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BY SHANGRI-LA

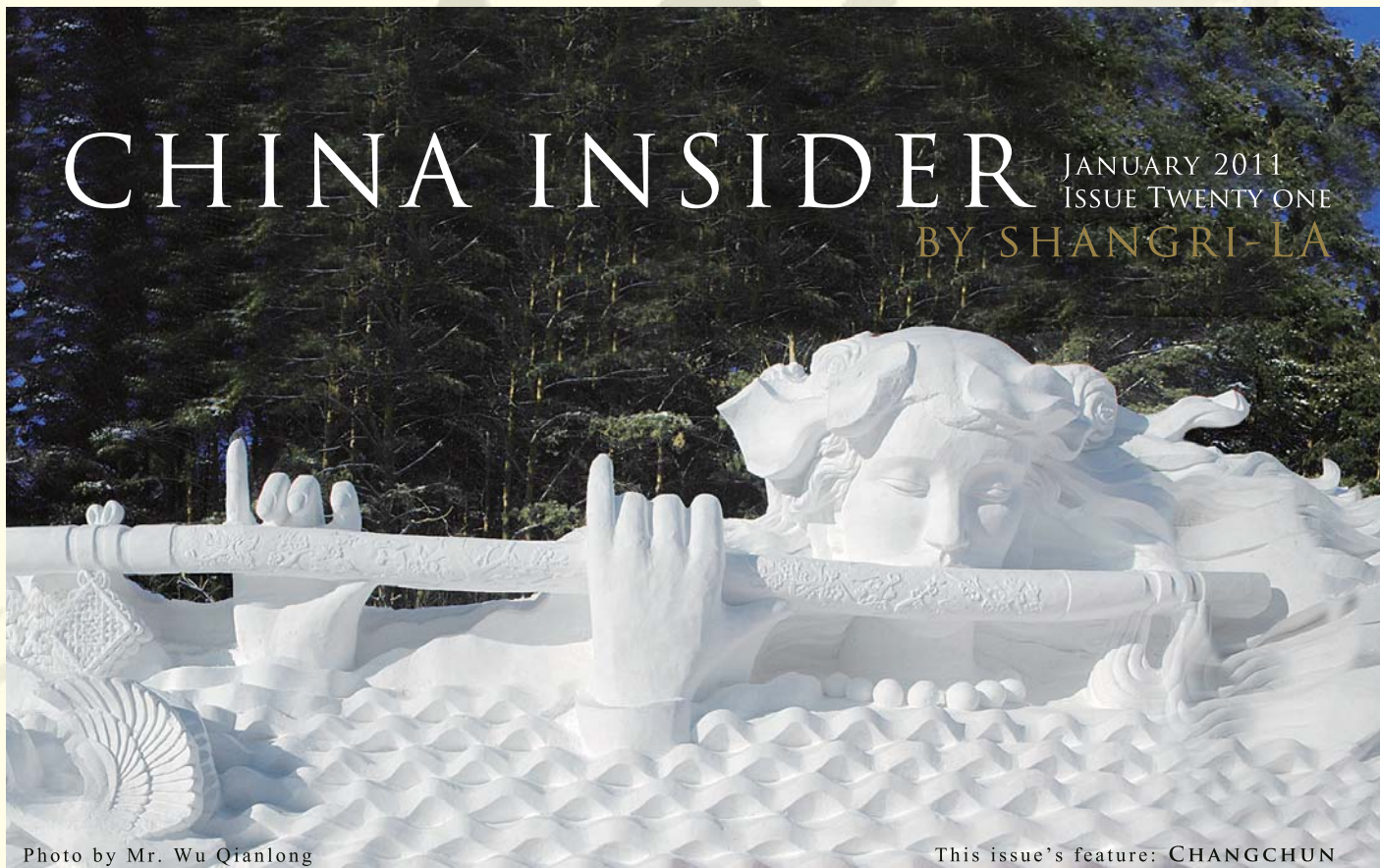


Photo by Mr. Wu Qianlong

This issue's feature: CHANGCHUN

A quarterly newsletter of “insider tips” on China’s latest travel news, including the best and latest in restaurants, retail, entertainment and culture, culled from general managers, concierge and staff of Shangri-La’s 30 China hotels.



