

Yurt got to be joking

Skiing in remote areas of China is a hit-and-miss affair with unexpected pleasures, writes Peter Nowak.

In China, nothing ever goes the way you planned," says John-William over tea in the Yabuli après-ski lodge. "Sometimes that's good, sometimes that's bad."

I met the Dutchman while waiting for the tour bus that brought us to Yabuli, in far north-eastern China. Having lived in the country for several years, he knows what he's talking about. And since I've spent the past few weeks attempting to ski in China, I know exactly what he's talking about.

A few weeks before meeting John-William, I was in a four-wheel drive on the other side of the country, trundling up a snowy path in search of skiing. A flock of sheep scrambled out of our way; the shepherd gave us a nasty glare as we passed.

"Kazakh farmer," said Jessie, my Chinese guide, as we crept cautiously into a tiny village, deserted except for a few donkeys idling outside a cluster of yurt tents. "They're not very nice."

What an interesting place for a ski hill, I thought.

I'd come a long way to Nanshan International Ski Resort, about 70 kilometres south-west of Urumqi. Nanshan, I had been told, was one of the best places to ski in Xinjiang, China's most remote province. The billboards on the highway to the resort – depicting skiers equipped with sleek, modern equipment and in the latest clothing schussing down a pristine slope – seemed to back that up.

With Kazakhstan only about 500 kilometres north-west, and Kyrgyzstan – a country whose name I still have trouble pronouncing – about 600 kilometres west, this would surely be the most exotic place I'd ever ski.

The 4WD lurched upward into the village and, just ahead past the yurts, a rusty, unused T-bar lift came into view. The jeep stopped; Jessie and the driver hopped out. "OK, we're here," she said excitedly.

"This is Nanshan International Ski Resort?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Are you ready to ski?"

An old man in a woollen toque and sweater stood smiling at us from the door of a nearby yurt. Given that he was the only other soul around for miles, I pegged him as the equipment rental guy – unless the shepherd down the road had some Rossignols stashed somewhere.

There was nobody else skiing, the lift wasn't running and the hill was a short, gentle slope at best, the kind that even beginners would tire of quickly. "You've got to be kidding," I mumbled to myself. Feeling seriously duped, I told Jessie that I wanted to go back to my hotel in Urumqi. Immediately.

"But why?" she asked with exasperation.

The whole affair had begun months earlier when I read a brief blurb about skiing in Xinjiang in an English-language Chinese travel magazine. I've been skiing since I could walk and am hooked on the sport, wherever it can be found. So, after weeks scouring the internet, guidebooks and magazines, turning up only the occasional tidbit of information, I finally found several resorts in the Tian Shan mountains, in north-western China. Little else about these places was forthcoming, and certainly nobody had written about them.

I got in touch with a fellow named Mark Zhong, president of Jade Road Travel Service in Urumqi, who offered to take care of all my skiing needs when I arrived. But we had communication problems – my Mandarin was basic at best and his English was only slightly more serviceable.

I asked if the resorts near Urumqi had proper lifts and if I could expect to find lots of people skiing and having a good time. He gave me quick assurances on both counts, which made me nervous – I'd travelled around China before and had been living in the country for several months, so I was all too familiar with the Chinese custom of telling you what you want to hear.



China takes the snow ... boarders, top and above, strut their stuff at the Nanshan resort near Urumqi. Photos: Peter Nowak

Still, it was a gamble worth taking and a fantastic experience if it worked.

On arrival, Mark quoted me a price for his services: 750 yuan a day for transportation to and from the resort, food, guide and "machines" (his word for equipment rental). I bargained him down to 700 yuan, but that still translated into about \$110 – for that kind of money I could expect to ski at world-class resorts in British Columbia or Switzerland.

The price was extravagant so I agreed only to one day in order to check out the resort, and then try to make my own way.

Of course, having seen what passed for an "international" ski resort in Xinjiang, I had to cut my losses and look for proper skiing elsewhere.

Which is why, weeks later, I'm on the other side of the country in

frozen Harbin, half-way between North Korea and Russia, in a hotel lobby filled with Chinese people.

After my experience in Xinjiang, I decide to take matters into my own hands and avoid the organised tour, so I head for the train station.

The woman at the counter scoffs at my request for a ticket to Yabuli, then yells at me in Chinese. After some mutually unintelligible banter, a pair of police officers and several young men gather to help me get my ticket. The only thing I succeed in getting my mobile phone pilfered.

Yabuli International Ski Resort sounded promising. It was the site of the 1996 Asian Winter Games, and it's where the Chinese national ski team practises. With 400 hectares of skiing, Norwegian-built lifts, 13 trails, a vertical drop of more than 700 metres, and its own website – with photos – the resort lived up to its name.

Our bus makes the trip to the resort, 200 kilometres south-east of Harbin, in about three hours – enough time to suffer through a Chinese-dubbed version of Terminator 3 played at ear-shattering volume over the bus's DVD system.

Finally our tour guide gets on the microphone and gives us an introductory spiel as we pull up to the beginners' slope. John-William translates for me, and my heart sinks – because nobody on the bus has ever skied before, we're going to stick to the bunny hill. I ask if we can go to the pro slopes – looming large in the background – or if I can at least be dropped off there, and the reply is a curt: "No."

We get our rental equipment and I take off for the long and wide beginners' hill. The ski lift is excruciatingly slow, yet near the top I can see a working chairlift servicing the snowboarding half-pipe. Young boarders are doing their thing there, sweeping down through the pipe and catching air on either side. They're easily as good as snowboarders anywhere else in the world.

