

Hēilóngjiāng 黑龙江



Blessed – or cursed – with one of the coldest climates in Asia, Hēilóngjiāng (Black Dragon River), surprisingly, promotes its frigid winters as the peak tourist season. And travellers do come – braving the -30°C weather and howling Siberian gales common to the country's northernmost province – primarily to marvel at the elaborate ice sculptures that glitter throughout the city of Hāerbīn during its famous Ice Lantern Festival.

If you bring warm clothes – and we mean layers of thermals – and restore yourself with hearty stews and the local firewater, you can enjoy this sparkling spectacle. Hēilóngjiāng is also the centre of China's emerging ski industry, offering some of the country's best skiing at Yàbùlǐ.

In any season, Hāerbīn is worth visiting for its Russian-influenced architecture and pleasant pedestrian streets, particularly in the Dàoliqū district near the tree-lined riverfront. When the sun is shining, you can unwind with a walk along the river or on cobblestone-lined Zhongyang Dajie, stopping to sample steamed cornmeal buns or Russian-style sausages.

Other Hāerbīn attractions include a new museum that illustrates the city's Jewish heritage, a collection of Buddhist and Confucian temples, a park that attempts to protect the rare Siberian tiger and a haunting museum that details grisly wartime experiments by the Japanese.

Between May and September, you can explore the lakes, nature reserves and forests throughout the rest of the province. Things to see include sparkling Jìngpò Hú (Mirror Lake); the Wūdàlián Chí area, with its volcanic landscapes and mineral springs; the Zhalong Nature Reserve and its rare wild cranes; and the remote regions along the Russian border.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Chill out at Hāerbīn's **Ice Lantern Festival** (p392), the region's most spectacular winter event
- Explore Hāerbīn's Russian past and visit a Jewish-heritage museum in the **Dàoliqū district** (p390)
- Wander the wetlands of **Zhalong Nature Reserve** (p398), a refuge for endangered wild cranes
- Hike through the lava fields of volcanic **Wūdàlián Chí** (p399)
- Get off the beaten path in the remote **Russian borderlands** (p400)



■ POPULATION: 36.8 MILLION

■ www.yunnantourism.net

History

Hēilóngjiāng forms the northernmost part of the region formerly known as Manchuria. Like the other provinces in China's Dōngběi (northeast), Hēilóngjiāng's recent history has been influenced by its neighbours, notably Russia, which borders the province to the north and east.

During the mid-1800s Russia annexed parts of Hēilóngjiāng's territory, and in the late 1890s its influence in the region strengthened when Russian workers began the construction of a railway line that linked Vladivostok with Hǎerbīn as well as with Dàlián.

Hēilóngjiāng also saw an influx of Russian refugees following the Russian revolution in

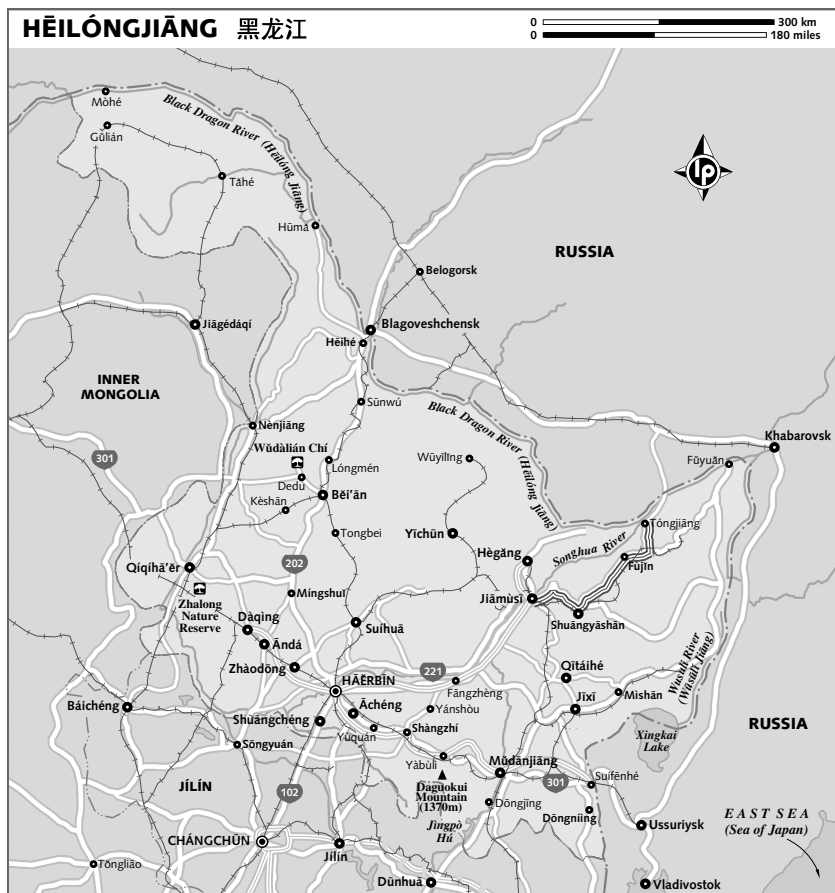
1917. Hǎerbīn still retains Russian-style buildings constructed during this era.

Getting There & Around

Since trains, buses and flights connect Hǎerbīn with other cities throughout China, it's a logical starting point for exploring the far north. From Hǎerbīn, you can travel west to Qiqihā'ěr, north to Wūdàlián Chí and the Russian border regions, or travel east to Yàbùlì, Múdānjiāng and Jìngpō Hú.

Good highways make bus transport an alternative to the sometimes-slower local trains.

If you're headed for Inner Mongolia, direct trains run from Hǎerbīn to the cities of Hǎilǎo or Mǎnzhōulì.



Hǎerbīn 哈尔滨

☎ 0451 / pop 4,757,000

If a city of more than four million people can be considered relaxing, Hǎerbīn is so – at least if you join the strollers and shoppers wandering its tree-lined streets and river-front promenade. One of the largest cities in northeastern China, Hǎerbīn is influenced by its relationship with nearby Russia and dotted with architectural gems handed down from the Russian era. Plenty of first-rate snack shops line the streets too, and restaurants serve rib-sticking fare to sustain you as you explore sights ranging from Russian Orthodox churches and Buddhist temples to the grim remains of a germ warfare base.

History

In 1896 Russia negotiated a contract to build a railway line from Vladivostok to Hǎerbīn and Dàlián (in Liáoníng province), which brought Russian workers to the region. In the early 1900s large numbers of Russian refugees fled to Hǎerbīn as well. Although the Japanese gained control of the railway after Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), the Russian imprint on Hǎerbīn remained in one way or another until the end of WWII.

Many of the Russian émigrés were Jewish, and by the 1920s Hǎerbīn's Jewish population topped 20,000. The little that remains of this Jewish legacy is on display in a museum of Jewish history and culture housed in a former Hǎerbīn synagogue.

Following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the Japanese occupied Hǎerbīn until 1945, when the Soviet army wrested the city back. The following year, as agreed by Chiang Kaishek and Stalin, Kuomintang troops were installed, marking the end of the Russian era.

Hǎerbīn, which derives its name from *alejin* (Manchu for 'honour' or 'fame'), is a sprawling largely industrial city. Russia is once again a major trading partner for this region, and most foreign faces on the streets are Russian.

