

Hā'ěrbīn winter tips

By Guan Ming Teo

In no particular order. I think these are all entirely essential. Collected from asking the taxi drivers, tour guides, and Hotel staff, as well as what I went through.

- Waterproof (*fáng shuǐ*) and windproof (*fáng fēng*) pretty much everything: shell pants or lined pants, oversized so you can hopefully fit at least two pairs of thermals underneath, if not a pair of jeans also; at least a duck down jacket (goose down is slightly warmer) that must also have a hood; as well as boots, with a thick sole (walking on snow will cool down the sole and then your feet, so the thicker the sole, the longer it'll take for your feet to get cold) with a good grip (ice is slippery, black ice is hard to see and is slippery, and sooty/dirty/car-oiled ice looks a bit like black ice and so is also hard to see and sort of slippery.) In case you're wondering why it needs to be waterproof when it's snow, not rain: snow melts from your body temperature and will seep into your clothes if the outermost layer isn't waterproof.
- Thermals over another pair of thermals for the legs, knee-high snow socks, 260gsm long-sleeve thermals, thermal undies. Remember the rule: cotton kills. It absorbs sweat and then will freeze, giving you frostbite. What you want is 100% wool. Unfortunately the cheaper alternatives, mostly made of polypropylene, will not cut it in these temps.
- Snowboarding/skiing gloves. They're warm, waterproof, and windproof. Don't buy them too tight-fitting as you want some air to circulate within to keep warmth (just not so large-fitting that it lets outside air in.)
- Either a beanie (100% wool again, pretty much for anything that touches your skin) and earmuffs over the top, or an awesome furry hat, like a real rabbit fur hat that covers ears also. They look dorky

but save your ears from frostbite. I did try asking if the rabbit died humanely, with little success in formulating an understandable question. There are many videos on YouTube about Chinese fox furs which show, explicitly, cruel skinning-alive techniques.

- A 100% wool scarf, to wrap around your nose/cheeks/mouth. If you wear glasses like I do, this means your glasses fog up from your breath, which then freezes onto your glasses, so you need to find some anti-fog spray (you can find it at K-Mart in the Auto aisle for car windows) or do what I did (because I didn't think I'd need car anti-fog spray) and just leave your mouth/nose/cheeks unprotected. This will most likely lead to skin peeling from wind burn (apply at least three layers of a good moisturiser,) and a lot of chill on the lips and nose. Frozen snot is a reality.
- If there's a lot of wind, snowboarding/skiing goggles are helpful. The moisture on my eyelids froze when there was a lot of wind (like at the top of the Dragon Tower (*lóng tǎ*),) so if you don't have goggles, be prepared to feel the smarting from the wind, and remember to blink frequently—keep the eyelids warm and moving and they'll stay unfrozen.
- Look at the ground while walking. Lots of people (usually tourists, the locals seem wise to the terrain) slip on patches of ice or oily snow. Walk tilted slightly forward, so if your foot slips while walking, it slips backwards, and you yourself stay upright with more weight balanced on your standing foot. Walking straight or leaning slightly back will pretty much mean you fall on your ass or are forced into the splits, because your slipping foot will kick forward. Walk slowly. If you rush you will fall. Take care at crossings—since you have to walk slower—also, the white paint is more slippery.
- When you get out of the cold and into a warm room, don't immediately strip off. Some people peel bits of their face off by pulling their face-scarf away too early. Another point is, don't let your scarf get all wet from your breath, if you're wrapping it around your face—it will lead to the ripping bits of your face off. Also, you

can catch a chill from immediately taking off all your warm layers. Leave everything on for a little while.

