

The China Rambler

An Occasional Letter On Topics Of Interest To China Investors

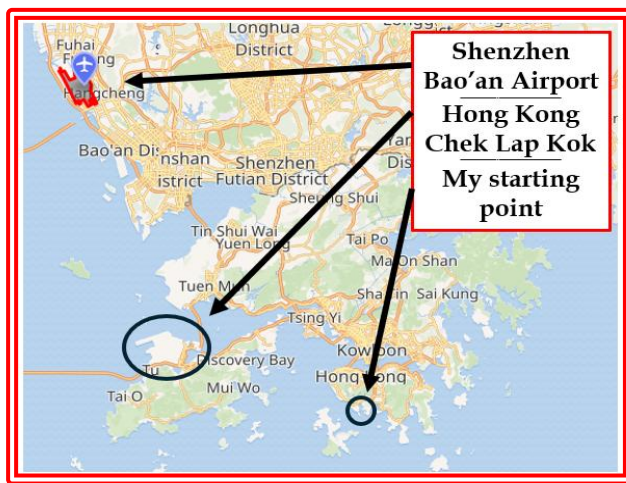
Issue #3.

"Seek Truth From Facts"

Jan. 21st, 2025

In this edition: **Harbin** (哈尔滨, Hā'ěrbīn) has been on my bucket-list for a while and I recently managed to tick it off. Trip highlights with some investing thoughts at the end.

A Report On A Journey To, And Time Spent In, The Capital City of China's Heilongjiang Province, Harbin



First - The Getting There

For internal flights in China these days Hong Kong residents will usually be better off checking their options via Shenzhen's Bao'an airport.

Not only are flights to everywhere more frequent than from Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok, they're a LOT cheaper.

There are several ways to make the journey. If time's important and money no object you can hire a car. All in the journey shouldn't be more than an hour and half from Hong Kong's Central district. Next best would the high-speed rail from Kowloon to Shenzhen's Futian railway station and then a subway connection from there; but getting tickets for the high-speed train, and at a time to suit, is tricky. Moreover, this won't be easy with baggage.

The most convenient for many and the option I went with was via bus. There are several departure points, tickets are easy to obtain, and they run frequently. As you can see on the map you're doing more than twice the distance to the Hong Kong airport so, unsurprisingly, it takes about twice as long, in my case a little over two hours (from boarding the bus).

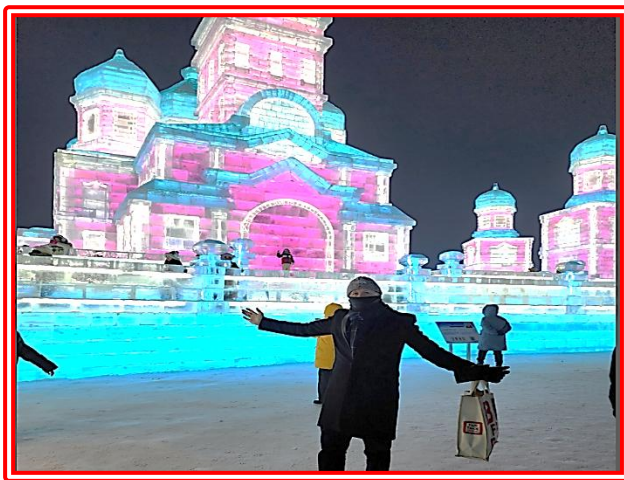
You have to de-bus at the border and go through mainland immigration but once back on it's a 30-minute straight-shot to the airport.

An interesting aside. Look again at the map above. See how Shenzhen now extends from Futian on the right to Bao'an on the left. That's a lot of 'spaghetti'. Then look down at Hong Kong, more spaghetti but nowhere near comparable to what's above us.

Shenzhen Bao'an Airport

It's a [beautiful facility](#) and puts to shame any airport in use now in the West. I was in Heathrow recently and the comparison is stark.

Shortly after it opened the British newspaper The Independent wrote a snarky piece ([here](#)) about how it was another Chinese white-elephant and blah, blah; and? In 2023 it handled 53 million passengers making it the fourth busiest airport in China; and a satellite terminal with 22 million capacity has recently been added.