Orientation

The Dàoliqū district, just south of the Songhua River (Sōnghuā Jiāng), houses most of the historical buildings that give the city its character. North of the river is Sun Island Park (Tàiyángdǎo Gōngyuán); beyond the park, the city is expanding further northward with a number of development projects under way.

The main train station is in the centre of town, opposite the long-distance bus station. Several blocks southeast of the station, along Dongdazhi Jie and nearby Guogeli Dajie, is the main shopping district.

Information

BOOKSHOP

Xinhua Bookshop (Xīnhuá Shūdiàn; 368 Guogeli Dajie) Has a small selection of English-language books, mostly 19th-century novels.

CD BURNING

Photo shop (Zhongyang Dajie; Y15) Near the Flood Control Monument.

INTERNET ACCESS 网吧

Internet bar (wǎngbā; 2nd fl, Hǎerbīn train station; per hr Y3-4) It's even a no-smoking zone!

Yidu Kongjian Wangba (27 Zhonghuan Jie; per hr Y2; ☎ 24hr) Off Zhongyang Dajie.

MONEY

Most large hotels will also change money.
Bank of China (Zhōngguó Yínháng) Main office (☎ 5363 3518; 19 Hongjun Jie; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm) Dàoliqū (37 Zhaolin Jie; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Both offices have 24-hour ATMs and will cash travellers cheques.

POST

Post office (yóujú) Dàoliqū (115 Zhongyang Dajie; ☎ 8.30am-8pm); train station area (Tielu Jie; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) The Dàoliqū branch is between Xi Wu Jie and Xi Liu Jie. The branch in the train station area is to the right as you exit.

PUBLIC SECURITY BUREAU

PSB (Gōngānjú; 26 Duan Jie; ☎ 8.40am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

TELEPHONE

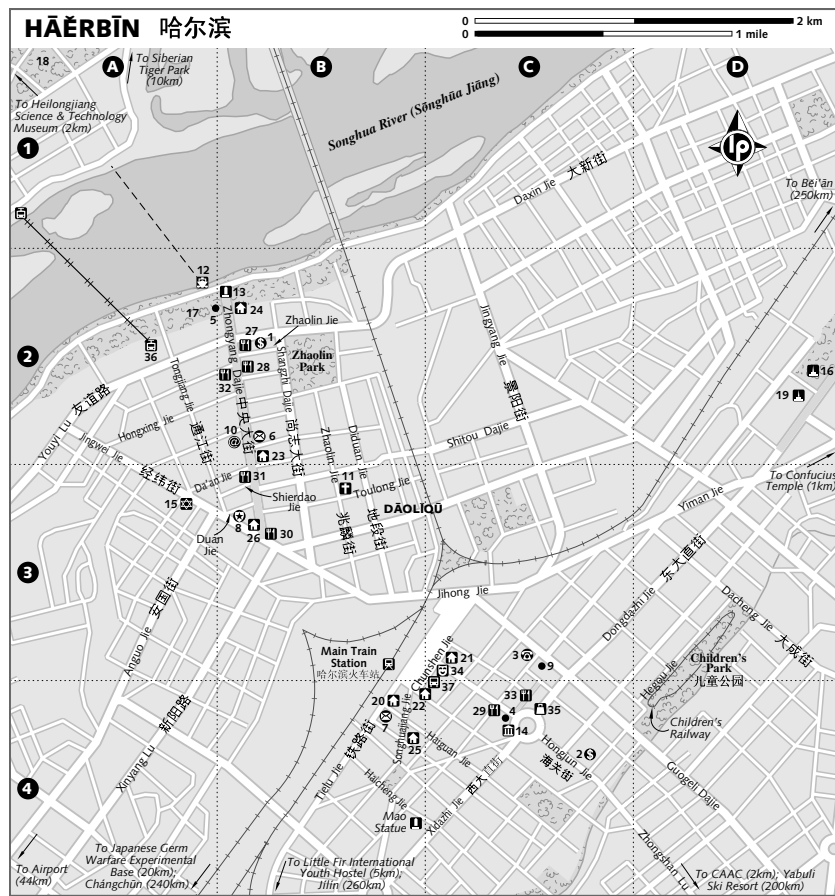
China Telecom (Zhōngguó Diànxin; 420 Guogeli Dajie) There's also a telephone office on the 2nd floor of the train station.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Most midrange and top-end hotels have travel services that book tickets and arrange tours throughout the province.

China International Travel Service (CITS; Zhōngguó Guójí Lǔxíngshì; ☎ 5366 1191; fax 5366 1190; 68 Hongjun Jie)

Harbin Modern Travel Company (☎ 8488 4433; 89 Zhongyang Dajie) This office at Mǎdié'ěr Bīnguǎn offers ski trips to Yàbùlì.



Sights

DAOLIQU 道里区

Hāerbīn's Russian legacy lives on in the Dàoлиқū area, along cobblestone-lined Zhongyang Dajie – a pedestrian plaza – and on the surrounding side streets. Though the early-1900s buildings here are now shops, restaurants and hotels, much of the architecture still shows a strong Russian influence, with spires, cupolas and scalloped turrets.

CHURCH OF ST SOPHIA 圣索菲亚教堂

The **Church of St Sophia** (Shèng Suǒfēiyà Jiàotáng; cnr Zhaolin Jie & Toulong Jie; admission Y25; ☎ 8.30am–5pm), one of Hāerbīn's most photographed landmarks, is a Russian Orthodox church built in 1907. The church now houses the **Haerbin**

Architecture Arts Centre, which displays black-and-white photographs of Hāerbīn from the early 1900s (captions are in Chinese only).

STALIN PARK 斯大林公园

Locals and visitors alike congregate year-round in **Stalin Park** (Sīdālín Gōngyuán). The tree-lined promenade, dotted with statues, playgrounds and cafés, is built along a 42km-long embankment that was built to curb the unruly Songhua River. The odd **Flood Control Monument** (Fānghóng Shènglì Jìniàntǎ), built in 1958, commemorates the thousands of people who died in years past when the river overflowed its banks.

In winter, head to the Songhua River for ice-skating, ice hockey, tobogganing and even

INFORMATION

Bank of China	1 B2	Haerbin Architecture Arts Centre	(see 11)	EATING 🍴	Cafe de Eife French Bakery	
中国银行	1 B2	Heilongjiang Provincial Museum		埃非咖啡馆	27 B2	
Bank of China	2 C4	Hāerbīn New Synagogue	15 A3	Cafe Russia 1914	28 B2	
中国银行	2 C4	哈尔滨犹太新会堂	15 A3	Dōngfāng Jiǎozǐ Wáng		
China Telecom	3 C3	Seven-tiered Buddhist Pagoda	16 D2	东方饺子王	29 C4	
中国电信	3 C3	七级浮屠塔	16 D2	Dōngfāng Jiǎozǐ Wáng		
CITS	4 C4	Stalin Park 斯大林公园	17 A2	东方饺子王	30 B3	
哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	Sun Island Park		Food Market	31 B3	
Photo Shop	5 A2	太阳岛公园	18 A1	Lǎo Chāng Chūnbīng		
新华书店	5 A2	太阳岛公园	18 A1	老昌春饼	32 B2	
Post Office 邮局	6 B2	Temple of Bliss 极乐寺	19 D2	Night Market	33 C4	
Post Office 邮局	7 B4	PSB 公安局	8 B3	Snack Shop	(see 23)	
Xinhua Bookshop	9 C3	Xinhua Bookshop		ENTERTAINMENT 🎬		
Yidu Kongjian Wangba	10 B2	网吧		Bēibēi Hānbīng Dìshìgāo	34 C3	
网吧	10 B2	SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		北北早冰迪士高		
Church of St Sophia	11 B3	圣索菲亚教堂	11 B3	SHOPPING 🛍️		
Ferries to Sun Island Park	12 A2	太阳岛游览船	12 A2	Hongbo Century Square	35 C4	
Flood Control Monument	13 B2	防洪胜利纪念碑	13 B2	TRANSPORT		
Haerbin Modern Travel Company	(see 23)	哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	Cable Car 缆车	36 A2	
Haerbin Ma Dier Travel Agency	(see 23)	哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	Haerbin Railway International		
Haerbin Ma Dier Travel Agency	(see 23)	哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	Tourist Agency	(see 20)	
Haerbin Ma Dier Travel Agency	(see 23)	哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	Long-Distance Bus Station		
Haerbin Ma Dier Travel Agency	(see 23)	哈爾濱馬迭爾旅行社	(see 23)	公路客运站	37 C4	