Skating over to the top of the pipe, which has a better view of the mountain, I notice there isn't a soul on the hills. None of the lifts is working. China's top ski resort, it seems, is closed.

Destination Yabuli

GETTING THERE
Most international travellers will have to fly to Harbin through Beijing or Hong Kong. China Southern Airlines has several flights daily from both locations to Harbin.

HOW TO DO IT
If you're not fluent in Chinese, there are only two options – and doing it yourself is not one of them. Most hotels in Harbin sell packages to Yabuli that include transport, food, equipment rental and an afternoon of skiing for about \$40. However, such tours limit participants to beginners' hills. For more advanced skiing, the only option is to book through a tour company that caters to foreigners, such as Wild China (www.wildchina.com). It offers a four-day, all-inclusive tour, excluding air fare, for \$US780 (\$991).

With either option, it's a good idea to have a written guarantee spelling out what you're getting. For more information, see www.skiyabuli.com

BEING THERE
While in Harbin, don't miss the city's jaw-dropping Ice and Snow Festival. Every winter from January to March, the city becomes a winter wonderland with enormous, intricately carved sculptures. This year's life-sized renditions include a Confucian temple, the Louvre and St Peter's Basilica.







China to fund the constant running of lifts. (On making some investigative phone calls a few days later, I was blatantly lied to and told the lifts were open.)

I head back down to the beginners' hill, dejected. For the next few hours, I ski the hell out of that slope. In doing so, I discover a new kind of pleasure: most of the people are skiing for the first time and having a great time.

I've often been around beginners before, and I've seen them having fun, but this was different. China is new to skiing, and these aren't just people learning their first ski legs – I was watching a nation take its baby steps in the sport I love. That's not something you can find on slopes in North America or Europe.

This fact resonates later in the lodge, with John-William's words. In China, nothing ever does go as planned, but sometimes that's good.

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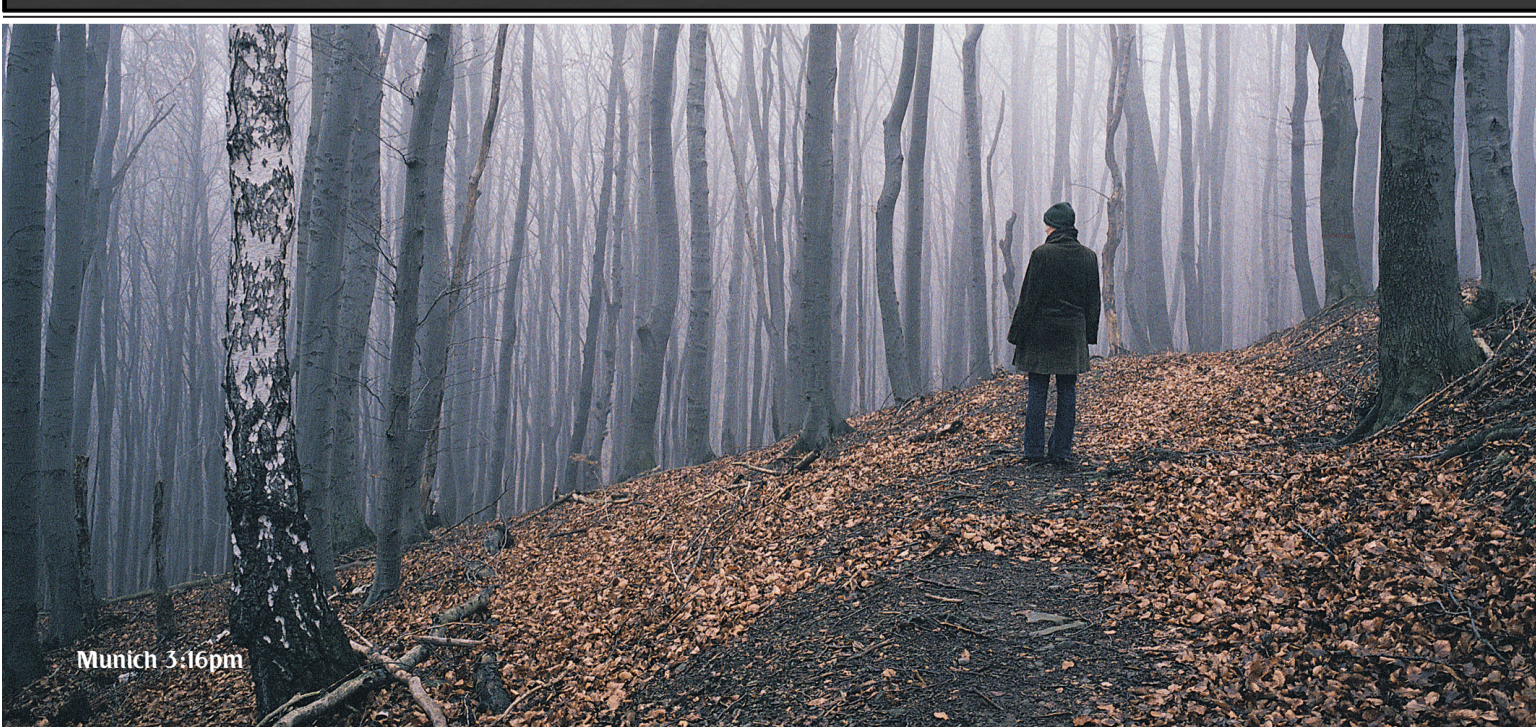
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