- Don't drink a lot while you're out. Your drinks are either cold or will go cold quickly, and that makes you cold. Also, every time you urinate your body cools down. Unfortunately, dehydrate while out in the cold, rehydrate when you're back inside and warm and have access to a toilet.
- Don't spend the whole day outside. It hurts. Go outside for an hour or two, then spend some time inside, warm up, then maybe brave the outside again. Alternate your stops between these things, for example, go outside and look at Sun Island (it's a snow sculpture expo, not to be confused with the ice sculpture expo) then go inside and have lunch, then go outside and view something else, back inside for dinner, go outside for the ice sculpture expo, back inside, and so on.
- If the sweat in your boots has frozen into little ice cubes touching your toes, you're too cold. Go inside. Keep moving your toes or lose them.
- Electronic equipment is all pretty much rated to work—at a minimum—to 0°C. You could void warranty on your DSLR by using it out in negative temperatures. Just something to be mindful about. Also, any mechanical zoom camera may in fact freeze or get snow in it, and you won't be able to retract the lens anymore. A prime lens or a phone camera might be better. I did see one girl with a thick hand-warmer-device that had windows in the middle and was designed to fit a DSLR with a zoom lens. That thing looked awesome.
- Speaking of electronic equipment, lithium-ion batteries work a lot less efficiently in extreme cold—so don't expect your devices to last as long as it normally does. Try to keep it against your body, sheltered from the cold, and it'll last longer.
- There were many things to go see, and you pretty much need someone to drive you to all of them, they're too far to walk. Catching taxis can be difficult, so pre-booking a taxi or tour van for

an entire day is a better alternative, and not too expensive: for 400rmb, we had a van for an entire day, complete with driver and they threw in a free tour guide (who can only speak Chinese, English-speaking tour guides are quite rare and highly sought after.) Ticket prices not included, but our tour guide was very nice, spoke a tiny bit of English, and organised the buying of our tickets, so we got better seats and didn't have to line up pretty much anywhere.

- Pre-book your Hotel. When the Ice sculpture expo is on, if you don't have a reservation at a Hotel, you don't have anywhere to sleep. I don't recommend the GFOUR Hotel, it was terrible, although very close to the busy/interesting shopping street, which had ice sculptures in the middle of the road.
- Things I saw in one day: **Dragon Tower** (*lóng tǎ*, 150rmb) **winter swimming competitions** (*dōng yòng*, 50rmb) a **mountain tiger park** that had also had ligers, white tigers, jaguars and more (90-120rmb I think it depends on what package you want, like taking a photo right beside an obviously drugged tiger,) **Sun Island** (compacted snow sculptures—not the same as the Ice sculpture expo—240rmb plus optional 20rmb ticket to ride the sightseeing bus from and to the entrance/exit [i.e. ride it, get off and walk around, ride it back to exit,]) a **beluga whale show** right next door to Sun Island (there are also sealion and polar bear shows, but the beluga whale show is the most popular, I think these were 150rmb, but I forget,) the **Ice sculpture expo** (opening ceremony day is very busy, and you really should pre-book tickets to this, it's cool to see at night because all the ice buildings are lit up, 290rmb,) and the **Moscow Theatre show** (some acts are slightly/a lot stripperish, but the Chinese acrobatics is cool, and you get to listen to some Russian and Chinese songs, 298rmb.)
- If you do get a driver and tour guide, get their mobile phone number, and remember to write it down on a piece of paper too. Read up about mobile phones dying quickly. Having it on a piece of paper means you can kindly ask a stranger to call them for you, if your phone is dead. If they say they'll come back to pick you up when

you're done (some things the tour guide will not be able to get into for free in order to show you around, such as the Ice sculpture expo, so they wait in the car/van for you) ask to be met somewhere inside, and not outside. Also make sure you have the number of the tour company. If you get lost and fail to find or contact your tour guide, call them to help sort it out. So, also write down your tour guide's name.

- Failing that, make sure you have your Hotel name, address and phone number written down on a piece of paper, in Chinese, so you can at least get back to your Hotel.
- Our tour guide told us that “the locals can be quite loud and they may come off as unfriendly or unwelcoming [i.e. waitstaff] but it's [probably] not because they are unfriendly or unwelcoming, but because they are 'rough'. Don't take it to heart.”
- Local specialties are supposedly: Harbin beer, lamb, mountain goat and/or yak, and I heard some rumours about dog and cat. I did not manage to find mountain goat or yak, and forgot to ask about the truth behind dog or cat. Rabbit meat is very common, so it's not really a specialty, more like a staple.

Have fun :)