ice sailing. Equipment for these sports can be hired from vendors along the riverbank. Slightly madder folk astound onlookers by swimming in gaps in the ice.

SUN ISLAND PARK 太阳岛公园

Across the river from Stalin Park is **Sun Island Park** (Tàiyāngdǎo Gōngyuán), a 3800-hectare recreational zone offering gardens, forested areas and a 'water world'. In winter it has its own snow-sculpture exhibition. The excellent hands-on **Heilongjiang Science and Technology Museum** (黑龍江省科技館; Hēilóngjiāngshěng Kējìguǎn; ☎ 8819 0188; admission Y20; ☎ 9am–4.30pm Tue–Sun) is at the west end of the park.

Buy a boat ticket (Y5) from one of the government-run ticket vendors (*guóyíng chuánpiào*), whose dock is directly north of the Flood Control Monument. Private boat operators, whose touts aggressively seek out customers, charge Y10. You can also take a cable car (one way/return Y30/50) to Sun Island Park from the end of Tongjiang Jie.

SIBERIAN TIGER PARK 东北虎林园

The mission of the **Siberian Tiger Park** (Dōngběi Hū Lín yuán; ☎ 8808 0098; www.dongbeihu.net.cn in Chinese; 88 Songbei Jie; adult/child Y50/25; ☎ 8am–4.30pm, last tour 4pm) is to study, breed, release and ultimately save the Manchurian tiger from extinction. Though protected by the Chinese government and recognised as an endangered species

worldwide, the tigers' situation remains perilous. Estimates put the remaining number of Siberian tigers living in the wild at fewer than 400, with most in eastern Russia, North Korea and northeastern China.

As you drive safari-like through the fenced-off fields, you get an up-close look at more than 100 of these animals, as well as African lions and a pair of rare white tigers. Although the park reported a baby boom in 2006, with more than 80 tiger cubs born, it's not clear how the park is preparing these animals for the wild, with the minibus drivers encouraging passengers to buy live chickens – or whole cows – to throw to the tigers.

The park is located roughly 15km north of the city. From the northwest corner of Youyi Lu and Zhongyang Dajie in Dàoлиқū, take bus 65 west to its terminus, then walk a block east to get bus 85, heading north on Hayao Lu. The terminus of Bus 85 is about 2km from the park; minicabs take you from there to the entrance (Y15 to Y20 per person, return). Alternatively, a taxi from the city centre is about Y100 return). You can combine the trip with a visit to Sun Island Park. Bus 85 stops at the western end of Sun Island Park en route between the city and the tiger park.

JEWISH MUSEUM 哈尔滨犹太新会堂

In the 1920s the **Hāerbīn New Synagogue** (Hāerbīn Yóutài Xīnhuìtáng; 162 Jingwei Jie; admission Y25; ☎ 8.30am–

5pm) was the centre of the city's small but influential Jewish community, most of whom had emigrated east from Russia over the preceding 20 years. The building was converted to a museum in 2004. The 2nd and 3rd floors house interesting exhibits about the history and cultural life of Hǎerbīn's Jews in the early 20th century; the 1st floor is an (unrelated) architecture exhibition about construction projects under way in the city, including the new Hǎerbīn subway system.

GERM WARFARE BASE

侵华日军地731部队遗址

In 1939 the Japanese army set up a top-secret germ warfare research centre in Hǎerbīn, where medical experts performed gruesome experiments on Chinese, Soviet, Korean, Mongolian and British prisoners of war. Over 4000 people were exterminated: some were frozen or infected with bubonic plague, others were injected with syphilis and many were roasted alive in furnaces.

The history of these war horrors is on view at the **Japanese Germ Warfare Experimental Base – 731 Division** (Qínhuá Rìjūn Dì 731 Bùduì Yízhǐ; ☎ 8680 1556; Xinjiang Dajie; admission Y20; ☎ 9-11.30am & 1-5pm, last entry 4pm), where grim photos and sculptures illustrate various tortures. In videotaped interviews (with English subtitles), Japanese officers describe what went on at the base with eerie detachment.

The museum is about 20km south of the city, a 45-minute trip on bus 343 from the train station area; board near the post office on Tielu Jie. When you get off the bus, walk in the same direction (west) until you cross the train tracks; the base is on the right.

TEMPLES

To reach these temples, take bus 14 from the train station. Get off when the bus bears right off Dongdazhi Jie onto Yiman Jie. To the Buddhist Pagoda and Temple of Bliss, cross Yiman Jie and walk north to Dongdazhi Jie, which is a pedestrian plaza in front of the temples. To the Confucius Temple, go instead through the arch on the south side of Yiman Jie; it's about a 10-minute walk along Wen Miao Jie.

Seven-Tiered Buddhist Pagoda

七级浮屠塔

Héilóngjiāng's largest temple complex, the **Seven-tiered Buddhist Pagoda** (Qījī Fútú Tǎ; 11 Dongdazhi Jie; admission Y10; ☎ 8.30am-4pm) was built in 1924.

The elegant stone pagoda in the middle of the courtyard makes a great photo op with the Ferris wheel in the adjacent park! The illustrations along the back wall tell classical stories of filial piety. Tickets include admission to the Temple of Bliss next door.

Temple of Bliss 吉乐寺

There's an active Buddhist community in residence at the serene **Temple of Bliss** (Jí lè Sì; 9 Dongdazhi Jie; ☎ 8.30am-4pm). The many statues here include Mílefo (Maitreya), the Buddha yet-to-come, whose arrival will bring paradise on earth.

Confucius Temple 文庙

This peaceful and seemingly little-visited **temple** (Wén Miào; 25 Wen Miao Jie; admission Y15; ☎ 8.30am-4pm) claims to be the largest Confucian temple in northeastern China. It was built in 1929.

HEILONGJIANG PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

黑龙江省博物馆

This rather musty **museum** (Héilóngjiāng Shèng Bówùguǎn; ☎ 5364 4151; 48-50 Hongjun Jie; admission Y10; ☎ 9am-4pm) may appeal to the archaeologically inclined, with displays showcasing huge dinosaur skeletons and other finds from digs around the province. Also on view is fish-skin clothing worn by the Hezhen minority. On the museum's lower level is the **Sea World** aquarium (Y40).

The museum is about a 10-minute walk from the train station; alternatively, take bus 64 from Dàoqiū.

