



Facilities may be spartan compared with world-class ski resorts, but Graham Bond finds a certain charm on and off the piste in Yabuli

COLD MOUNTAIN

HALF-WAY UP the mountain, my lips begin to turn blue. Small gulps of Siberian air numb my mouth and every breath is exhaled as a violent torrent of vapour. As my creaking carriage inches skyward, my body begins to go into deep freeze.

It seems an unfortunate coincidence that one of the world's slowest chairlifts should find a home in one of the world's coldest ski resorts. Back in Harbin, Heilongjiang province's capital, the December weather had a certain novelty value. Out here on the exposed slopes of Yabuli, 200km away, the temperature is minus 25 degrees Celsius, and 20 minutes feels like a long time to be hanging in mid-air.

A few shimmies at the 1,374m summit and life is partially restored to my limbs. The stunning views across the rippled, snow-drenched plains of Heilongjiang are almost as breathtaking as the icy air, and soon I'm hurtling along an empty slope, feeling thoroughly glad I braved the Manchurian chill. Skiing is apparently increasingly popular in China, with about one million newcomers said to be taking to the slopes annually.

The small town of Yabuli, with 21 years' experience behind it, is something of a godfather to the sport in China. It hosted the Third Asian Games in 1996 and, despite a raft of newly developed ski areas across the country, safely maintains its reputation as the biggest and best resort this side of Mongolia.

It isn't only the astonishing cold that gives Yabuli an edge on its competitors. It may not be as sophisticated as its newer, modern rivals in the Beijing locale

and it may not be as thrilling as some of the ski fields of Japan, Europe or America, but Yabuli has its own rural Chinese charm. In few ski resorts will you find scores of hanging red lanterns lining the alpine trails or encounter entire battalions of chain-smoking workers apparently piste-grooming with spades. Both provide a novel distraction as I breeze along one of the many runs that have been carved from the mountain forest.

At the end of my first day, my guesthouse landlady-cum-chauffeur collects me from base camp in a battered police van – another reminder, perhaps, of just how far I am from urban authority. The van looks as if it's been rolled down more mountains than it has driven up, but the siren works. We race back to the guest house with blue lights flashing.

Dried frogs are on the menu for dinner and they dangle decoratively from a piece of string in the front window. Sitting cross-legged on a heated platform, I politely refuse my host's overtures as he teasingly rattles a petrol canister filled with home-made rice wine, eventually settling for a meal of spinach and local dongbei dumplings.

Yabuli's nightlife is unusual, too. The most basic of skiing questions – "Where's the nearest bar?" – causes big problems. One man says the best bar is at the Xin Yu Hotel. Another suggests the only bar is at the Xin Yu Hotel. Its receptionist has another opinion. "We don't have a bar," she says.

When I track down the resort's only bar, I find a solitary waiter perched, fist to

cheek, surveying an empty room. Après-ski in Yabuli is muted, although the barman directs my attention to the muffled karaoke wails coming from upstairs.

"Chinese people don't like to drink and talk," he says, with a sigh. "They like to drink and sing." Another vivid illustration of Yabuli's after-dark habits is offered as I leave. Bursting into the night, it's hard to say which comes as more of a surprise: the freezing air or the fact that a group of skiers is dancing around a bonfire to a high-decibel Vengaboys medley.

cause of the Dutch-influenced design of many of its on-site hotels. As well as being the home of the elusive bar, the Windmill Village maintains 11 impressive trails of varying length and difficulty. The "Welcome" booklet, written in charming Chinglish, promises to "help you [sic] take your skiing to next level".

By the day of my departure, I've learned to love Yabuli's charming – and occasionally baffling – idiosyncrasies. I even enjoy the early morning squawk of the guesthouse roosters that rouse me

ability. The journey takes about four hours. A regular train service links Harbin and Yabuli, with tickets for the three-hour ride costing 30 yuan.

Accommodation: The Windmill Village (186 451) 345 5168) offers a range of comfortable on-site accommodation. Doubles in the main hotel start at 375 yuan a night and other rooms are available in the nearby Windmill-style villas. Cheaper rooms can be found at the restaurant-cum-guesthouses just outside the main ski centre. The Yang Guang San Jie Mei



The Chinese countryside seems to be the last refuge of bad 20th-century Euro-pop. In a sauna later that evening, I spend 20 sweaty minutes trying to pin down the tune playing over the PA system. As it turns out, it's a Chinese version of S-Club 7's *Never Had a Dream Come True*.

One of Yabuli's less-endearing quirks is the lack of an impartial information office. Four operators work the resort and are reluctant to give business to the competition. If you've booked a package deal through a local travel agent, check what kind of skiing you'll be entitled to.

I spent the first hours of my stay being assured the nursery slope I'd been delivered to was the only venue open.

"Oh, that mountain? That's for the national team," says my escort, unconvincingly, before belatedly realising her mistake after I'd paid for half a day's skiing.

"That mountain" had actually belonged to Yabuli's most reputable operator, the Windmill Village, so named be-

from the under-heated linoleum I've taken for my bed. The public bus chugs back to town across the snow-drenched plains. Under freezing blue skies, horse-drawn carts pull farmers towards clusters of steaming chimney stacks.

The bus conductor – who doubles as a hotel agent and a train-ticket tout on the ride in – is sad to inform me that today's Beijing train is fully booked. I opt instead for the three-hour "bullet" ride back to Harbin, but accidentally get on the slow train. Four hours later, having survived the scrutiny of the PLA soldiers who shared my carriage, I disembark and head for the nearest stack of steaming chimneys. After all, it's still minus 25 degrees out there.

