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Mainland kids revel in local travel

Mainland families are finding travel really broadens the mind - even if their destinations are close to home

Hannah Xu (donghuan.xu@scmp.com)

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Beijing school administrator Li Shouen and her husband, Fu Jianhui, a security camera supplier, are great advocates of the benefits of travel.

"We believe in the old saying 'It's better to travel 10,000 miles than to read 10,000 books'," says Li, 35. "Travel can facilitate brain development in young children."

That's partly why the couple take their six-year-old son, Fu Ziheng, along on trips as often as they can. Usually they travel with Li's in-laws, Fu Mangmeng and Cao Jinrong, who relocated from Jiangxi province to live with them in Beijing when Ziheng was born; the grandparents would take over household chores for the busy couple and look after the child while they were at work.

The three generations made their first trip as a family in the summer of 2007, when Ziheng was one, visiting the popular seaside resort of Beidaihe, three hours' drive east of Beijing. Since then, they have travelled all across the mainland, from the grasslands of Inner Mongolia to the beaches of Hainan.

"We prefer driving if it's within a distance of seven hours," Li says. "It is easy to manage the itinerary and gets round the hassle of booking train or airline tickets."

Quality time with the whole family is hard to come by when parents have demanding careers and children face similarly challenging schedules at school. In recent years, travel has increasingly become a way for busy mainland professionals to make up for lost time with family members - and give their children an edge in school at the same time.

China is fast becoming the world's largest market for domestic travel,

with an estimated 2.2 billion trips made across the country. The boom in domestic travel began after 2005, when the National Tourism Administration shifted its focus from overseas visitors, who were supposed to bring in foreign currency, to encouraging Chinese to travel domestically.

Family trips account for fewer than 20 per cent of the total, many making short trips to destinations near big cities, says Wang Xuefeng, a lecturer in the tourism management department at Beijing Jiaotong University.

Most families join tour groups, which are cheaper, but those who can afford it are opting to travel independently.

Last year Li and her family stepped up their travels, going on trips almost every long weekend or national holiday.

"Ziheng will start school in September, so we think it's better to visit these places before his school work gets him busy," Li says.

In April last year, the family visited Shidu Nature Park - a popular destination known for its dramatic karst landscape with towering cliffs and winding rivers, 90 kilometres southwest of Beijing; in July, they went to the Mulan Weichang Imperial Hunting Enclosure in neighbouring Hebei province - a nature reserve established in the 17th century as hunting grounds for the Qing emperors; during the Mid-Autumn Festival in September, they visited the coastal city of Huludao in Liaoning, four hours' drive to the north, and stayed at a farmer's courtyard home; over the National Day holidays in October, they were in Shanxi, touring the Yungang Grottoes and the ancient city of Pingyao; and last month, Li and her son visited Hong Kong.

Their favourite destination is the Mulan enclosure, which they have visited twice with three other families from Beijing.

"On the road, our four cars communicated via walkie-talkies," Li says. "Whenever we made a stop, the kids just ran wild in the fields. It's hard to catch them for a photo.

"There is so much to do and see. The children can have pony rides. There are the lakes and wetland scenery. My son is very interested in the insects there. It's good for the children to be close to nature."

All the travel has evidently paid off in class too; Ziheng is considered one of the brightest children in his age group at kindergarten. "Everyone at the kindergarten says Ziheng is a little genius because he knows everything," she says.

For Wang Xu, a 33-year-old manager at a leading travel agency in Beijing, taking trips is a way to spend quality time with her son and give him an opportunity to see the outside world, which help his presentation skills in kindergarten.

On a recent Friday morning, Wang and five-year-old Kunkun hopped on a plane for a three-day visit to the popular resort town of Sanya in Hainan province, famous for palm trees and white beaches.

"Both my husband and I are busy with our jobs," Wang says. "We have the money but not the time for travel. So, the best option is to go for a quick trip over the weekend."

Kunkun has loved the beach since he was a toddler, and he especially likes to build sandcastles, Wang says.

But when you live in the concrete jungle of Beijing, it is not easy to find a water park suitable for children. Some weekends, Wang and her husband, an advertising executive, take their son to Miyun Reservoir, an hour's drive away on the outskirts of Beijing. When they are keen to go farther, another three hours on the road can take them to Nandaihe, a popular seaside resort next to Beidaihe.

Last September, the family drove to Qingdao, Shandong, where they spent a week visiting attractions such as Polar Sea World.

It's late in the afternoon when Wang and her son arrive at The Ritz-Carlton hotel in Sanya. Despite the four-hour flight, Kunkun is excited when check-in staff place a garland of orchids around his neck and hand over a Kids' Passport, which will provide access to the children's activities at the hotel.

