

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

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 Archi-

tecture 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 re-

stored but left in its original state

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

ence, 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 persever-

ance 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 cre-

proof enough that in China, any-

thing worth doing is worth doing

Peter Nowak is a freelance writer

in Guangzhou, China.

Harbin's ice festival seems

ate, all done in incredible cold.

Despite all the Russian influ-

Alternatively, you can amble

as much as possible.

(he is Romanian).

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

Harbin, the capital of Heilongiang 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 sculp-

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 multiethnic heritage and have embarked on big restoration projects. Most of the buildings on Zhongyang, with their onion domes, upolas, 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

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 General tourist information.

Ice and Snow Festival Festival Zhaolin Park is the smaller of the festival's two venues. It's in downtown Harbin, Daoli district, off Shangzhi

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

Where to stay www.sinohotel.com.

Admission is about \$10.

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

o / Snangyou St. Edible Russian food with an English menu. Meals \$6 and less.

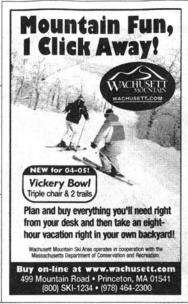
Pizza Mai 154 Shanzhi St.

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 Zhongvang St.

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

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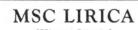
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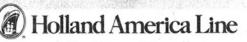
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