Festivals & Events

The **Ice Lantern Festival** (Bīngdēng Jié; ☎ 8625 0068; admission to main area Y80, other prices vary), Hǎerbīn's main winter attraction, is held in Zhaolin Park and along the Songhua River. Fanciful and elaborate ice sculptures in the shapes of animals, plants, buildings or motifs taken from legends sparkle in the frigid air; they've even included a miniature Great Wall and a scaled-down Forbidden City. At night the sculptures are illuminated with coloured lights, turning the area into a temporary fantasy world. Figure-skating shows, hockey tournaments and other winter events round out the calendar. Officially, the festival runs from 5 January to 15 February, although it frequently starts a week earlier and glistens into March. The main entrance is by the Flood Control Monument.

Sleeping

The most convenient places to stay are along Zhongyang Dajie in Dàoqiū or in one of the many hotels that surround the train station. During the Ice Lantern Festival, expect hotel prices to jump at least 20%.

BUDGET

Little Fir International Youth Hostel (小杉树国际青年旅馆; Xiǎo Shānshù Guójī Qīngnián Lǚguǎn; ☎ 8300 5008; www.hihostels.com; 83 Xuefu Lu; 学府路83号; dm/d Y25/120; ☎) Hǎerbīn's Hostelling International affiliate is set in a traditional courtyard house down a lane in the city's university district. The dorm beds are the cheapest in town, and the doubles are a good deal too, so book ahead. Internet access costs Y3 per hr and breakfast is Y3. Though not much English is spoken here, the staff try to make you feel at home.

Take bus 11 or 343 from the train station for about 20 minutes to 'Medical University, 2nd Hospital' (医大二院; Yīdà Èryuàn); continue walking south about three blocks, and turn right at the hostel's sign.

Zhōngdà Dàjiūdiàn (☎ 8463 8888; fax 8465 2888; 32-40 Zhongyang Dajie; 中央大街32-40号; d Y240-288, tr 388; ☎) This budget accommodation has spacious rooms and a prime location on Zhongyang Dajie. Discounts bring doubles under Y150, which is dirt cheap for pricy Dàoqiū, though the whole place (especially the formerly pink carpets) could use a good scrub. Look for the English sign that says 'Big Hotel of Inside'.

MIDRANGE

Tiānhú Bīngguǎn (☎ 8647 2109; fax 5364 3720; 6 Songhuajiang Jie; 松花江街6号; s Y248, d Y130, d with bathroom Y208-298, tr Y298; ☎) This oldie-but-goodie tower has the best-value midrange rooms near the train station; prices include breakfast. Many of the doubles have been nicely updated, and the triples are huge.

Lóngyún Bīngguǎn (☎ 8283 0102; Huochezhan Zhanqian Guangchang; 火车站站前广场; s Y258, d Y268-348, tr Y358; ☎) Another good choice in the train station area, this 10-storey hotel has well-kept rooms with high-speed internet connections. It's adjacent to the long-distance bus station. Ask for a south-facing room on a high floor if traffic noise bothers you; all rates include breakfast.

Mǎdié'ér Bīngguǎn (Modern Hotel; ☎ 8461 5846; www.modern.com.cn in Chinese; 89 Zhongyang Dajie; 中央大街89号; s Y280, d Y348-580; ☎) Marble and carved woodwork decorate the common areas of this lovely hotel, built in 1906 by a member of Hǎerbīn's turn-of-the-century Jewish community. Most rooms are large with contemporary furnishings, although a few are older and cheaper (under Y250). The bountiful breakfast buffet is first-rate and is included in the rate.

Lóngmén Dàshà (☎ 8679 1888; 85 Hongjun Jie; 红军街85号; tower bldg s/d Y480, tr Y870, original bldg d from Y680; ☎) This hotel is essentially two lodgings in one: the elegant original building, built in 1901 and decked out with marble, gold and elaborate woodwork; and a newer, more prosaic tower. Bargain to get a double for under Y300; rates include breakfast.

TRYING TO GO GREEN?

China's northernmost province has historically been an industrial centre, and it's been plagued with the environmental consequences that heavy industry brings, including the 2005 toxic waste spill in the Songhua River that sent streams of dangerous chemicals coursing through the northeast.

Héilóngjiāng is also endowed with a wealth of natural resources – more than 40% of the province's territory is forested, and there are more than 6000 lakes and reservoirs. The region is home to the rare Manchurian tiger (p391), and it's a nesting ground for endangered cranes (p398). Some of these resources have fuelled the region's industrial development; the province is a major supplier of wood to companies like furniture giant IKEA.

Yet government officials are beginning to consider the environment, at least as a way to draw tourists to the region's forests, lakes and hills. According to the World Wildlife Fund, Héilóngjiāng province created 24 new protected forest or wetland areas between 2002 and 2005, and has committed to adding another one million hectares to the protected list by 2010. If that goal is reached, 14% of the province's land area will be under government protection.

Too little too late? Or the dawning of a new era of environmental awareness and developing ecotourism? Only time will tell.

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

At many midrange hotels throughout northeastern China you can begin your day with a hearty breakfast buffet. Don't expect Western-style bacon and eggs, but you won't go hungry either. The lavish morning spreads typically start with a variety of cold vegetable dishes: perhaps spicy cabbage, wild greens with peanuts or pickled radishes. Hot dishes might include stewed pork, tender eggplant or bean-curd noodles.

Hard-boiled eggs, often bubbling in soy sauce, are a staple, as are puffy steamed breads. And don't forget the congee – plain rice, rice with beans, corn or millet are all cooked into comfortably soupy hot cereals. If you're lucky, there'll be nut-filled cookies or sugary bean buns to sate the sweet tooth, and you'll be set till supper time.

TOP END

Songhuajiang Gloria Inn (Sōnghuājiāng Kǎilái Shāngwù Jiùdiàn; ☎ 8463 8855; www.gjharbin.com; 257 Zhongyang Dajie; 中央大街257号; d Y538, d Y538-888, ste Y1188-1388 from Stalin Park, this inn offers plush rooms in a prime location.

Kūnlún Fāndiàn (☎ 5361 6688; www.hljkunlun.com; 8 Tielu Jie; 铁路街8号; s Y538, d Y538-888, ste Y1188-1388 plus 15% service charge; ☎ ☎) To your right as you exit the train station, this first-class hotel is an oasis of calm with a billiard room, sauna and several restaurants.

Eating

Stroll along Zhongyang Dajie for bakeries, restaurants and bars. Another cool restaurant and bar district is around Guogeli Dajie, near Children's Park.

Dōngfāng Jiǎozi Wáng (Kingdom of Eastern Dumplings; dumplings Y4-8; ☎ lunch & dinner; Dàoqiū ☎ 8465 3920; 39 Zhongyang Dajie; train station area ☎ 5364 2885; 72 Hongjun Jie) This always-busy dumpling chain serves royal helpings of *jiǎozi* (饺子; dumplings) with a large choice of fillings; try the greens with egg. English menu. The Hongjun Jie branch is a 10-minute walk south of the train station, behind the Overseas Chinese Hotel.

Lǎo Chāng Chūnbǐng (Lao Chang Spring Pancakes; ☎ 8468 5000; lower level, 178 Zhongyang Dajie; dishes Y12-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) A popular local speciality, *chūnbǐng* (春饼) are flat tortilla-like pancakes. Order a variety of fillings to slather on your pancake; then roll it up and eat. One favourite is the spicy-tangy *xiāng là ròu sī* (香辣肉丝), which is pork with coriander and dried hot pepper.

