

Nordic ski race draws a global crowd in China

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— most of whom hailed from Scandinavia — were traveling around northeast China for a week competing in a series of accredited races called China Tour de Ski. The others, I learned, were paying their way for about \$150 per day.

“When I told my friends I was going to China to ski, it sounded kind of exotic,” Hulgaard said.

Thirty minutes later, when the bus stopped at a forested public park, I saw an outdoor stage flanked by 10-foot balloons and a billboard-sized snow carving of a woman’s face. Hundreds of Chinese and foreign skiers were milling around at a snowy starting line. The sky was perfectly blue, with no hint of precipitation. Most of the powder had been artificially produced, which is usually the case for this event.

As Chinese rock music blared from the stage, someone released pigeons that soared above the crowd. A government official gave a booming speech, in Chinese, to thunderous applause and a flurry of photography. The spectacle suggested a cross between a Chinese New Year celebration and a chilly version of Rio Carnival.

As the ceremony wrapped, I dashed inside a nearby building to rent skis. I hadn’t brought any snowpants with me, and none were available here, so I laced up my ski boots over my black jeans. Hulgaard, the Danish skier, lent me an extra pair of gloves, and I emerged from the building just as the starter’s air horn sounded.

Whoosh. I was skiing again.

Vasaloppet, a Nordic ski race launched in Sweden in 1922, is named for the 16th-century Swedish hero Gustav Vasa who once skied to Norway to rally support for Swedish independence from Denmark. Today the event’s nine races attract more than 65,000 skiers over a week, according to its website, and Swedish skiers tell me it is a national sporting institution.

International versions of the Vasaloppet were launched in Minnesota and Japan in 1973 and 1981, respectively, but China’s race has a unique flavor. The surrounding forest, where many trees are of identical height, looks unnatural, and because Changchun’s climate is so dry, event organizers go to great lengths to create the course. One year, after a heavy dust storm, they hired 5,000 farmers to create a 12-kilometer track by pushing snow into place with shovels.

Fortunately the race, which organizers say included about 6,000 skiers this year — at least three-fifths of them Chinese —



Skiers take off at the start of Vasaloppet China. Below, Rickard Aslund and son Matteus, from Sweden, celebrate their finish.

If you go . . .

What to do
Vasaloppet China
011-86-10-8580-1757
www.vasaloppetchina.com
Arranges multiday China ski tours coinciding with the Jan. 2 Vasaloppet China cross-country race. A typical trip lasts five or six days and costs \$800 to \$950, which includes all expenses except airfare. Be sure to apply for a tourist visa before you fly to China.

Where to stay
Shangri-La Hotel
569 Xian Road
Changchun
011-86-431-8898-1818
www.shangri-la.com
One of the best hotels in the city. Friendly, English-speaking staff. Doubles from \$283.

makes up for its artificial veneer with heaps of sensory stimuli.

As I glided away from the starting line, I saw giant snow sculptures, groups of Chinese tourists racing ATV-like buggies across a frozen lake, and a life-sized, medieval-looking snow castle with a sign advertising “COFFEE.” Chinese spectators whooped as I passed, no matter



how slowly I moved, and enthusiastic volunteers handed me tea, bananas, and candy bars at trail-side stations.

“We’re doing something we don’t usually do,” Hu He Ping, 20, a student volunteer, told me in English at one station, adding that she normally spends her free time jogging, playing Ping Pong, or communicating with friends on social networking websites. “It’s very cold but very meaningful.”

Nordic and downhill ski venues are cropping up across Chi-

na’s northern provinces, according to Kris Van de Velde, director of sport for Nordic Ways International, the Swedish company that organizes Vasaloppet China in partnership with local authorities. But although many here still regard skiing as an activity one tries for novelty’s sake — like bungee jumping — young Chinese are beginning to consider it a healthy winter activity.

“China is not on the map of Nordic skiing in the world at all,” said Ahvo Taipale, a Vasaloppet USA representative whom I met

take deep breaths, admire the views, and recite snippets of half-remembered Robert Frost poems. Skiing made me miss Vermont, but on the other hand, I was thrilled to be doing it half-way around the world.

Other racers were similarly tickled. “Vasaloppet in China?” said Susanne Dahl, a teacher from Gothenberg, Sweden. “How crazy is that? That’s why I’m here!”

I met Dahl at the finish line. She wore a velvet Viking hat, with a Swedish flag emblazoned on the front, that she had purchased in the Stockholm airport. She had researched Vasaloppet China on the Internet, but that didn’t prepare her for all the attention she received from Chinese spectators. At points in the race, she said, she felt like Ingemar Stenmark, the Swedish alpine skiing legend.