SHANGRI-LA

HOTELS and RESORTS



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CHINA NEWS

UNDER THE COVERS

Have you ever wondered how there came to be more than a billion Chinese? Be enlightened at the China Sex Museum in Tongli, a water town not far from Shanghai. Home to around 1,400 sculptures, carvings and paintings - some items dating back 9,000 years - the museum offers a unique glimpse into the history of the world's most populated country.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

China has a new world record to its name with the recent unveiling of the CRH380, dubbed the fastest train in the world. Operating between Shanghai and Hangzhou, the train allegedly clocked speeds of more than 400 kilometres per hour in test runs. Carrying passengers today, however, it runs at a maximum speed of 350 kilometres per hour, meaning that the 200-kilometre journey takes just 45 minutes. China is aiming to have 16,100 kilometres of high-speed rail in operation by 2012.

TUNNEL VISION

Metok County, with a population of just 11,000, lies in a valley surrounded by soaring mountains in eastern Tibet. Until now, it has been unconnected with the outside world and relatively inaccessible to tourists, with porters carrying food and daily necessities to the area by foot over mountain passes. A new 3.12-kilometre-long tunnel, built at an altitude of 3,750 metres, is set to open up the region, giving tourists access to one of the most remote and beautiful areas of China in half an hour.

HIGH FLYER

It is official - Beijing's International Airport has become the second busiest of its kind in the world, overtaking London's Heathrow Airport in terms of the number of passenger arrivals in 2010. Air traffic to Beijing International grew by 16.9 per cent in 2009 to a whopping 65.3 million passengers. The world's busiest airport remains Atlanta's Hartsfield International in Georgia, America, with 88 million passengers in 2009.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The world's longest cross-sea bridge will soon be welcoming traffic in China's coastal city of Qingdao. When complete in early 2011, the Qingdao Haiwan Bridge (or Bay Bridge) will extend more than 42 kilometres over Jiaozhou Bay, linking the main urban area of Qingdao city with Huangdao District on the southern coast of the Shandong Peninsula. The route between Qingdao and Huangdao will be shortened by 30 kilometres, cutting the travel time by 20 minutes.

THE HOTTEST NEW VENUES IN CHINA

NEW RESTAURANTS AND BARS

BY GEORGE!

One of Beijing's most sought-after cocktail connoisseurs, George Zhou (ex Q Bar) has branched out on his own to open slick bar George's inside the Workers' Stadium. The design of the lounge is unfussy and cosy, with a large mezzanine overlooking the main, booth-lined area. Still, you do not come here for the ambience, you come for the drinks. The cocktail list is staggering, divided into sections including margaritas, Martinis and daiquiris. In addition, the bar has one of the most comprehensive selections of whiskey you will find in the Middle Kingdom. Cheers to that!

THE ALCHEMIST

Occupying a nook in the Sinan Mansions - an up-and-coming dining enclave in Shanghai - the Alchemist is the brainchild of prolific restaurateur Kelley Lee. The gastro-lounge, designed to resemble an old medicine shop, shakes and serves some of the most interesting cocktails in China, paired with a menu of very unique bar bites: sous vide egg-yolk sandwiches with arugula pesto and onion micro-greens anyone? Or perhaps a foie gras confit with jasmine tea-pear compote and bacon jus caviar? With a DJ booth and space to boogie, expect some wild nights here.

SHOPPING AND RELAXATION

VEGA OR BUST

Emerging Beijing design talent Vega Wang is now showcasing her oh-so-cool clothes and accessories at an eponymous boutique in the Chinese capital's Jianwai Soho complex. The boutique carries Wang's ready-to-wear lines alongside custom-made pieces utilising chiffon and leather tailored into classic vintage silhouettes with a Chinese twist.

LUCKY NUMBERS

If you thought that there was not room in Shanghai for yet another shopping mall, think again. Set in the city's northern Jing'an District, the newly opened 889 Plaza features a six-storey shopping mall, home to the charmingly named "I Am Eating" food court alongside a variety of clothing shops, from local brands like Bread and Butter to international names like Next, Nike, Benetton and Crocs. One of the big draws is the enormous branch of Sephora, as well as a pet shop in the basement. Keep your eyes open for the Muji lifestyle store, set to take the city by storm any day now.