"Since I work in the travel industry, I have heard that they have a good children's programme here," Wang says, "and I'm quite certain that my son will love it."

Besides an outdoor kiddies' pool with waterslide and a children's garden featuring animals from guinea pigs to turtles, the hotel also offers a variety of one-hour classes to keep their young guests entertained, with activities ranging from making sand pictures to cooking a pizza.

"Kunkun has never liked amusement parks," Wang says. "There is a big amusement park in western Beijing, but it bores him each time we are there."

The next morning, Kunkun gets time to build sandcastles and search for crabs on beach before joining a dozen other children at the hotel to help release a rehabilitated sea turtle that had been rescued from illegal

traders. (The raise-and-release campaign is a collaboration between the hotel and conservation group Sea Turtles 911, to help save endangered sea turtles around Hainan.)

Over the weekend, Kunkun also joins the sand art and pizza-making sessions and receives a certificate for taking part in the programme before they fly back to Beijing on Sunday.

The next day, Wang returns to her busy routine at work, and Kunkun is back in his kindergarten, a private facility offering a Montessori programme, eager to share his experiences with his class.

"He can get stressed after a day of concentrated activity in class when the children learn to sit still and focus on their work," Wang says. "A trip like this can be a change in the routine, and it also gives him good stories to share with his class. And this will help his presentation skills."

GREAT ESCAPES

Even as major hotels on the mainland initiate children's programmes to cater for holidaying families, some boutique operations have emerged offering an alternative for those with a taste of adventure:

Songtsam Lodges

A series of boutique hotels in the Shangri-La area in southwest Yunnan province, the lodges are built in Tibetan style and usually within easy reach of Tibetan-speaking villages. The award-winning hotels have become a favourite for city dwellers who want to experience ethnic culture and tranquillity in the mountains while enjoying luxury facilities with home-like service.

Baima Dorji, a Beijing-based Tibetan filmmaker, got the idea to set up the lodges in 2001 when he returned to his childhood home in a remote region of Zhongdian county with plans to shoot a documentary.

Although his documentary project was aborted, Baima decided to try his hand at the tourism business. As it happened, this was around the time that the local government decided to rename the region Shangri-La, after the fictional lamasery in James Hilton's book of the same name, as a way to boost tourism.

So, Baima turned his family's small guesthouse into the first lodge - Songtsam Green Valley at Shangri-La. Since then, he has added more lodges to the business.

This summer, Songtsam is offering a special seven-day package, departing every week, that caters to families with children. Starting from Lijiang, the trip will take visitors to Tacheng, where they will see the famous snub-nose golden monkeys in the mountains and visit a Tibetan village that specialises in making pottery.

At Benzilan, you can see the sun rise from the tips of snowy mountains and join the locals to the prayer centre. Cycling enthusiasts can use the bicycles and equipment provided at the hotel for a ride; the last stop is Shangri-La, where you can go on a treasure hunt at Songzanlin Monastery.

"The scenery at each stop is different but equally stunning," says 26-year-old Wang Qiuyin, who flew from Beijing with her new husband in May. She was particularly touched by the friendliness of the villagers.

"It is not like other busy tourist spots, where you feel the commercial atmosphere all the time."

www.songtsam.com

The Schoolhouse Homes

Located at the foot of the Great Wall at Mutianyu, about a 1 1/2-hour drive from the centre of Beijing, The Schoolhouse Homes is an unusual holiday retreat for families. It features eight village houses that have been renovated to include modern amenities while largely preserving their original character.

Spread across two villages, the houses are designed to provide families with real village experience and allow them to enjoy their private gardens within enclosed walls. The houses vary in size, accommodating from four to 10 people.

Jim Spear, a native Californian based in Beijing, started the homes in 2005 after quitting the business world to spend more time at his renovated house at Mutianyu. His tasteful renovation drew admiration from many expatriate friends, who followed his path to the village where they also rented old village houses on long-term leases of 30 to 40 years. Spear was brought in to do the renovations, with some converted into holiday homes for visitors.

"There is nothing better than wake up in the morning and have the Great Wall in your view," says Andy Cox, an American who stayed at one of the homes with his family during a recent trip to Beijing.

Each house comes with a full kitchen, so families can cook their own meals with ingredients they bring in from the city or source from the local market. For those who prefer to have the meals cooked for them,

the Schoolhouse operates a restaurant in a converted school building, where an expatriate chef serves Western cuisine - with help from local village women. One tradition is a buffet-style meal for American Thanksgiving in November.

In 2009 and 2010, the Schoolhouse Homes was selected one of the top five hotels in China by Wild China.

www.theschoolhouseatmutianyu.com

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