Cafe Russia 1914 (☎ 8456 3207; 57 Xi Toudao Jie; dishes Y18-48, coffees Y18-25, teas Y8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) This peaceful Russian tearoom just off Zhongyang Dajie looks like grandmother's parlour, filled with old photos and knick-

knacks. Linger over coffee or tea, or dig into hearty home-style dishes like stuffed cabbage and puffy *piroshki*.

Cafe de Eife French Bakery (Áifēi Kǎféidiàn; ☎ 8911 3753; 185 Zhongyang Dajie; pastries Y5-7, coffees Y15-20; ☎ 9am-9pm) Take a break in this tiny corner café stocked with English-language newspapers and international magazines. The Parisian-style pastries go well with espresso.

Outside Mǎdié'ěr Bīngguǎn, a busy snack shop serves kebabs, dumplings and ice cream (Y2 to Y5); nearby, a **food market** (96 Zhongyang Dajie; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) has stalls offering buns, cookies, sausages, fruits and sweets.

About a 15-minute walk from the train station – east of Hongjun Jie and north of Dongdazhi Jie – is a night market, with vendors hawking kebabs, grilled squid and other nibbles.

Entertainment

Běibēi Hānbīng Dìshìgāo (Beibe Dry Ice Disco; admission Y20; ☎ 9am-midnight) Underground entertainment takes on a new meaning at this disco/roller-skating rink that is literally underground. It's in the underground shopping centre opposite the train station; take the stairs down from the southwest corner of Hongjun Jie. Admission includes skate hire, but bring your own earplugs.

Shopping

Zhongyang Dajie is lined with department stores, stylish boutiques and souvenir shops, many of which hawk Russian-inspired goods.

Dongdazhi Jie, in the city centre southeast of the train station, is another major shopping street. Below the street, the Hongbo Century Square (Hóngbó Shìjì Guangchāng; 红博世纪广场) shopping complex extends for blocks underground.

Getting There & Away

All the large hotels can book airline and train tickets.

AIR

Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC; Zhōngguó Mínháng; ☎ 8262 7070; 101 Zhongshan Lu) is in the CAAC Hotel.

Both Air China and **Asiana Airlines** (www.flyasiana.com) fly nonstop to Seoul (Y3200, 2½ hours). China Southern has flights to Khabarovsk (Y1800, 1½ hours) in Siberia and to Vladivostok (1¼ hours). Russian carrier **Vladivostok Avia** (☎ 8228 9471; www.vladavia.ru) flies between Hǎerbīn and Vladivostok (1¼ hours) on Tuesdays and Fridays.

From Hǎerbīn, you can fly to a huge number of domestic destinations, including Běijīng (Y960, one hour and 50 minutes), Shànghǎi (Y1780, two hours and 40 minutes), Shēnzhèn (Y2700, six hours) and Dàlián (Y840, 1½ hours).

BUS

The main long-distance bus station is directly opposite the train station. Buses leave for Mùdǎnjiāng at least every 30 minutes (Y60 to Y81, four hours). Other buses run hourly to Qíqǐhǎ'èr (Y61, 3½ hours) and throughout the day to Jílín (Y61, four hours) and Shēnyáng (Y140, 6½ hours).

At the time of writing, a new international bus service was slated to begin operating between Hǎerbīn and Vladivostok; check at the long-distance bus station for details.

TRAIN

Hǎerbīn is a major rail transport hub with routes throughout the northeast and beyond, including daily service to the following cities:

Destination	Seat/Sleeper Price	Duration
Běijīng	Y154/281	12-13hr
Chángchūn	Y35-41	2½-3hr
Dàlián	Y125/231	9-10hr
Mùdǎnjiāng	Y50	4½-5hr
Qíqǐhǎ'èr	Y50	3-4hr
Shēnyáng	Y76	6hr
Suǐfēnhé	Y76/143	9hr

To Běijīng, there's also a nightly express train, the Z16 (Y429 soft-sleeper only), which departs at 8.27pm and arrives the next morning at 7.07am.

Trains depart from Hǎerbīn to Vladivostok via Suǐfēnhé on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Travellers on the Trans-Siberian Railway to or from Moscow can start or finish in Hǎerbīn (six days). Contact the **Hǎerbīn Railway International Tourist Agency** (哈尔滨铁道国际旅行社; Hǎerbīn Tiědào Guójī Lùxíngshè; 7th fl, Kūnlún Fāndiàn, 8 Tielu Jie) for information on travelling through to Russia. CITS may also be able to help.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Hǎerbīn's airport is 46km from the city centre. From the airport, shuttle buses (Y20) will drop you at the railway station or the CAAC office. To the airport, shuttles leave regularly from the CAAC office until 6.30pm. A taxi will take 45 minutes to an hour (Y100 to Y125).

BUS

Hǎerbīn's many buses (Y1 to Y2) include buses 101 and 103 which run along Shangzhi Dajie from Stalin Park to the train station. Bus 109 runs from the train station to Children's Park. Bus 64 goes from Dàoqiū to the Provincial Museum.

At the time of writing, a subway system was under construction, with the first line slated to open in 2007 or 2008.

AROUND Hǎerbīn

Yabuli Ski Resort 亚布力滑雪中心

The biggest ski resort in China, Yabuli (Yàbùlì Huáxuě Zhōngxīn), 200km southeast of Hǎerbīn, has 11 runs and nine lifts on Mt Daguokui (Dàguōkuī Shān). Weather permitting; the ski season lasts from December through March.

CITS and other travel agencies in Hǎerbīn (see p389) offer ski packages that include transport, ski passes, equipment rental and accommodation. One-day trips start at around Y400.

If you want to stay overnight, lodging is available at Windmill Village (the resort village) or in several small hotels in nearby Yàbùlì village where beds can often be found for under Y100. Both **Windmill Village** (☎ 0451-5345 5088; fax 0451-5345 5138; www.yabuliski.com; d Y380-780) and the company's Běijīng **sales office** (☎ 010-6463 6126; fax 010-6463 6126) can make bookings for stays in the resort village. In winter, lodging owners in Yàbùlì village will likely find you when you exit the train or bus.

Buses and trains to Yàbùlì depart from Hǎerbīn (Y30 to Y40, three hours) and Mūdānjiāng (Y14 to Y24, two hours). Mini-buses in Yàbùlì village run to the ski resort.

MŪDĀNJIĀNG 牡丹江

☎ 0453 / pop 767,000

A nondescript city of more than half a million people, Mūdānjiāng's main interest to independent travellers is as a transit point to nearby Jìngpò Hú (Mirror Lake) and the Underground Forest.

Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 692 9833; 9 Taiping Lu; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) This office, two blocks south of the train station, will cash travellers cheques. There's a 24-hour ATM one block further south.

China Telecom (中国电信; Zhōngguó Diànxìn; Dongyi Tiaolu) One block east of the post office.

CITS (中国国际旅行社; Zhōngguó Guóji Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 691 1944; 34 Jingfu Jie; ☎ 8am-5pm) The helpful staff at this office, two blocks east of Taiping Lu, organise day trips to Jìngpò Hú. They can also book air and train tickets, and arrange discounted lodging at the lake or in Mūdānjiāng.