The Harbin Ice and Snow Festival

The main reason for the trip was this. It's a series of events in and around the city and the highlight is the Ice and Snow World.

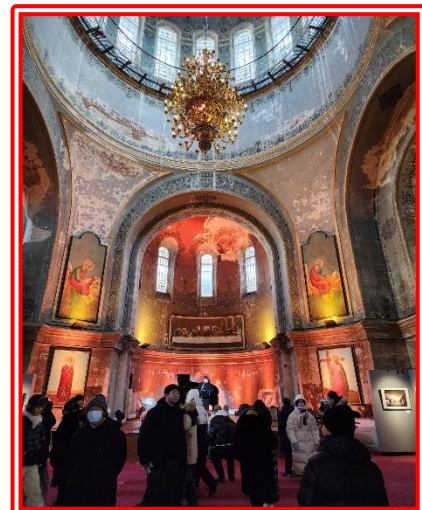
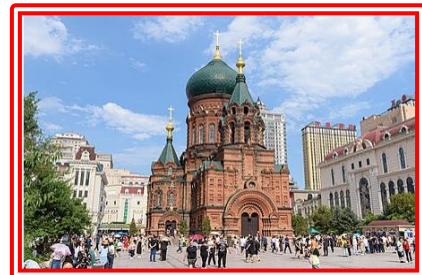
I found the attraction as advertised and according to its [website](#) it's become the most popular winter attraction in the world. Crowds though were manageable.

St. Sophia Cathedral

The first picture is taken from the [Wiki entry](#) and is the image seen on nearly all marketing material relating to Harbin. Cute, no?

The second is the reality of the building inside and the whole structure is a metaphor for the rise and fall of the Russian presence in Harbin.

Harbin owes its existence to being the terminus of part of the [Trans-Siberian Railway](#). This brought Russian immigration and for years Harbin was, in reality, part of Russia in China. The building was designated a heritage site in 1996 but prior to that it suffered decades of neglect. Today it seems much loved, by the citizenry and tourists alike.





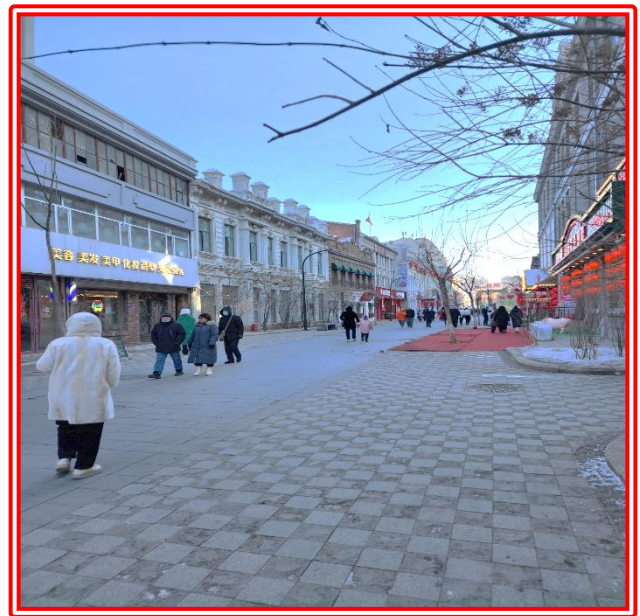
(M)Eats

Around the cathedral there are many Harbin speciality food stores. Ice cream (yes, with daytime temperatures around -10c) in a pastry cone is popular. Cakes, of all varieties are ubiquitous as are preserved and cured meat stalls. Perhaps it's the European legacy, whatever, Harbin folk seem to like their sausages, a lot!

Old Daowai District

Another product of comparatively recent refurbishment this part of town was originally inhabited by rich local merchants who built in a curious mix of vernacular and borrowed styles. It's unique in its scale in China and the style has been dubbed '[Chinese Baroque](#)'.

