

HARBIN ICE AND SNOW FESTIVAL

Duration: **10 days / 9 nights** · Physical effort: **Moderate**

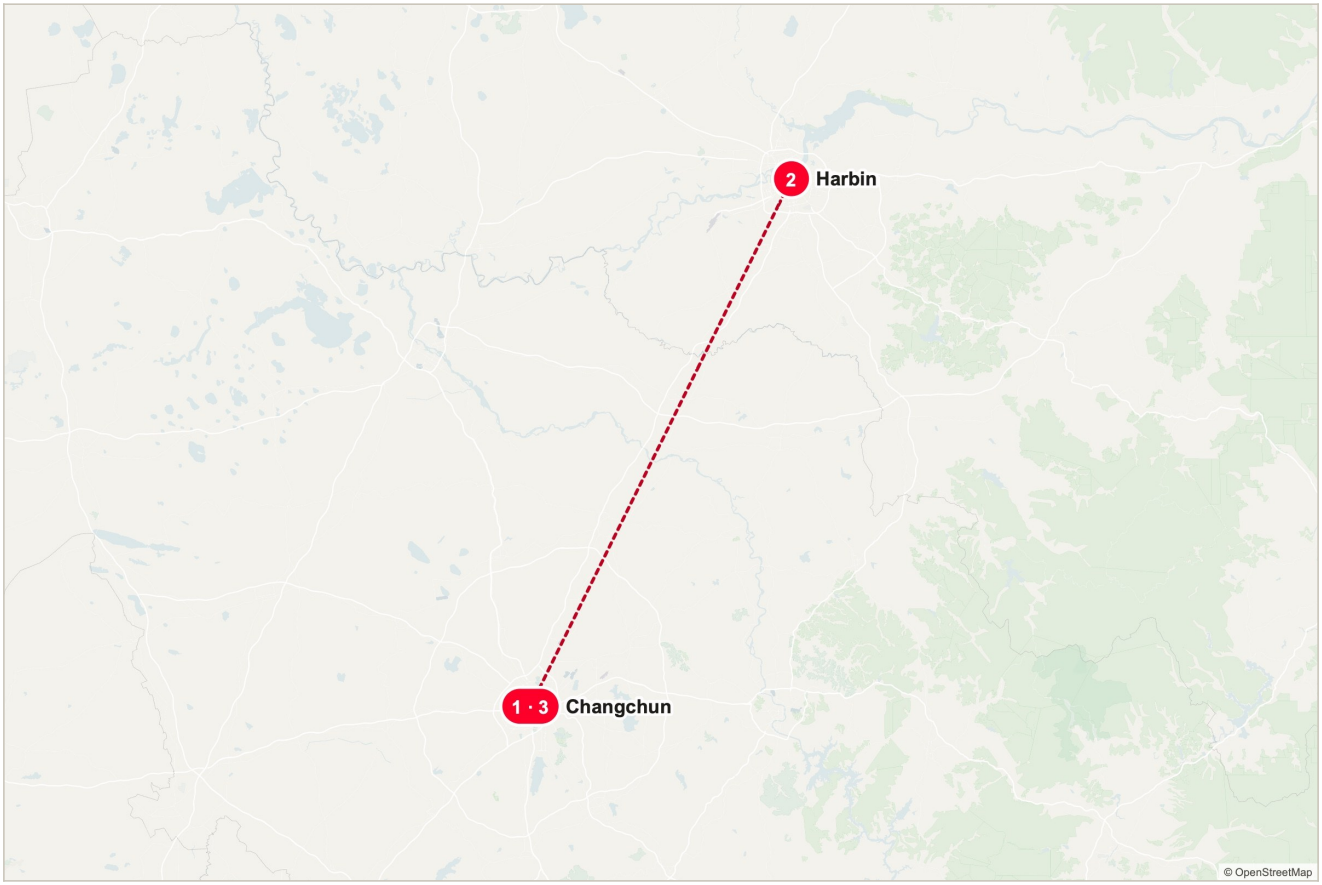
Up-to-date dates, prices and included services: moai.ch/harbin-ice-and-snow-world

Embark on an unforgettable journey to the Harbin Ice and Snow Festival in Dōngběi (Manchuria), the far northeast of China. Between majestic illuminated ice sculptures and snow artworks, the festival offers a surreal and magical setting.