Internet bar (网吧; wǎngbā; per hr Y2) In the lane facing Běilóng Dàjiǔdiàn.

Post office (邮局; yóudiàn; Taiping Lu; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Three blocks south of the bank.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōngānjú; Guanghua Jie) Two blocks west of the train station.

Sleeping & Eating

Mūdānjiāng Fǎndiàn (牡丹江饭店; ☎ 692 5833; fax 699 7779; 128 Guanghua Jie; 光花街128号; dm Y20-30, d Y80-140, tr Y168) This budget hotel is convenient if you're just passing through town. When you exit the train station, turn left, walk one block and cross the street to the hotel.

Běilóng Dàjiǔdiàn (北龙大酒店; ☎ 812 8888; 68 Dongyitiao Lu; 东一条路68号; s Y310-360, d Y330-380, ste Y530; ☎) This midrange tower has standard doubles, as well as a 'garden wing' with rooms in a pseudo-traditional courtyard. Rates include breakfast; check with CITS about discounts. From the station, walk south on Taiping Lu and turn left onto Qixing Jie; the hotel is one block ahead on the right.

Shuānglóng Jiǎozǐ Wáng (双龙饺子王; Double Dragon Dumpling King; ☎ 691 2111; Qixing Jie; dishes Y8-20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Good jiǎozǐ (饺子) and rib-sticking northeastern dishes that you choose from a display of ingredients make this eatery popular with local families.

Dongyibuxing Jie, southeast of the train station, is a pedestrian mall with a night market selling kebabs, noodles and other snacks.

Getting There & Away

Mūdānjiāng has rail and bus connections to Hǎerbīn (Y50, five hours), Sūfěnhé (Y30, four to five hours), Yánjí (Y22, seven hours), Tǔmén (Y20, six hours), Jiāmùsī (Y21, eight hours) and Dōngjīng (Y6, 1½ hours). Long-distance buses arrive and depart from in front of the train station.

CITS books airline tickets. Flight destinations include Běijīng (Y1190, two hours), Shànghǎi (Y1830, two hours and 20 minutes) and Guǎngzhōu (Y2600, six hours). A taxi to the airport will cost about Y45.

AROUND MŪDĀNJIĀNG Jìngpò Hú 镜泊湖

The clear reflections of the tree-lined shore and small islands within **Jìngpò Hú** (Mirror Lake; admission Y50) leave no question about why it has been named Mirror Lake. Covering an area of 90 sq km and 45km in length, the lake was formed on the bend of the Mudan River 5000 years ago by the falling lava of five volcanic explosions. Jìngpò Hú is about 100km southwest of Mūdānjiāng.

Ferries (Y80, two hours) make leisurely tours of the lake, or you can hike along the lakeshore. Near the lake is the **Diaoshuilou Waterfall**, 20m tall and 40m wide; it swells in size during the rainy season but can dry to a trickle at other times of year.

Jìngpò Hú is extremely popular with busloads of Chinese tourists who roll up during the summer months. Visiting during low season, from October to May, is more peaceful, but many hotels and restaurants shut down outside of the summer season.

There's not a lot to do here to occupy more than a day, but if you want to stay over you can choose from more than 50 hotels that encircle the lake. It's worth checking first with CITS in Mūdānjiāng (see left), since the office can arrange discounted bookings. Expect to pay around Y25 for dorm beds, Y140 for budget doubles and Y280 for mid-range doubles.

Many small restaurants at the park entrance and near the lake serve local fish, but ask for prices before you sit down, since fish can run upwards of Y150.

The easiest way to get to Jìngpò Hú is on the direct bus from Mūdānjiāng that leaves the train station parking lot at 7.30am (one way/return Y20/40, two hours) and departs from the lake at 4.30pm. Outside the summer season the bus may depart and return earlier, so confirm the time.

Regular trains run from Mūdānjiāng to Dōngjīng (Y6, 1½ hours). From there it's one hour by minibus (Y10) to the lake, but these buses run only from June to September; at other times you'll have to take a taxi (Y150 to Y200 return).

At Jìngpò Hú, trams take visitors from the park gate to the lake and the waterfall (Y10 per ride).

Underground Forest 地下森林

Although called the **Underground Forest** (Dìxià Sēnlín; admission Y40; ☎ June-Sep), the forest has actually grown within the craters of volcanoes that erupted some 10,000 years ago. Hiking around the lush pine forest and several of the 10 craters takes about an hour.

The forest is 50km from Jìngpò Hú. Some of the Mūdānjiāng-Jìngpò Hú buses add a stop at the forest for an additional Y40; ask before you set out. Otherwise, take a bus or train from Mūdānjiāng to Dōngjīng and from there change to a minibus for the forest. You can take a taxi from the lake gate to the forest, but drivers charge at least Y200 return.

QÍQIHĀ'ÈR 齐齐哈尔

☎ 0452 / pop 895,000

Qíqihā'èr, a predominantly industrial city 250km northwest of Hǎerbīn, is a gateway to the Zhalong Nature Reserve, a bird-watching area 30km southeast of town. Its quirky name comes from the Daur word for 'borderland'.

WAITING...

If you have a day when Chinese bureaucracy is getting to you, pick up a copy of *Waiting*, the 1999 novel by Liáoníng-born, Hēilóngjiāng-educated author Ha Jin. It tells the story of a doctor in a fictional northeast China city who waits 18 years for the local government to grant him a divorce.

Author Jin, who now lives in the United States, has set many of his works in the Dōngběi region. A recurring theme is the effect of mind-numbing bureaucracy on day-to-day life. *The Crazy* takes place in the northeast around the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, while *In the Pond* follows an artist who suffers through a monotonous job in a northeastern fertilizer plant.

Waiting for your visa application to be processed? Stuck in a long line at the train station? Pick up a Ha Jin novel, and remember, it could be worse!

Though not really a tourist destination, Qíqihā'èr is pleasant enough, with several parks dotting the city; the largest, Longsha Park (龙沙公园; Lóngshā Gōngyuán), houses a small zoo, gardens and lakes. The city also has a mosque and a large Buddhist temple that are worth a look.

Orientation

The train station is east of the city centre. Longhua Lu heads west from the station to the main square, where you'll find the bank, post and telephone offices and shops. Longsha Park is west of the main square.

Information

Bank of China (中国银行; Zhōngguó Yínháng; ☎ 247 5674; 3 Bukui Dajie, off Longhua Lu; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun) An ATM inside the bank accepts cards from several networks. There's a 24-hour ATM at 349 Longhua Lu, near the long-distance bus station.

China Telecom (中国电信; Zhōngguó Diànxìn; 10 Zhonghuan Lu) Next door to the post office on the main square.

CITS (中国国际旅行社; Zhōngguó Guóji Lǚxíngshè; ☎ 240 7538; fax 247 4646)

Internet bar (网吧; wǎngbā; 2nd fl, 342 Longhua Lu; per hr Y2) Opposite the train station, in the pink building between Báihè Bīnguǎn and Tiědào Fàndiàn.

Post office (邮局; yóujiú; 6 Zhonghuan Lu; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) On the main square at the corner of Bukui Dajie.

Public Security Bureau (PSB; 公安局; Gōngānjú; 57 Bukui Dajie; ☎ 8-11.30am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) One block north of the Bank of China.

