



REUTERS PHOTO/REINHARD KRAUSE

An artist puts the final touches on a snow sculpture in one of Harbin's park competitions.

Faithful replicas, right down to the Arc de Triomphe

Continued from preceding page

Chinese tourists, along with a handful of Russians, gawks in amazement.

Venturing north, I come across a giant pagoda, reminiscent of Beijing's Temple of Heaven, perched atop a distant hill. People are walking gingerly on a 25-foot-tall Ming-style bridge that crosses an ice lake, then going up stairs that climb to the pagoda. Running down the other side of the hill is the Great Wall, seeming as impossibly long as the real thing.

Tucked in behind the tower is the Louvre, or its façade anyway, complete with a pyramid made of snow. Towering at least 60 feet high and several hundred feet long, it might as well have been transported here from Paris and frozen for all to see.

The sights just keeping on coming as I stroll through the park's spacious grounds: St. Peter's Basilica, an actual Cambodian Wat, a Confucian temple, an ice-climbing wall, a ski hill, and much, much more. It's mesmerizing to say the least.

Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province and about 250 miles south of Siberia, ran its first ice festival in 1985. It has been growing ever since, a trend that is likely to continue with the city's recent decision to create more parks, spaces that are sure to be filled with even more impressive sculptures.

The city itself has a past as colorful as its festival. Initially a small fishing village on the banks of the Songhua, Harbin became a haven for Russians fleeing the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. In 1932, it was captured by the Japanese and used as a horrific germ warfare experimentation base during the Second World War. The city returned to Chinese rule after the war and, when relations with the Soviet Union turned frosty during the 1960s and 1970s, most of the native Russians withdrew.

Sadly, over the past few decades of development, Harbin has become more like a typical Chinese city — dull, grey, polluted, and ugly — and as such probably doesn't deserve its old "Little Moscow" nickname anymore. The Russian influence, however, still can be felt in its architecture and culture.

The heart of the city is Zhongyang Street, a mile-long cobblestone boulevard lined with shops, restaurants and cafes housed in classic Russian-style buildings. City authorities have realized the tourism value of Harbin's multi-ethnic heritage and have embarked on big restoration projects. Most of the buildings on Zhongyang, with their onion domes, cupolas, and spires, are newly restored or in the process of being patched up.

The street is also home to numerous restaurants serving Western food, as well as the odd Russian eatery, such as the imaginatively named Russia Coffee & Food. While true-blooded Russians scoff at the borscht and beef Stroganoff served up in these places, choosing instead to eat at one of the several McDonald's and KFC outlets in town, the food is certainly serviceable.

Just a few blocks off Zhongyang is Harbin's best-preserved

example of Russian architecture, St. Sofia Orthodox Church. Built in 1907 and recently restored, the magnificent onion-domed church is no longer a place of worship, but the centerpiece of a large public square that houses Harbin's Architecture and Art Center, a museum of photographs devoted to the city's history. Unfortunately, as with most museums in China, the captions are in Chinese only, so a visit is worthwhile only to gander at the interior, which has been restored but left in its original state as much as possible.

Alternatively, you can amble about outside and admire the building while listening to the Zamfir-like pan flute music piped into the square. Strangely, Zamfir and his kin are for some reason equated with Russia in these parts (he is Romanian).

Despite all the Russian influence, Harbin's main attraction is completely Chinese. Standing again on the main avenue of Ice and Snow World, on the other side of the river, it is difficult to fathom the skill, ingenuity, and perseverance needed to create all these massive sculptures. Each is crafted from hundreds if not thousands of ice blocks and infused with dozens of multicolored lights, and most have taken days or weeks to create, all done in incredible cold.

Harbin's ice festival seems proof enough that in China, anything worth doing is worth doing big.

Peter Nowak is a freelance writer in Guangzhou, China.

If you go . . .

How to get there

The lowest round-trip air fare between Boston and Harbin at press time was \$1,127 on United Airlines.

What to do

China National Tourist Office

www.cnto.org

Ice and Snow Festival

Zhaolin Park is the smaller of the festival's two venues. It's in downtown Harbin, Daoli district, off Shanghai Street. The park is open 4-8:30 p.m. Admission about \$5.

Harbin Ice and Snow World is on the northern side of the Songhua River and is only accessible by a \$2 taxi ride. The park is open all day until the crowds disperse, usually around 10 or 11. Admission is about \$10.

Where to stay

www.sinohotel.com

You can book hotels through this website, though finding and booking accommodation in China is a loose science at best if you don't speak Mandarin. Even five-star hotels have poor English, few can supply any sort of booking confirmation, and rates can fluctuate wildly.

Holiday Inn

90 Jingwei St.

86-451-84226-666

www.holiday-inn.com

Holiday Inn is the lone Western chain in Harbin, and recommended not only for its high level of comfort, but also for its familiarity with Western travelers. Rooms from \$65.

Where to eat

Russia Coffee & Food

57 Shangyou St.

Edible Russian food with an English menu. Meals \$6 and less.

Pizza Mai

154 Shanzhi St.

Decent pizza as well as other Western offerings, including burgers. Pizzas are generally the most expensive items on the menu, and are about \$7.

Dongfang Jiaozi Wang

39 Zhongyang St.

Famous for its dumplings, \$3-\$4.

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