



REUTERS PHOTO/REINHARD KRAUSE

Fireworks in Harbin, China, explode near a tower made of ice blocks illuminated from within.

Chinese fete the feat of sculpting snow, ice



AFP PHOTOS (AND BELOW)/FREDERIC J. BROWN

The Harbin Ice and Snow Festival has made famous a Chinese city midway between North Korea and Siberia, a city where winter lasts seven months, and where snow and ice are made huge.

By Peter Nowak
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

HARBIN, China — The cab hurtles at breakneck speed along the long bridge over the frozen Songhua River, and a brightly glowing suburb on the northwest bank comes into view. Still a few miles away, some of the town's buildings are discernible from here: a towering skyscraper, a soaring archway, a host of monolithic buildings.

Everything is bathed in green, pink, and yellow lights, and spotlights broadcast the town's presence by flooding the sky overhead.

I can't help but wonder if this is yet another Chinese industrial suburb, the kind springing up outside most of the country's big cities. Harbin, in the forbidding frozen land midway between North

Korea and Siberia, is northeastern China's industrial center, so perhaps this is a new subdivision, albeit one that's nicely lit, devoted to building cars or machinery or electronics of some sort.

As the cab races along, the town comes into closer view and the shocking reality hits me: The skyscraper, the arch, and the buildings — they are not real. They are ice sculptures. Enormous, exquisitely detailed, painstakingly crafted ice sculptures.

The "town" is, in fact, what I had set out to find, the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival, yet I had never imagined something of this scale. It's a fairytale winter wonderland, with jaw-dropping works of ice art. I let out an audible gasp and the cab driver, probably accus-

tomed to seeing such reactions, chuckles at my astonishment.

Building projects in China are rarely small. Whether it's the Great Wall or the Three Gorges dam, the Chinese have to make things bigger and grander. It's a matter of cultural pride. So while ice festivals in Sweden, Japan, or Quebec City may boast some extraordinary sculptures, they seem merely quaint compared with what Harbin has to offer.

The festival opens at the beginning of January and runs until it melts, usually mid-March. Even though winter temperatures routinely drop to 20 below zero, tourists flock to Harbin from all over — though mainly from south China, Japan, and Russia — and the city is alive with winter activities such as skating and tobogganing.

Ice sculptures are everywhere. Street lamps hang from ice pedestals; advertisements are posted on ice walls; banks have huge ice archways erected in front. While

the sculptures are impressive during the day, they're positively magical at night as colored lights are inserted during construction, creating a luminescent glow-in-the-dark effect.

The proper festival is broken into two locations, the smaller in downtown Zhaolin Park. Even this "beginner" park is mind-blowing: A green-glowing, 30-foot pagoda at the southern end towers into the night sky. The park's northern end is a monument to China's military prowess: A 70-foot-long battleship and submarine flank an enormous aircraft carrier. If you pay a little extra, you can climb the stairs inside the carrier to get a view of the park from its tower. A life-size replica of a Forbidden City temple, meanwhile, graces the park's eastern side.

"This is incredible," says Anna, a teenage Russian girl from Ussuriysk, near Vladivostok. She's here on a tour with her family and friends, and cannot believe the immensity of some of the sculptures. "We have ice festivals back in Russia, but nothing like this."

Back across the river, the cab

driver drops me off in the parking lot of Harbin Ice and Snow World, the festival's main venue. It feels like Disneyland, with hundreds of parked cars and tour buses, and hawkers selling postcards and frozen candied crab apples. Bizarrely, ABBA plays from the park's loudspeakers.

I get my ticket and dive into the flood of people pushing in through the main gate, an exact replica of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. When I pop through on the other side, I am stunned once again. In front of me is a grand avenue lined with pillars — all made of ice, of course. Red carpets run the length of the avenue, and sculptures of various shapes and sizes — animals, buildings, even giant fruit — stretch out in every direction. I don't know what to look at first.

I decide to head straight for the huge tower I had seen from the bridge. Glowing green and yellow, it's the centerpiece of the park and easily 20 stories tall. It looks like a cross between a Cambodian Wat and Taiwan's Taipei 101 tower (Asia's tallest building). A ring of

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Dancers in front of a snow sculpture in Harbin's Sun Island Park. The Year of the Rooster begins on Feb. 9.

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