Sights

DACHENG TEMPLE 大乘寺

A towering Buddha greets visitors to this **temple complex** (Dàchéngsì; 449 Minghang Lu, at Zhanqian Dajie; ☎ 9am-3pm), set in park-like grounds south

of the train station. Eight buildings are arranged around the main temple, which was constructed in 1939. Take bus 2 south on Zhanqian Jie.

BUKUI MUSLIM TEMPLE 卜奎清真寺

Built in the Chinese style in 1684 (and rebuilt in 1893), this **mosque** (Būkui Qīngzhēnsī; 38 Qingzhen Lu; admission Y6; ☎ 8am-4:30pm) is on the west side of town. Non-Muslims can't enter the prayer hall, but you're free to look around. From the train station, take bus 13 or 101 to Bukui Dajie and walk two blocks west to the mosque.

Sleeping & Eating

Tiědào Fàndiàn (铁道饭店; Railway Hotel; ☎ 212 4579; 336 Longhua Lu; 龙华路336号; dm/s/d incl breakfast Y22/140/200) At this friendly budget hotel one block from Báihe Bīnguǎn, the rooms are aging but clean.

Báihe Bīnguǎn (白鹤宾馆; White Crane Hotel; ☎ 292 1112; fax 212 7639; 85 Zhanqian Dajie; 站前大街85号; dm Y28-50, s Y160-180, d Y170-260, tr Y240; ☎) This tower with helpful staff is to your left as you exit the train station. Rooms range from five-bed dorms to large comfortable doubles, with many options in between. All rates include breakfast.

Hóngfēng Huǒguō (红丰火锅; ☎ 247 7775; Zhonghuan Lu; 中环路; hotpots Y24-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) This bustling restaurant near Longsha Park serves delicious lamb hotpots in individual cook-your-own cauldrons. Solo diners can request half-orders.

The **Fu-Mart Shopping Centre** (132 Longhua Lu), several blocks east of the main square, sells buns, noodles and other prepared foods, as well as fruit, snacks and drinks. Between the main square and Longsha Park, many restaurants line Zhonghuan Lu and the surrounding streets.

Getting There & Around

Frequent trains run between Qiqihā'ěr and Hāerbīn; express trains (Y50) make the trip in 2½ hours, local trains (Y37) in 3½ hours. Overnight trains go to Běijīng (seat/sleeper Y182/333, 14½ hours). There are trains north to Běi'ān (北安; Y19) and Hēihé (seat/sleeper Y38/83). A train leaves for Hēihé at 6am, stopping in Běi'ān at 10.30am and arriving in Hēihé at 4.57pm. A second train to Běi'ān leaves at 4.05pm and arrives at 7.43pm.

The long-distance bus station is at 339 Longhua Lu, a five-minute walk west of the train

station. In summer a direct bus to Wǔdàlián Chí leaves at 8.30am (Y40, six hours). Buses north to Hēihé (Y70 to Y80, seven hours) depart daily at 8am and 5.30pm. Buses to Hāerbīn (Y61, 3½ hours) leave hourly from the parking lot opposite the train station.

There are flights between Qiqihā'ěr and Běijīng (Y1110, 1¾ hours) on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. A flight to Shànghǎi (Y1850, two hours and 50 minutes) departs on Tuesday and Friday and continues on to Guǎngzhōu (five hours and 50 minutes). An airport bus (Y5, 20 minutes) leaves from the **CAAC office** (☎ 242 4445; 12 Bukui Dajie) in the CAAC Hotel (Mínháng Dàshà) near the main square. There's also an airline ticket office in Báihe Bīnguǎn.

Several buses run along Longhua Lu between the train station and the city centre, including buses 13, 14, 101 and 103. Most buses run from 6am to 7pm.

Taxi fares start at Y6.

ZHALONG NATURE RESERVE

扎龙自然保护区

Bird-lovers flock to this **nature reserve** (Zhǎlóng Ziran Bǎohùqū; admission Y20; ☎ 7am-5pm), home to some 260 bird species, including several types of rare cranes. Four of the species that migrate here are on the endangered list: the red-crowned crane, the white-naped crane, the Siberian crane and the hooded crane.

The red-crowned crane (see the boxed text, opposite) is particularly fragile; its numbers worldwide are estimated at only 2400, with roughly half living in northeastern China. The near-extinct bird is, ironically, the ancient symbol of immortality and longevity in Chinese, Korean and Japanese cultures.

One of China's first nature reserves, Zhǎlóng was set up in 1979. On a bird migration path that extends from the Russian Arctic down into Southeast Asia, the reserve is made up of about 210,000 hectares of wetlands. Hundreds of birds arrive from April to May, rear their young from June to August and depart from September to October. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of the birds visible to visitors live in zoo-like cages.

The best time to visit is in spring. In summer the mosquitoes can be more plentiful than the birds – take repellent!

Zhǎlóng is 30km from Qiqihā'ěr. Minibuses travel to the reserve (Y8, one hour) from the corner of Longsha Lu and Zhanqian Dajie

CRANE COUNTRY

Northeastern China is home to several nature reserves established to protect endangered species of wild cranes. Zhalong Nature Reserve, near Qiqihā'ěr in Hēilóngjiāng province is the most accessible and most visited of these sanctuaries, but intrepid bird-lovers may want to seek out the others.

The Xianghǎi (向海) National Nature Reserve, 310km west of Chángchūn in Jílín province, is on the migration path for Siberian cranes, and the rare red-crowned, white-naped and demoiselle cranes breed here. More than 160 bird species, including several of these cranes, have been identified at the Horqin (科尔沁) National Nature Reserve, which borders Xianghǎi in Inner Mongolia. North of Xianghǎi, in Jílín province, the Momoge (莫莫格) National Nature Reserve is also an important wetlands area and bird breeding site.

According to the World Health Organisation, scientists have yet to confirm the role of migratory birds, such as wild cranes, in the spread of avian influenza, although preliminary studies have raised concerns. Birds at the Zhalong Nature Reserve have been immunised against the virus, and at the time of writing, the Xianghǎi reserve had been closed to visitors, in part due to fears about bird flu and in part because a severe drought was threatening its wetlands areas. Check the status before planning a visit to any of these crane sanctuaries. For more information about China's crane population and these nature reserves, contact the **International Crane Foundation** (www.savingcranes.org).

near the Qiqihā'ěr train station. They leave about once an hour between 6am and noon. The buses return from the reserve parking lot.

Another alternative is to take bus 7 or 9 from the train station and get off at Dàgǎngzi (大岗子); it's only about a five-minute ride. From there, shared vans leave frequently for the Zhǎlóng area and will drop you at the reserve. Locals pay Y5 to Y10, but the driver may ask you for Y20, so it's worth bargaining.

You can also hire a taxi to take you to the reserve. Expect to pay about Y150 return.

If you'd like to stay overnight, the somewhat basic **Zhǎlóng Bīnguǎn** (扎龙宾馆; ☎ 138 3622 7566; d Y168-268) is on the reserve grounds. Call ahead if you're arriving in low season to be sure the hotel is open.

WǔDÀLIÁN CHÍ 五大连池

☎ 0456

Wǔdàlián Chí is a nature reserve about 250km northwest of Hāerbīn that has been turned into a 'volcano park'. In summer the area's mineral springs draw busloads of tourists, including many Russians, to slurp the allegedly curative waters. The town itself is rather dreary, but the surrounding area has enough exotic-looking lava fields, hot springs and volcanic craters to fill a day or two of exploring.