Walk through intricate **ice labyrinths** by day, capturing the crystalline beauty of ephemeral artworks, while golden evening light enhances their grandeur. At night, the sculptures transform into **illuminated masterpieces**, creating a breathtaking visual spectacle. With your camera ready to capture every detail, explore the incredible blend of Chinese tradition and artistic creativity, discovering local culture through culinary delights.

On this **photo tour between Changchun and Harbin**, prepare to capture the magic and vibrant energy of one of the world's most extraordinary winter festivals, without forgetting the history of **Manchukuo**, the puppet state created by Japan in the 1930s, of which **Changchun** was the capital: the **Imperial Palace** where **Puyi** lived, the last emperor of China made famous by the film by **Bernardo Bertolucci**, the monumental **Eight Ministries**, and the historic *Man'ei* film studios.

The route



1 **Changchun**
3 nights · Days 2–4

2 **Harbin**
4 nights · Days 5–8

3 **Changchun**
1 night · Day 9

Itinerary

Day 1 – Departure

Flight from Europe with a stopover, likely in Beijing or Shanghai, heading to Changchun.

Night on the road · Flight

Day 2 – Arrival in Changchun

Arrival in **Changchun** in the early afternoon and check-in at the hotel. Changchun today is the capital of Jilin Province, but between 1932 and 1945 it was **Xinjing**, the "New Capital" of **Manchukuo**, the puppet state created by Japan after the invasion of Manchuria. Japanese urban planners designed it from scratch as a showcase of their empire in Asia: wide tree-lined avenues, circular plazas, and monumental buildings, still clearly recognisable in the city's fabric.

At sunset, we will reach **Renmin Square**, the former Datong Square, one of the nodes of this urban layout. At its centre stands the monument to the Soviet Red Army soldiers, who in August 1945 put an end to

Manchukuo. In the evening, dinner in the **Guilin Road** area, among the busiest restaurants and street stalls frequented by locals.

Overnight: Hotel in Changchun

Day 3 – Changchun and the Last Emperor

This day is dedicated to the figure of **Puyi**, the last emperor of China. Ascending the Qing dynasty throne in 1908 at just two years old, Puyi was forced to abdicate after the 1911 revolution and spent years confined in the Forbidden City as an emperor without an empire. In 1932, the Japanese brought him to Changchun and made him head of Manchukuo, first as executive leader and from 1934 as emperor. He was a figurehead ruler: every decision was made by the Japanese army.

In the morning, we will visit at leisure the **Manchukuo Imperial Palace**, where Puyi lived and "ruled" until 1945. The complex, carved from the buildings of the old salt tax office, preserves the private apartments of the emperor and empress Wanrong, the official audience halls, the gardens, and the air-raid shelter. A large museum tells the story of the Japanese occupation and Puyi's life after the war: captured by the Soviets in 1945, handed over to China in 1950, and "re-educated" for nearly ten years in the Fushun prison, he ended his days in Beijing as an ordinary citizen. He died in 1967.

This is the story told by **Bernardo Bertolucci** in the film *The Last Emperor* (1987), winner of nine Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. It was the first Western film allowed to shoot inside the Forbidden City, and some scenes were filmed here in Changchun. During the visit, we will retrace the film's locations, from Puyi's coronation as Manchukuo's emperor to his gradual downfall.

In the afternoon, we will visit the **Changchun Film Studio Museum**, housed in the original buildings of the *Man'ei*, the Manchukuo film company founded in 1937 to produce propaganda films. It was directed by Amakasu Masahiko, a character who also appears in Bertolucci's film, played by Ryūichi Sakamoto, who also composed the Oscar-winning soundtrack. After the war, the studios became the "cradle of New China cinema." The museum allows you to follow the history of Chinese cinema from the 1930s to today, among sets, backdrops, and vintage cameras.

Overnight: Hotel in Changchun

Day 4 – Changchun, the Capital of Manchukuo

In the morning, we will stroll along **Xinmin Avenue**, the monumental axis of Manchukuo's capital, where the so-called **Eight Ministries** line up—the seats of the puppet government. These buildings feature a unique architectural style, blending Western masonry with Chinese and Japanese-inspired roofs and towers. This architecture was meant to symbolise the "harmony among peoples" of Asia under Japan's guidance. Many of these buildings are now university campuses and hospitals, offering excellent subjects for architectural photography, especially under snow. We will continue towards **Wenhua Park** and the nearby area where Puyi's unfinished imperial palace once stood.

