. Images by Wang Yuanchang



Landscapes and classic Chinese architecture account for about 30% of all the snow and ice sculptures in Harbin every year.

HARBIN, THE CAPITAL OF northeast province Heilongjiang, is the ultimate winter destination. The much-anticipated International Ice and Snow Festival celebrates the theme “Peaceful World,” showcasing a kaleidoscope of marvelous frozen sculptures and artistic snow carving. If you can handle the sub-arctic climate, then you’re bound to witness a celebration that is indisputably one of China’s biggest highlights.

As the fourth largest winter festival in the world, after Sapporo Snow Festival, Quebec Winter Carnival and Norway’s Ski Festival, Harbin’s month-long festivity dates back to 1963. Unfortunately after two years, when the Cultural Revolution started, it was put on hold. The Chinese government resumed it in 1985 and since then, it has become a holiday destination.

With a snowflake-spitting weather that is as cold as Saturn, first-time travelers may find the Little Moscow

daunting. Multiple layers of thermals and down clothing paired with downhill ski boots, including a face mask and a wool hat are essential to keep you warm enough to enjoy the beautiful sights.

Start the day exploring the Sun Island Park Scenic Spot or Taiyang Dao located north of Songhua River. Occupying an area of four million square meters, the former Russian resort in the 1920’s has been transformed into a recreational zone. Amid the lush greenery and forest alleys, there’s a small Russian Old Town that entertains you with their traditional music and dance performances. Beside it, the Sun Island Park’s ground-breaking snow carvings such as majestic temples and modern structures are feast for the eyes.

To reach here, if you’re bold enough, skip the cable ride and cross the frozen Songhua River by foot. Once a fishing village, it takes approximately 20 minutes to walk on layers of ice covered with five inches of snow. However, be very cautious because some parts can be slippery and shatter easily. But when the water melts, according to resident Zhou Hai Jia, old people plunge into the cold water and swim to gain strength and improve circulation.

 The Ice Festival runs from January 5 – February 5, 2009. For more details, visit www.harbin-ice.net (Chinese only) or www.harbin2009.org (Chinese and English).



Everyday during winter in Sun Island, you can watch Russians dance on ice. Harbin’s architecture is notably Russian because it was once under Russia’s rule. (Left photo) Presently the largest natural park for Siberian tigers, the Siberian Tiger Park is home to 500 pure-bred tigers. They rarely prey on humans unlike the other species, and they do so only when provoked.

If this activity isn’t your choice, treat yourself to a visual spectacle instead. The elaborate and dazzling ice sculptures at Zhaolin Park are Harbin’s most breathtaking winter attractions at night. The Chinese have taken the liberty of imagination to make replicas of such iconic structures like the Great Wall of China or Parthenon of Athens. With colored lights illuminating from inside, everything looks like a fantasy playground.

But a trip to Harbin isn’t limited to multi-colored ice carvings. Those who have a penchant for adventurous activities can spend a day skiing at Yabuli Ski Resort, a two-hour drive to the site of the 3rd Asian Winter Games.

For the less adventurous travelers, the Siberian Tiger Park’s safari trip offers a close encounter with vivacious tigers. A small van that accommodates eight people takes you to see these creatures. At the final destination, get the chance to feed them with live home-raised chicken at RMB40 (US\$6); farm-raised chicken at RMB100 (US\$15); whole duck at RMB100 or beef slices at RMB10 (US\$1.50). We fed them with a home-raised chicken stuck in a long wooden stick. It was a petrifying experience but a memorable one.

Exploring Harbin is endless. The city, combining strong influences from Russia and China, still reveals a culture that is distinct from anywhere. It is in these few places we understood Harbin as a thriving city and how it has continuously developed through the years. ■

 PAL flies between Manila and Shanghai daily. Swingeround tour packages are available. For more information, call PAL reservations office (+632 855 8888 and +632 855 7777) or log on to www.philippineairlines.com.

◆ EAT

Harbin’s vibrant dining culture depends heavily on wheat, flour, potato and corn. There is nothing comforting than Dongbei-style dumplings filled with pork, beef, vegetables or shrimp. We assure **DONGBEIYA**, a 24-hour modest restaurant, serves juicy and mouthwatering dumplings better than Shanghai’s Dongbei Ren Restaurant.

Zhongying Da Jie, 26 Xiliu Dao Jie; tel. +86451 8886 0377

For traditional Dongbei cooking, **XUE FU RESTAURANT** dishes up stir-fry sour potato slices and Dongbei-style sour cabbage. Make sure to try the beef bone marrow and suck the soup using a straw.

Daoli District, 7 Shangyou Jie; tel. +860451 8801 4288; +86451 8801 4388; 329 Tongda Jie; tel. +86451 8762 1288

Get a taste of Russian delicacies at **RUSSIAN 1914 CAFÉ**. Our two visits prove piroshiki or deep-fried bread with minced meat and carrot filling; and Russian cabbage meat rolls are truly flavorful.

Daoli District, 57 Xitou Daojie; tel. +86451 8456 3207

◆ STAY

THE SHANGRI-LA HARBIN

(555 You Yi Road; tel. +86451 8485 8888; www.shangri-la.com) offers luxurious living for RMB1,508 (US\$220.50) for one person and RMB1,588 (US\$232.20) for two persons, inclusive of 15% surcharge. For budget-conscious travelers, **GONGSHANG BINGUAN**, only 30 minutes from Harbin Taiping International Airport and located conveniently near the Zhongying Pedestrian Street, offers clean, standard rooms at cheaper prices. Make sure to book early because rates change everyday. Daoli District, 6 Xi Liu Dao Jie; tel. +86451 8461 7254

◆ SIDETRIP

Stroll at **DAOLI DISTRICT’S** Zhongying Dajie and check out the Russian architectures that line the cobbled-lane streets. Today, retail stores and shopping markets occupy them. Here, you’ll find souvenirs and food like Russian vodka, chocolates, and caviar. Make sure to haggle for a cheaper price. Dongbei sausages are a must. If there’s time left, discover Harbin’s past at Sofia Orthodox Church, built by the Russians in 1907.

◆ GETTING THERE

Several airlines depart from Pudong, Shanghai to Harbin. Flights start as early as 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. For more information, visit www.ctrip.com.