APPLE OF ITS EYE

It is no surprise that Shanghai's new Apple Store occupies a sprawling site in Pudong, the epitome of "new" China. The 1,500-square-metre shop (China's second Apple store) is as futuristic as they come: a 40-foot-high glass cylinder marks the entrance. Once inside, you will have access to the most goodies in any Apple store the world over - more than 250 Apple products on display for people to while away the day on. It also has one of the largest Genius Bars in the world, and arguably China's most helpful staff. Smart thinking, Apple.

UPCOMING CHINA EVENTS

HOP TO IT

Ring in the Year of the Rabbit on 3 February 2011 with spectacular Chinese New Year festivities. While events consume the country, the loudest bang will no doubt be heard from the Chinese capital Beijing, where fireworks engulf the sky... and do not stop until the Lantern Festival on 17 February 2011.

ART ATTACK

Art aficionados will want to make a beeline for the Shanghai Art Museum in 2011, hosting the Shanghai Biennial of contemporary art until 28 February 2011. The thought-provoking exhibitions, designed around the theme “Rehearsal,” are accompanied by talks and conferences by leading art critics and curators.

COME FLY WITH ME

Brightly coloured kites dot the sky above Chaoyang Park during the Beijing International Kite Festival, held throughout March. With decorative kites shaped like dragons and acrobatic ones doing tricks, this event is a great celebration of a 100-year-old Chinese tradition.

CHINA INSIDER'S LOOK AT CHANGCHUN'S ATTRACTIONS, DINING, ART, CULTURE AND SHOPPING

DESTINATION: CHANGCHUN

The capital and largest city of north-east China's Jilin Province, Changchun has not had the easiest of histories. Occupied at times by Japanese and Russian forces, the city was a hotbed for strife until the middle of the 20th century. Today, the city remembers its history through its unique blend of architecture and cuisine, heavily influenced by its occupiers as well as neighbouring countries including Korea. Still, the real reason you come to Changchun is for its scenic beauty. In addition to lakes, forests and mountains, the region is home to some of China's most popular ski resorts. The city also steals the limelight for its cinematic history, and visiting film buffs will be amazed at just how much this unassuming city has to offer.

With more than 30 years experience in the hospitality industry, Jordan Xu has been with Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts for some seven years, having joined the group in 2004 as resident manager at Traders Fudu Hotel, Changzhou. "Changchun is often overlooked in favour of other north-eastern cities like Dalian or Harbin," says Xu. "But there's so much to offer in this beautiful city, not in the least the extremely friendly people who are passionate about the vibrant city they call home."

ATTRACTIONS

MOUNTAIN MAGIC

Although it is not in Changchun proper, no visit to Jilin Province would be complete without a stop at Changbai Mountains. Bordering Korea, the range is home to the 2,745-metre-high Changbai Mountain, a volcano and the source of numerous rivers. Heaven Lake, a large lake in the caldera atop the mountain, will take your breath away, while the wilderness area surrounding it is home to rare animals, including the Siberian tiger.

IT IS HIP TO BE SQUARE

In the heart of Changchun, Culture Square is a pleasant urban hang-out offering a glimpse into the city's Japanese imperial past. The square is surrounded by several historical buildings from the Manchukuo era, including the New Palace of the Emperor of Manchukuo and the former Japanese State Council and Military Affairs buildings, prime examples of early 20th century Japanese architecture.

Insider's Tip: Culture Square is a great place for people watching. Or, buy a kite from one of the many small vendors wandering the square and join the hundreds of other people flying dragons and frogs over the city.

ART AND CULTURE

THE LAST EMPEROR

The Museum of the Imperial Palace of Manchu State is at once enthralling and harrowing. A reminder of Changchun's wartime history, the museum marks the spot that Puyi, the last emperor of China, was installed as the nominal head of state by the Japanese. The Puppet Emperor's Palace is located in the north-east of the city and is worth visiting for its heritage buildings alone.