TRAVEL TIPS

Flights: China Southern Airlines flies from Hong Kong to Harbin twice a week. A return ticket costs about \$6,900, with discounts available depending on avail-

(Sunshine Sisters) guesthouse offers a non-holiday rate of 100 yuan, which includes a lift in a police van to all the resort's attractions.

Food: The Windmill Village has its own Chinese and western restaurant, but eating is an experience best enjoyed in one of the family eateries. The private dining/bedrooms consist of a simple raised platform covered with linoleum and heated from below by a wood-fire. Feel the heat slowly rise through your toes, and expedite the process by knocking back some home-made firewater.

Skiing: A day's ski pass, including equipment and lifts, costs 375 yuan, except from Friday to Sunday and on public holidays, when the price increases slightly. Half-day ski passes are also available. Package tours at the Windmill Village can be booked through the resort's Beijing office (186 108) 287 2050). For further details, go to www.yabuliski.com/english/xuechang.



Stunning scenery surrounds Heilongjiang's Yabuli resort with its Manchurian forests (left) and unusual quarters in the windmill-type accommodation.

Photos: Graham Bond/Imaginechina

hot spots

Leisa Tyler

Vertigo and Moon Bar, Bangkok

Where? Ever wanted to sip champagne with the stars? The 61st floor of Bangkok's Banyan Tree is a good start: its roof-top restaurant Vertigo and Moon Bar are fittingly named. Forget sub-zero air conditioning and think the ultimate in alfresco: 360 degrees of the cityscape from every white linen table top, with a light breeze ruffling your hair and little more than a flimsy rail separating you from the abyss.

Have I heard of it? Perhaps not. Better known for splendid spas and swanky resorts than risky eateries, Banyan Tree has created the ultimate in feel-good restaurants. It's romantic, breathtaking and intoxicatingly fun. Anyone looking for the perfect place to pop the question need look no further.

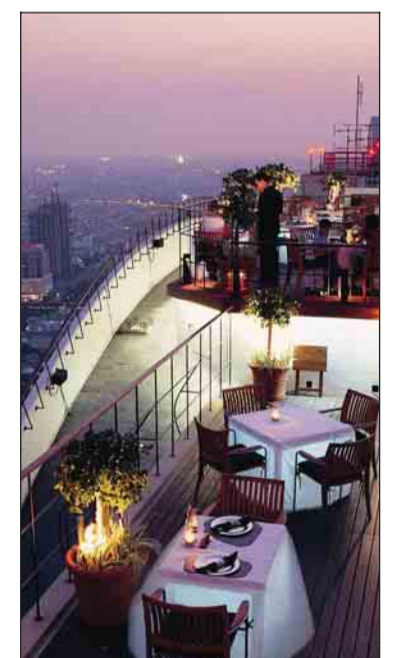
Contemporary or classic? Vertigo and Moon Bar are dazzlingly chic, thanks to the elegantly dressed staff, the glitter of lights on Sukhumvit Road and the Chao Phraya River, and the distinctly Mediterranean food. Try the oyster foam soup scented with truffle (HK\$90) or whole lobster seared with herbs (HK\$470). Or head to the Moon Bar for a margarita sorbet scented with kaffir lime (HK\$48).

Tell us more: Come the early hours of next year, the restaurant and bar will be at the centre of the biggest party in town. Of course, seeing New Year in at that kind of elevation doesn't come cheap: a ticket to Vertigo's party costs about \$1,800, including drinks, food and music. The doors open at 7pm on New Year's Eve and won't close until the sun rises. Be quick: tickets are selling fast.

Anything else we should know?

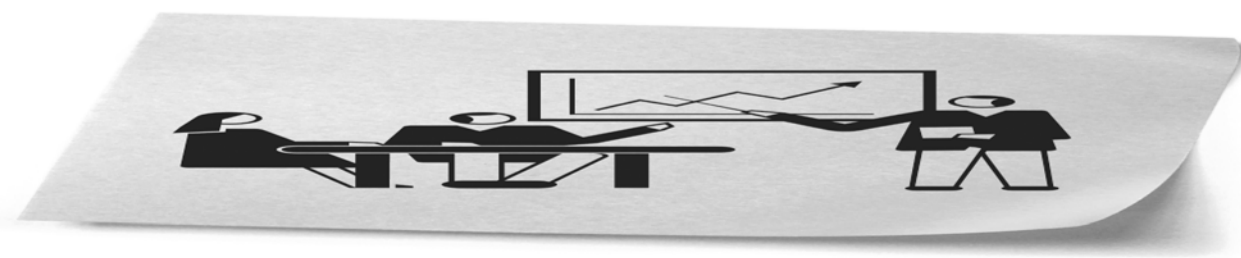
If the Vertigo revelries are over-subscribed, try the competition. The new Sirocco, closer to the river than Vertigo on the top floor of the State Tower, is also impressive, but without the full city views. It's polished and sleek, with jet-black furniture and a smoky glass bar at one end. Its garlic- and rosemary-infused lamb with tandoor, sun-dried tomato and mint sauce (HK\$215) is in a class of its own. Sirocco also has a slick little sister: oyster and vodka bar Distil. It has an outdoor patio area with stunning views. Regularly playing host to celebrities and models, its signature tippie is the City of Angels cocktail, blending passion fruit, vodka, Grand Marnier, raspberry puree and Laurent Perrier water (HK\$243). Grab one and go and rub shoulders with the other stars.

Vertigo and Moon Bar, 61/F Banyan Tree Hotel, Sathorn Rd, Bangkok. Inquiries: (66 0) 2679 1200; Sirocco and Distil, 54/F State Tower, Silom Rd, Bangkok. Inquiries: (66 0) 2624 9576.



Swoon at the top: the view from the Banyan Tree's restaurant and bar

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