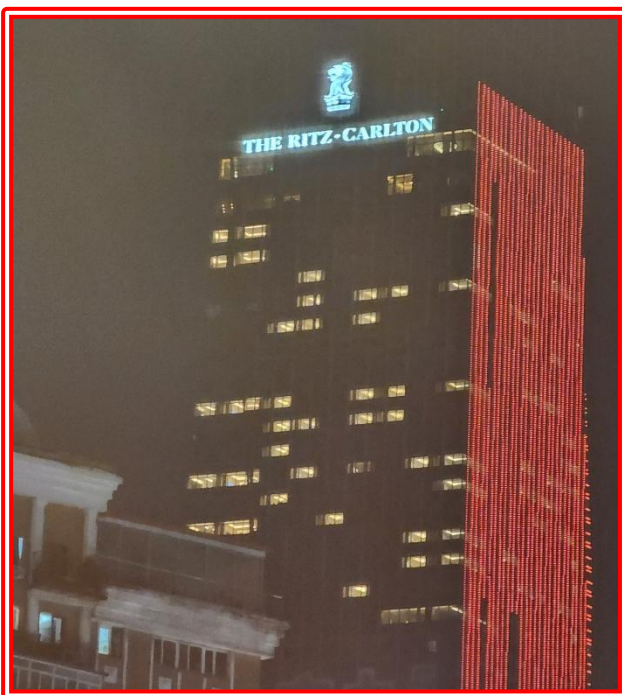
Sightseeing ended with a trip to the Heilongjiang museum. I'd advise a hard pass.



The Hotel

I have to finish with a few words on the hotel where I enjoyed my best hotel stay in China, ever. Even good hotels in China used to suffer from a 'software' problem i.e. swanky facilities but clueless staff.

My stay this time was a magic-carpet of courteous and helpful service. From the concierge who, unasked, found me appropriate headgear for -10c walkabouts to the room service staff who replaced my pillow, again unasked, after surmising I was having trouble with the fluffy ones. In all this was an 11/10 experience.



Homeward Thoughts

This was my third visit in the last year to a non-Tier-I city and, like the others, was a pleasant surprise. These towns are now where you can still see China developing in real time. Subways are still being put in, roads still being made, old buildings razed, bridges and tunnels erected and bored as you watch. They're wonderful and inspiring messes!

My trip also made me think about whether Tier-I, Tier-II and Tier-III definitions still make sense? Harbin today, technically a Tier-II locale, offers (pretty much) all the convenience and services that used to define Tier-I cities a decade ago. This city's progress is no doubt reflected in many other lower tier conurbations and whilst the Tier-Is of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen maintain their crowns the gap in living standards and quality of life between the aristocrats and the arrivistes has tangibly narrowed.

As an investor with most of my capital tied up in China stocks this trip was another reminder of where my faith in China's progress comes from. It's the product of seeing, first hand, the last 40-years of almost continuous economic progress and a belief this development will continue. The vitality, energy, can-do and progress manifest in China today has to be seen to be properly understood.

Hampstead-armchair-critics, like the fellow who (almost certainly without visiting) wrote off Shenzhen's Bao'an airport a while back, will continue to write their plausible guff. But the inconvenient reality for these Sunday-afternoon-Cassandras, of an anxious nation vigorously *and successfully* pressing forward, will continue to present itself, nonetheless.

Top China Travel Tip #1

Don't even think about a trip to China without being fluent in Alipay or WeChat Pay, preferably both. Download the apps and link to either your credit card or directly to your bank account (the latter the better option, IMHO). You can get by with cash, if you must, but many merchants won't even accept that, China is now a cashless society. You can still use credit cards for hotel bills and flight booking but I booked my flights with Trip.com and paid instantly with Alipay. Most merchants on my trip seemed to prefer WeChat Pay but **GET ALIPAY as well.**

Top China Travel Tip #2

Don't even think about a trip to China without setting up a Virtual Private Network (VPN) before you come. The internet in China works well enough in terms of speed and connectivity but if you have apps relating to Google, Yahoo or Meta (and many others) you won't be able to access them. So, no WhatsApp, no Facebook, no YouTube. Moreover, access to many other websites is blocked so even something as innocuous as Investing.com is unavailable. For U\$15 or less you can get a basic VPN service for a month and you'll **DEFINITELY need it.**