Don't worry about volcanic eruptions here. The most recent volcanic activity occurred in 1719 and 1720, when lava blocked the nearby

North River (Běi Hé) and formed a series of barrier lakes – the five interconnected lakes that give the area its name.

The best time to visit is between June and October when the weather is mildest. The Daur minority holds a three-day 'water-drinking festival' each year in early June.

The only way to see the sights is by taxi. Expect to pay around Y150 for a day-long loop taking in the lakes, volcanoes and caves.

Sights & Activities

LÀOHĒI SHĀN 老黑山

It's a steep one-hour (return) walk to the summit of **Laohai Mountain** (admission Y60; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm), one of the area's 14 volcanoes, but the reward is awesome views from the rim of the crater. Taxis take you to a parking area part-way up the volcano where the walking trail begins. From here, it's also a short walk to **Shí Hǎi** (石海; Stone Sea), an expansive lava field that resembles an ocean of lava rocks.

LONGMEN 'STONE VILLAGE' 龙门后寨奇 观观光区

At this impressive **lava field** (Lóngmén Hòushāi Qíguān Guānguāngqū; admission Y40; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) on the east side of town, you can stroll amongst the lava rocks on a network of boardwalks.

ICE CAVES

Elaborate ice sculptures lit with funky coloured lights fill both the **Lava Ice Cavern** (熔岩冰洞;

Róngyán Bīngdòng; admission Y30; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) and the **Lava Snow Cavern** (熔岩雪洞; Róngyán Xuēdòng; admission Y30; ☎ 9am-4.30pm). Sure it's corny, but the sculptures are quite intricate. Rent a warm coat (Y5) if you don't have your own; the caves' temperature is a chilly -10°C year-round.

ZHONGLING TEMPLE 钟灵寺

High on a hill off the road to Lǎohēi Shān, this large **temple** (Zhōnglíng Sì; admission Y10) complex houses several fat golden Buddhas. A tall marble Buddha overlooks the whole place. It's about a 20-minute walk up to the temple from the road.

Sleeping & Eating

The following hotels are all on the main east-west road through the centre of town on either side of the traffic circle. From October to May many lodgings close or reduce their services.

Gōnggrén Liáoyǎngyuàn (工人疗养院; Workers Sanatorium; ☎ 722 1569; fax 722 1814; dm/d/tr Y40/180/210; ☎ May-Nov; 🚗) This complex east of the traffic circle is a popular destination for Russian tourists. The rooms are decent value, and the restaurant serves both Russian and Chinese food (breakfast Y15, dishes Y10 to Y20), including awesome *xī túdòu* (西土豆; 'western potatoes', aka French fries).

Dìshù Wūdàliánchí Bīnguǎn (地税五大连池宾馆; ☎ 722 3387; d Y140-200) This imposing structure next door to the Workers Sanatorium has airy (if basic) doubles, with run-down bathrooms.

Tiělù Bīnguǎn (铁路宾馆; Railway Guesthouse; ☎ 722 1962; dm Y40-50, d Y240-360) In park-like grounds west of the traffic circle, this red-roofed hotel has huge, light-filled doubles, as well as cheaper standard rooms with and without bathrooms. Make sure the hot water is working though.

One block south of the traffic circle, there's a market street with stalls selling fresh breads, dumplings and fruit.

Getting There & Away

Wūdàlián Chí has a new bus station on the east side of town. A taxi from the station to most hotels will cost Y5.

In summer, direct buses to Wūdàlián Chí depart daily from Hǎerbīn's long-distance bus station (Y95, 5½ hours) at 8.30am, 9am, 1.30pm and 4pm. There's also a direct bus daily in summer from Qíqǐhǎ'ěr (Y40, six hours, 8.30am).

Otherwise, you have to travel first to Běi'ān (北安), where you change for a bus to Wūdàlián Chí. Several trains to Běi'ān run from Hǎerbīn (Y25, 5½ to six hours) or Qíqǐhǎ'ěr (Y27, four hours). Fast buses also travel between Hǎerbīn and Běi'ān (Y52, 4½ hours, six daily). Běi'ān's bus station is one block from the train station.

In Běi'ān buses depart frequently for Wūdàlián Chí (Y11, 1½ hours). In spring and fall, buses leave Běi'ān at 10.50am, 12.40pm, 3.30pm; in summer there are at least eight buses daily in both directions.

From Běi'ān buses north to Hēihé (Y49, 3½ hours) depart at 8.30am, 11am and 1.30pm; trains to Hēihé are much slower (Y32, six hours).

RUSSIAN BORDERLANDS

Much of the northeastern border between China and Siberia follows the Black Dragon River (Hēilóng Jiāng), known to the Russians as the Amur River. Along the border it's possible to see Siberian forests and dwindling settlements of northern tribes, such as the Daur, Ewenki, Hezhen and Oroqen.

To visit these border regions, you may need permits; check with the PSB in Hǎerbīn (p389). Take a small medical kit, insect repellent and warm clothing.

Major towns in the far north include Mòhé and Hēihé. On the eastern border, Suífēnhé is a gateway to Vladivostok.

Mòhé 漠河

Natural wonders are the attraction in Mòhé, China's northernmost town, dubbed the Arctic of China. In mid-June, the sun is visible for as long as 22 hours. The aurora borealis (northern lights) are another colourful phenomenon here.

Mòhé holds the record for China's lowest plunge of the thermometer: -52.3°C, recorded in 1956. On a normal winter day a temperature of -40°C is common.

An airport is under construction in the Mòhé region, slated to open in 2008. In the meantime, getting to Mòhé requires a train trip north from Qíqǐhǎ'ěr to Jiāgédáqǐ in Inner Mongolia, then another to Gǔlián, followed by a 34km bus ride.

Hēihé 黑河

Both Chinese tourists and Russian traders are beating a path across the Black Dragon River

in Hēihé, a small city across from the Russian river port of Blagoveshchensk. To visit Blagoveshchensk, you need a Russian tourist visa, as well as a re-entry visa for China, both of which must be arranged in Běijīng, so plan ahead.

Boats for Russia, as well as the customs and immigration facilities, are on **Dà Hēihé Dǎo** (Big Black River Island), at the eastern end of Hēihé's waterfront promenade. Also on the island is **International Market City** (Dà Hēihé Guójì Shāngmào Chéng), where Chinese and Russian traders haggle over wholesale shoes and bras. A bridge across the river between the two countries is in the planning stages.

Those without a Russian visa can settle for an hour-long cruise of Black Dragon River (Y10), departing from various points along the riverfront.

If you want to explore minority regions from here, one option is to contact Canada-

based **Access China Tours** (☎ 1-800-788-1399; www.accesschinatours.com). It offers group tours of the northeastern provinces, and can also help individuals or small groups arrange a day-trip (or longer) to an Oroqen village 200km from Hēihé.

Two trains a day run to and from Hǎerbīn (seat/sleeper Y92/165, 12 hours). Buses also travel to Hǎerbīn, Běi'ān and Qíqǐhǎ'ěr.

Suífēnhé 绥芬河

Like other borderland outposts, Suífēnhé is seeing an increasing amount of cross-border trade and tourism. To cross the border into Russia from here, you need to have organised a Russian visa in Běijīng.

Suífēnhé is linked by rail to Hǎerbīn (seat/sleeper Y76/143, nine hours) and Mūdānjiāng (Y30, four to five hours). There is a twice-weekly international passenger train for Vladivostok.

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