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Pack the gloves and work boots

Forget spa holidays. The in thing is to do community work abroad

By Sandra Leong

WHEN Jaise Goh took a holiday in Shangri-la, a prefecture near Yunnan, China, in September, she went mountain trekking and soaked in views of the scenic region many have dubbed paradise on earth.

But in the 10 days that she spent there, she was also put through some hard labour.

She and about 15 other holidaymakers toiled to refurbish a Community Educational Centre for the village's needy children.

'It was quite different,' Ms Goh, 29, a project engineer at a printing company, says of the experience.

'It reminded me of how fortunate we are here in Singapore. I don't think Singaporean children could survive in the conditions there.'

For \$1,400, she stayed in a typical Chinese dwelling - a simple lodge made from clay and wood.

She helped to build a children's playground, first levelling off the land and then installing equipment like pull-up bars.

She also taught the village children some basic English.

'We taught them their ABCs and they were so keen to participate they were shouting so loudly 'A for Apple',' she recalls with a laugh.

Two-in-one adventure trips, which combine adventure travel with community work, are becoming trendy among Singaporeans like Ms Goh who do not mind a 'working' holiday.

But unlike full-blown community service expeditions like those organised by the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), these latest spin-offs of the adventure travel genre promise that you can have fun after the work is done.

About half of these itineraries are devoted to community service projects. The other half is spent sightseeing, trekking, hiking and horseriding, says Mr Wong Yuen Lik, 33.

He is the co-owner of adventure company X-Trekkers Adventure Consultants, which was set up seven years ago and is believed to be the only company marketing these holidays regularly.

It started out offering only adventure travel holidays and branched into adventure-cum-community service holidays in 2002.

In fact, the insurance agent left his job three weeks ago to concentrate full-time on X-Trekkers, which he started with Mr Yeo Ching Khee, 35, the company's manager.

They rely on a group of freelance tour leaders - including former Channel News-Asia journalist Bridgette See - to survey destinations for possible community service projects to undertake.

The leaders liaise with an appointed ground officer, usually a villager who can speak English, to buy building material from a local contractor.

X-Trekkers also has to pay a small fee to the villagers for letting the tourists stay in their houses.

Besides Operation Shangrila, the name given to the recent excursion in Yunnan, the company has organised about 10 trips over the past two years.

About 100 people, ranging from professionals in their 20s to retirees, have paid between \$1,200 and \$1,800 to go on them.

Not a new trend

THE popularity of overseas community work, however, is not a new phenomenon.

The SIF, for example, has a Youth Expedition Programme (YEP) which sends thousands of Singapore youth aged 17 to 25 for humanitarian projects overseas.

Last year, it organised 102 overseas expeditions, a significant increase from 58 the year before.

Costs depend on the destination, but the programme funds 60 per cent of each volunteer's personal expenses or \$900, whichever is lower.

Mr Wong himself is a member of Raleigh Society, a youth development charity that often runs expeditions of 18 days or longer to countries in need of aid.

In 2001, he headed Operation Tashi Deleg, leading 100 local volunteers who paid \$1,800 to help build a school in a remote Tibetan region.

Volunteers on these programmes, however, must fulfil certain selection criteria.

For example, they must raise funds for expenses and sometimes have to leave work and family behind for extended periods of time.

Mr Wong says the only criteria for X-Trekker trips are good health and a desire to help others.

Travellers pay their own way there, and are away for 12 to 18 days.

'These trips are for people who have never done community service but want a taste of it.'

Tough business

ADVENTURE-cum-community service holidays appear to be riding the new wave of 'experiential' travel, which purports that it is not where you go but what you do.

Despite this, few market players have dared to venture into this extremely niche market.

'To plan and execute these projects is a tedious process. It takes about six to nine months,' says Mr Wong. 'I'm not surprised why others are not getting into it.'

Tour agencies specialising in adventure holidays like Universal Travel Corporation and Pac-West Travel do have similar trips, targeted at students, but only on an ad-hoc basis.

Mr Francis Lee, director of Pac-West, says that when there are no subsidies from philanthropic bodies or the Government, the costs of building materials, airfare and accommodation are just too high.

And getting people to part with their hard-earned money to soil their hands is even harder.

Mr Sim Tim Suan, partner of adventure company Blazing Outdoor Adventures & Co, says: 'Some people expect to pay a cheaper rate because they are going there to work.

'So of course, they would want to go with an organisation like SIF, which funds the trip to some extent.'

For travel companies without an extensive network of contacts, having to liaise with overseas operators or non-governmental organisations often means additional costs.

Mr Sim, for example, tried organising an adventure-cum-community service trip to Mongolia early this year but his plans were scuppered because the organisation - which he prefers not to name - demanded an extra US\$400 for administration work.

Undaunted, he is planning another trip to Mongolia next year.

Also, because companies are running these trips as commercial ventures, some travellers fear that the money put aside for charity work may end up as profits for the company instead.

X-Trekker's Mr Wong and Mr Sim say they only make money from trekking and sightseeing activities that fall under the adventure element of these trips.

They do not charge for co-ordinating the community service work and pass on the expenses for this to consumers at cost.

'It would just be wrong and unethical otherwise,' says Mr Sim.

More harm than good?

STILL, while Singaporeans may derive satisfaction from such trips, do these community service stints actually benefit the local residents?

Mr Wong says participants are briefed thoroughly prior to departure.

Ms See says that holidaymakers do work hard.

She explains: 'They have had to work in the dark and cold. It was quite a culture shock for some of them.'

SIF says that while it encourages Singaporeans to participate in community work abroad, 'sustainable development is understandably difficult to achieve through short and sporadic community service expeditions'.

This means organisers have to 'be aware of the expectations and needs of the overseas community as well as the participants, and also to ensure that they are met'.

Those in the business say that it all boils down to a desire to enhance their customers' travel experiences.

Says Mr Wong: 'I advocate travelling 'in depth' rather than a 'touch and go' type of tour. It's the same way I believe in relationships - knowing friends in depth is better than knowing many

acquaintances whom I will easily forget.'

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Upcoming trips

13-day Operation Snow Lotus in Guizhou, China

Jan 4 to 16 and March 22 to April 3

Mingle with schoolchildren and make donations to the school. Then take a hike into and around the village of the ethnic Miao tribe.

15-day operation in Siam Reap, Cambodia

March

Help build a school for needy children followed by sightseeing in the area.

13-day Operation Snow Lotus in Lijiang

October/November

Help build a library for villagers outside Lijiang then go trekking in the Si Gu Niang (Four Ladies) mountains.

- Details of the various itineraries are not confirmed yet, but for more information, e-mail info@x-trekkers.com or call 9487-6198.