I knew what Dahl meant. After I had crossed the finish line, a group of spectators demanded that I pose for an extended photo shoot — no matter that my nose was running and my beard was full of ice crystals. One man even asked if he could buy my souvenir race medal for 50 yuan (about \$8).

Perhaps he had mistaken me for a competitive skier. Or maybe he just wanted a keepsake of this highly unusual sporting event.

Soon it was late afternoon, and most of the Chinese skiers had gone, leaving about 300 rosy-faced Europeans to finish an epic lunch buffet. Aside from a dentist from Wisconsin, a patent lawyer from Minnesota, and a Shanghai-based exercise-equipment salesman from Maryland, I didn’t run into any other Americans.

George and I bee-lined for the Western-style buffet meant for the Europeans and heaped our plates with schnitzel, salad, and fried potatoes. Then we sat down to eat with Juergen Uhl, 26, from Muehlenbach, Germany, who was wearing a black University of Vermont jacket. Between bites of spaghetti, he said that as a UVM student, he was the 2009 NCAA nordic skiing champion in the men’s 10-kilometer classic.

Like Hulgaard, Uhl had traveled to Changchun as part of the China Tour de Ski. The race course wasn’t perfect, he said, but he had gotten a kick out of the snow sculptures and carnival ambience.

“In Vermont, there’s no buzz around races,” Uhl said. “Sometimes you have the national anthem, but compared with this, they’re pretty plain.”

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Mobsters on Valentine’s Day, amenities on airplanes

Nothing says “I love you” like shooting a virtual gun with your sweetie. The \$42 million National Mob Museum opens its doors in downtown Las Vegas on Valentine’s Day.

The historic Stewart Avenue building once served as a federal courthouse and one of 14 locations for the historic Kefauver hearings of the 1950s. It now

houses multimedia interactive exhibits that re-create courtroom and gun-shooting experiences. Artifacts on display include the wall from Chicago’s St. Valentine’s Day Massacre in 1929 and the barber chair in which mobster Albert Anastasia was murdered in 1957. Rates: adults \$18, ages 5-17 and 18-23 with student ID \$12. Open daily. 702-229-2734, www.themobmuseum.org

Passport cards online

The State Department’s Office of Passport Services has launched a pilot program, good through April 22 or until 20,000 people sign up, that lets US adult citizens living in the United States and Canada apply for a passport card (not to be confused with a passport book) online. To make it work, you must have a

valid 10-year US passport book, upload an acceptable digital photograph, and make an online payment in US dollars by means of pay.gov. The credit card-sized passport card costs \$30, remains valid for 10 years, and works for travel between the United States and Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda by land or sea. 877-487-2778, travel.state.gov

Airplane amenities

Wouldn’t it be nice to know what onboard perks your next flight will have? CheapAir.com has added new tools to its website that provide handy information on which flights have wireless Internet service, live TV, and personal video monitors, and which ones score top ratings for on-time arrivals. The website has

also added a new ranking feature that recommends top flight picks based on an overall assessment of price, total travel time, on-time percentage, airline ratings, comfort, and onboard amenities; just look for the star next to each flight. 800-243-2724, www.cheapair.com

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In Montreal, the perfect place to pop the question

MONTREAL — If I were rich and single, I know exactly where I would propose marriage to my sweetheart. It would be in Birks Café, the little gourmet hideaway on the mezzanine of the downtown flagship store of Birks, jeweler to the elite of Montreal since 1879. With its French history and contemporary sophistication, it’s hard to beat Montreal for romance. There’s no more romantic spot than the jewelry store in the lovely Beaux-Arts building in the very heart of town.

I even know what time of day I would pop the question. It would be after 2:30 in the afternoon so we could have the tea menu. After all, not many places import their tea from Mariage Frères in Paris, let alone serve it with a canape of foie gras and chutney, a mini club sandwich with crispy prosciutto, and another canape of smoked salmon and caviar.

And then there are the scones, clotted cream, jam, chocolates, and macarons as delicious as



Birks Café is known for its sweet macarons.

those served by Ladurée in Paris.

Against such a plan, what could she do but succumb? After she answered in the affirmative, we could go downstairs to select the ring, which naturally would come in a Birks trademark blue box with rampant lion.

Ah, but being neither rich nor single, I can still enjoy the cafe with my wife. Afternoon tea in-

cludes a bag of sweets to take home (even if she would rather have a ring).

DAVID LYON

Birks Café 1249 rue du Square Phillips. 514-397-2468, www.birks.com. Afternoon tea \$26.50 per person. Open for lunch Mon-Fri, brunch Sat-Sun, tea daily.