LARGER THAN LIFE

Built in 2003, Changchun World Sculpture Park sprawls across some 92 hectares, with larger-than-life sculptures dedicated to a globetrotting array of cultures covering realism, abstract expressionism, modernism and post modernism. Inside the park, stop by the dramatic art gallery, home to hundreds of sculptures made by notable local and international artists.

ENTERTAINMENT

CHANGCHUN IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Dubbed "China's Film City," Changchun steals the spotlight from its southern sisters with a burgeoning movie industry. There is an annual film festival held every August, but if you cannot wait that long to sample Chinese film making in action, Changchun Movie Wonderland Theme Park will give you what you are looking for, with some of the largest and most sophisticated studios in Asia.

Insider's Tip: Given its cinematic prowess, Changchun has a vast number of movie theatres. Tickets are cheap, and many films are in English.

THE WHITE STUFF

Changchun is a great base to enjoy winter sports, having several resorts close by. The Moon Lake and Lotus Mountain Ski Resorts are particularly well regarded, and are on a par with the better-known resorts in Harbin. If skiing is not your thing, head to the Changchun Speed-skating Stadium - the venue that hosted the ISU World Cup Short Track five times - or Xuelianhua Skating Resort, one of the biggest of its kind in north-east China with an indoor rink open all year round.

WINING AND DINING

SNACK TIME

Given its varied history, it is little wonder that food in Changchun bounces from hearty Russian fare to Korean and Japanese staples. One of the best ways to get a taste for the city is by sampling its snacks, including *Xueyi Dousha* (snow-sweetened bean paste) made with red beans, eggs and sugar, *Chaoxian Lengmian* (Korean cold noodles), topped with slices of beef, apple and egg, and *Piccalilli*, popular Korean vegetables and fruit pickled with chilli, garlic and ginger.

General Manager's Tip: If you are being treated to a Chinese meal, chances are that your host will not order white rice, as it is cheap and seen as a filler. If you must have rice, wait until the very end of the meal to ask for it.

FIT FOR A KING

Popular among locals and tourists alike, the award-winning Shang Palace at Shangri-La Hotel, Changchun is one of the best places in town to sample local and regional dishes. Enjoy fine Cantonese homestyle dishes and dim sum alongside sumptuous Dongbei dishes reflecting the fresh produce of north-eastern China.

General Manager's Tip: Dongbei cuisine is known for its use of fresh and dried seafood. If you are adventurous, try the dried sea cucumber and dried scallops – they are local delicacies.

RETAIL THERAPY

LOCAL LARDER

Aside from its film industry, Changchun has earned a reputation as one of China's largest producers of ginseng. The city's numerous apothecaries overflow with powdered, pickled and dried varieties of the popular root. Changchun is also one of the best places in China to stock up on handcrafted kites, sold by vendors around Culture Square.

DEEPER UNDERGROUND

Originally dug out by prisoners of war during the Japanese occupation - intended to be used as bomb shelters - Changchun's underground markets are now extensive underground shopping areas. Head to Chongqing Road, the train station and Hongqi Street, where you will find hundreds of small shops selling everything from electrical goods and souvenirs to clothes and jewellery.

General Manager's Tip: Be prepared to bargain hard at the stalls in Changchun's underground markets, and aim to pay around 30 per cent of the original price quoted to you by the storekeeper.

HOT EVENTS

LIGHTS, CAMERAS, ACTION!

China's hottest film stars come out to strut their stuff on the red carpet at the annual Changchun Film Festival, the next instalment of which will be held in August 2011. The prestigious awards ceremony has paid homage to the likes of Zhang Yimou and Zhao Wei in the past; in 2010, the Golden Deer (the Chinese equivalent of the Oscar) for best film went to *The Founding of Nation*.

ICE, ICE BABY

From a single skiing event, the Changchun Ice & Snow Festival has developed into one of China's largest winter events. Kick starting with the Changchun Moon Lake Vasaloppet International Skiing Festival, the event also features snow sculptures, a Disney snow wonderland, ice skating on the Yitong River, winter swimming, hot-spring bathing, dog-sledding, horse-sledding, snow biking and much more. Sounds cool to us.