

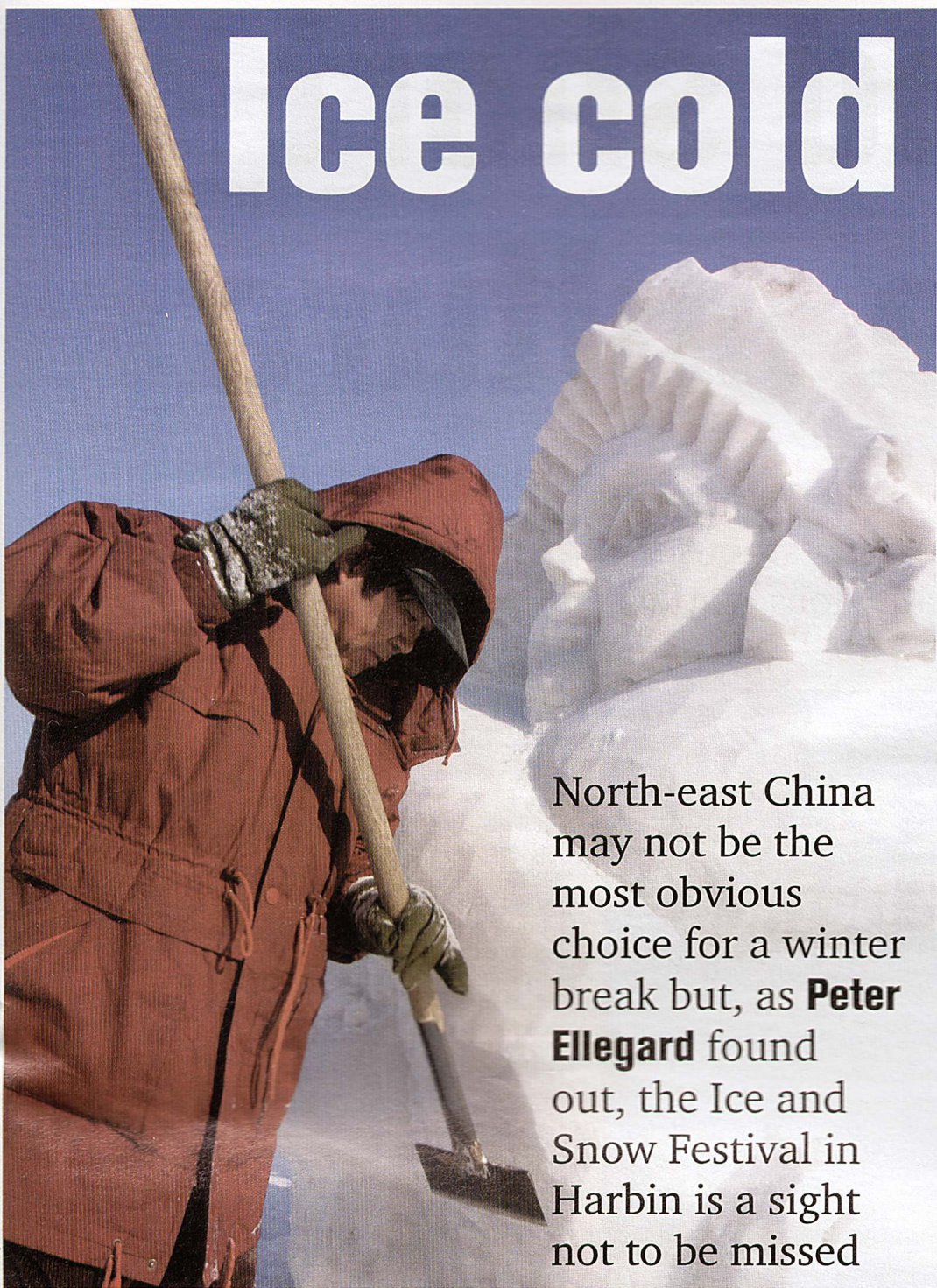
DESTINATION

Asia north-east China



84 Bigging up Japan
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Ice cold in Harbin



North-east China may not be the most obvious choice for a winter break but, as **Peter Ellegard** found out, the Ice and Snow Festival in Harbin is a sight not to be missed



NORTHERN CHINA gets cold in winter. The night air is so raw it freezes the hairs in your nostrils. Even daytime temperatures struggle to reach the giddy heights of minus 15C. Trying to cross the street when it is coated in slick ice is like attempting to walk on a skating rink while dodging traffic.

But it is these frigid conditions that enable Harbin, China's most northerly and easterly metropolis, to transform itself into a magical winter wonderland each January and February, when the city hosts a winter festival that is one of the world's foremost and on a par with those of Sapporo and Quebec.

The Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival features – unsurprisingly – masses of ice and snow carvings of incredible complexity.

The festival had already been going a month when I visited, but there were still armies of sculptors working to fashion fantastic new creations from snow piled several storeys high. Others were carefully scraping away new deposits to

reveal the detail of carvings hidden by the fresh snow. It seemed like the Chinese equivalent of painting the Forth Bridge.

Night-time is when Harbin really comes to life. The sculptures are lit by multitudes of coloured spotlights once the sun sets. Sun Island's Ice and Snow World park has become the focal point in recent years.

It is like a small city, built out of ice blocks cut from the adjacent river. At night its soaring crystal citadels are lit by multi-coloured strips of fluorescent lights set into the ice, even below your feet. The effect is dazzling.

Guests staying in river-view rooms on the Horizon floors of the Shangri-La Harbin get a grandstand view of the ice park's vivid hues just across the frozen Songhua.

The hotel also has its own ice creations for guests to enjoy – an outside ice bar, and an igloo restaurant, the Ice Palace, that looks like an ice-bound conservatory and contains five rooms seating up to 40 people. It is China's only ice restaurant and opens from late December to mid-February.

I dined with my group here one night, all of us dressed like Eskimos to keep out the cold. A thermometer on the ice wall showed the temperature as minus 15C, but we were each given a pair of white cotton gloves and a little heart-shaped heater to hang round our necks and tuck inside our coats to keep out the cold. A heater under the table warmed our legs while a hot-pot stew helped warm our insides – the steam from it

condensed on the icy ceiling and fell back down as tiny snowflakes.

For many years, the Ice Lantern Festival in the city-centre Zhaolin Park was the main focus of Harbin's winter celebrations. It is still there, and well worth a visit.

My visit was made more memorable for the wrong reasons, though. I wanted to get some low-level photographs, so took my camera backpack off to lie on the icy ground and use a couple of low tripods. Absent-mindedly I walked off leaving the camera bag, and by the time I returned a few minutes later it had gone. Sadly, even in China you need to be careful of your possessions.

But I wasn't going to let that ruin my enjoyment of this spectacular city and its festival, so a little later I

made my way down to the frozen river and marvelled at masochistic swimmers braving the sub-zero chill to take a dip in a section kept clear of ice. Some wore rubber gloves to protect their fingers from frostbite.

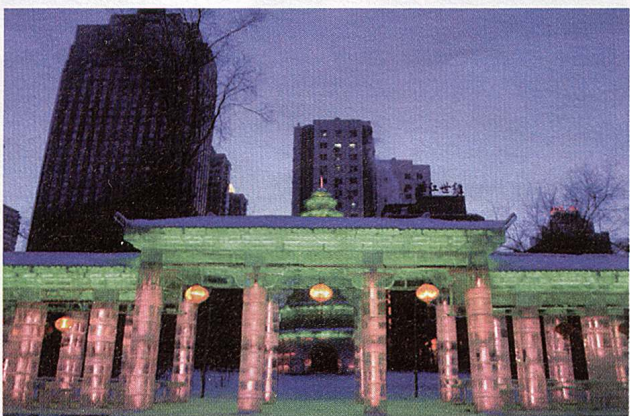
Another big attraction is the Siberian Tiger Park. The thrill of seeing these rare and majestic creatures, plus Asian lions, close-up from a minibus that tours the enclosures is tempered by the cramped conditions they endure. Live chickens are also thrown to the lions as a tourist spectacle, with visitors encouraged to buy more to be thrown. That left me cold.

But I did warm to Harbin as a destination, despite my loss. If you are looking for a cold and unusual place to send clients, they don't come much cooler.

Above: A sub-zero swimmer says no to Peter's offer of a warm towel – apparently drip-drying is far more refreshing

Above: A sculptor cleans off the night's snow

Below: The Harbin Ice Lantern Festival is a great winter attraction



BOOK IT!

Harbin's Ice and Snow Festival officially runs from January 5 to February 15, but events can run until the end of February.

A six-day Harbin trip with THOMAS COOK SIGNATURE costs from £1,199. It includes flights to Harbin and accommodation, mostly bed and breakfast. Activities in Harbin include visiting the Sun Island

snow sculptures, the Ice Lantern Festival and the tiger park, and a sleigh ride on the frozen Songhua river.

• www.thomascooksignature.com

KUONI offers five nights at the Shangri-La Harbin in a superior room on a room-only basis, including flights with British Airways from Heathrow, domestic flights and transfers in resort, from £1,461 per person. Entrance fees to the ice and snow festival parks, tiger park and other attractions are extra.

• www.kuoni.co.uk