



Northern Exposure Harbin's Icy Treasures Warmly Welcome Tourists

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Situated in northeastern Heilongjiang Province, Harbin is China's northernmost provincial capital—actually further north than the notoriously cold Russian seaport of Vladivostok, just 300 miles away. The city is a lot closer to the Russian border than Beijing, and its traditional Russian architecture, many built by White Russians who fled their country after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, gives the place a distinctly European feel.

Harbin is renowned for two things: its cold weather and the city's yearly ice festival. At times, the temperature in Heilongjiang plummets to a bone-chilling -40C, and stays below freezing nearly half the year.

Rather than endure the cold, however, the residents of Harbin celebrate it, hosting an annual extravaganza of striking snow and ice creations that often reach outsized proportions. The festival officially runs from January 5 through to February 15, but usually opens early and runs into March.

Having invested in some fetching thermal underwear, two pairs of gloves and a spare camera battery, I felt ready to brave any challenges that Harbin's weather might throw at me. Despite wearing more clothing than an Arctic explorer, however, it was with a slight sense of trepidation that I prepared to leave the cosy confines of my train compartment as we pulled into Harbin station. I mean, just how inhospitable could

this place be at 7 o'clock in the morning?

Of course, the frigid platform air was cold enough to make me wince with every inward breath, but I soon came to appreciate that exposure rather than absolute temperature was the key factor in Harbin. Walking five minutes from the station to my hotel was never going to cause more than slight discomfort. Later that day, when my fingers and tripod had become one frozen mass, and wind-blown tears were little icy rivulets adorning my cheeks, I realized that six straight hours outside at -20C might have been a tad ambitious.

Snow and ice sculpture in Harbin dates back to Manchu times, but the first organized show was held in 1963, and the annual

festival itself began in 1985. Since then it has become a massive event, bringing in over a million tourists from around the world. The sculptures created have become increasingly elaborate and artistic, and now involve competing sculptural teams from around the globe. Harbin's most impressive ice artworks can be viewed at three main locations: Sun Island Park (Taiyangdao Gongyuan), Zhaolin Park (Zhaolin Gongyuan) and Harbin Ice and Snow World.

Sun Island Park lies on the north bank of the Songhua River that bisects Harbin. The Ice Sculpture Garden and International Snow

Sculpture Art Expo are particularly impressive, and the island is also home to various Russian and Chinese museums, theatres and exhibition halls. With its stunning collection of "ice lanterns," Zhaolin Park is another must-see, with beautifully sculpted and illuminated Chinese classical works, European folktales, and mythical and real-life animals.

Ice lanterns have a long heritage in northeastern China. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) locals often used them to find their way in the long hours of darkness. At that time lanterns were simply made by pouring water into a bucket, which was then

put outside to freeze. It was then warmed before the water froze completely so that the bucket-shaped ice could be extracted. The ice was hollowed out and a candle placed inside, thereby creating an ingenious windproof lantern.

Don't let anyone scare you off visiting Heilongjiang with tales of frostbite. Pack up those polar fleeces and check out the fantastic possibilities of frozen water. With healthy doses of steaming borscht, pepper vodka and red hot showers, a winter weekend in Harbin is a unique experience not to be missed.



More photography by the author at www.pbase.com/daniel_allen