In the afternoon, we will head to the **Jingyuetan** forest park on the outskirts of the city, with its large frozen lake and snow-covered woods. In winter, it becomes the place where Changchun residents ski, ice-skate, and walk on the ice—a great opportunity to photograph daily life in the cold Northeast.

Overnight: Hotel in Changchun

Day 5 – Arrival in Harbin

Morning transfer to **Harbin** by **high-speed train**, taking just over an hour. Harbin was born at the end of the 19th century as a hub of the Chinese Eastern Railway, built by the Russian Empire. For decades, it was a cosmopolitan city inhabited by Russians, Jews, Poles, and Chinese, earning the nicknames the "Eastern Moscow" and the "Eastern Paris."

We'll visit the famous **Zhongyang Avenue**, the central street of Harbin, the longest cobblestone pedestrian street in all of Asia (about 1.5 km), flanked by buildings in Baroque, Art Nouveau, and eclectic styles. We'll then reach the **Cathedral of St. Sophia**, the ancient Russian Orthodox church with its green onion dome, one of the city's symbols, and the **Flood Monument** along the riverside. From the riverside, we'll descend to the **Songhua River**, completely frozen, where in winter people skate, sled, and spin tops on the ice.

Overnight: Hotel in Harbin

Day 6 – Harbin Ice and Snow World and New Year's Eve

This day is fully dedicated to visiting the **Harbin Ice and Snow World**, the largest and most famous ice and snow festival in the world. Every year, thousands of workers and artists extract massive blocks of ice from the Songhua River and build an ephemeral city of palaces, temples, towers, and sculptures, some tens of metres high. By day, we'll walk through the ice labyrinths, capturing the crystalline beauty of the works. As the sun sets, the golden light enhances their majesty. When night falls, the sculptures light up in coloured lights, transforming into a breathtaking visual spectacle.

New Year's Eve only: We'll stay in the park until evening to **celebrate the new year** in one of the most spectacular places in China, surrounded by lights, music, and thousands of people in celebration.

Overnight: Hotel in Harbin

Day 7 – Harbin, Winter Swimmers, and Sun Island

New Year's Eve only: After the New Year's Eve night, in the morning we'll head to the Songhua River to meet the **winter swimmers**, who, with temperatures well below zero, dive into a pool carved into the ice. The first day of the year holds special meaning for them, and between the steam rising from the water and the faces marked by the cold, it's a unique opportunity for portrait and documentary photography.

In the afternoon, we'll visit the **Snow Sculpture Expo** at **Sun Island**, on the opposite bank of the river, where sculptors from around the world create giant snow artworks. Unlike the ice architectures of the Ice and Snow World, here we'll photograph the shapes, volumes, and shadows of the sculpted snow.

Overnight: Hotel in Harbin

Day 8 – Harbin

Morning visit to **Harbin**, including the **Jile Temple**, home to a massive **golden Buddha statue**, and the nearby **Temple of Confucius**, one of the largest in Northeast China.

In the afternoon, you may independently visit the **Unit 731 Museum** (about 45 minutes by metro from Harbin's city centre), a memorial dedicated to the atrocities committed by the Japanese army during World War II, where inhumane experiments on prisoners are remembered to raise awareness about war crimes and promote peace through historical memory. The visit ideally concludes the story of Manchukuo begun in Changchun.

In the evening, visit the **Baroque Chinese Quarter** (Laodaowai), where at the beginning of the 20th century Chinese merchants built their homes and shops imitating European architecture, enriching it with traditional

Chinese decorations.

Overnight: Hotel in Harbin

Day 9 – Return to Changchun

Return **from Harbin to Changchun** by **high-speed train**. Free afternoon for last-minute shopping and photography in the city, followed by a farewell dinner.

Overnight: Hotel in Changchun

Day 10 – Return

Transfer to the airport and flight with a stopover for your return to Europe.

Climate

Extreme cold

Temperatures in Harbin range from -30°C to -15°C, rarely exceeding -10°C during this time of year, so it is essential to bring warm, layered clothing. If needed, we can advise you on what to pack or buy. Despite these temperatures **don't let them intimidate you**, it's worth it!

Good to know

Entry information: visa requirements vary by nationality. Please check and, if necessary, apply for your visa in advance.

Several countries in Europe, including Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, and others, currently enjoy visa exemption for short-term stays in China. However, visa policies may change: we recommend checking the official website for updated information.







NOTES

Thank you!

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