

Those great green escapes

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Getting away from the city isn't as difficult as it sometimes may seem, especially with the help of Canadian Jenny Zhou. Her tailor-made trips to the nearby countryside offer a rural, more natural and traditional China that to many is a welcome tonic.

As much as we all love Shanghai, sometimes the fast pace, tall buildings, and millions of people can get a little overwhelming.

This can make even the most dedicated city slicker crave open fields, clean air and the natural calm of the countryside.

Now however, there is a way to occasionally escape the hustle and bustle of city life and make new friends along the way.

The Shanghai Weekend Oasis Club is exactly as its name describes a club that organizes weekend retreats to places abundant with nature and calm.

"We go on weekend excursions to places near Shanghai where nature and fresh air is abundant," explains Jenny Zhou, the founder of the club.

"This provides the opportunity to explore towns and countryside in the nearby provinces of [Zhejiang](#), [Jiangsu](#), and [Anhui](#), giving participants the chance to get in touch with nature and local cultures, as well as meeting new friends from Shanghai."

Started a little over six months ago, Zhou continues: "It is more of a community based social group. And most of our trips involve hiking, and introducing interesting places near Shanghai that are not very frequently visited by foreigners."

Going on to explain why she started the club, the Canadian native continues: "I feel that as exciting as Shanghai is, a part of me craves for being with nature, and the travel bug inside me doesn't seem to die off. I also understand that many expats feel the same way and want to get away on the weekends and explore, but planning a trip can sometimes be a hassle. So joining the club is a hassle free way to get out on the weekends."

Choosing the name Weekend Oasis was easy, she says.

"I had just come back from extensive travels in [Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region](#), and fallen in love with the oasis towns in the deserts. So the idea was born to find an oasis outside of this neon lit concrete jungle on the weekends."

Now the club offers both day and overnight trips, with previous excursions including; Hiking at the Xixi Wet Lands in Hangzhou, visiting the fishing villages and a tea growing island on the Taihu Lake near Suzhou and a day hike to the Nanbei Lake in Zhejiang.

"Most of these places are probably unheard of by many, but they are very pleasant places for hiking and exploration that are close by enough," Zhou says.

Organizing about three trips per month: "I plan trips according to the season, and what has worked in the past. As well as feedback from people on what they are interested in seeing or doing. I would put out a trip schedule for the next month at the end of every month, and those who are interested can sign up before the deadline."

Describing the group's most recent trip she continues: "We went to the Nine Creeks and 18 Gullies (jiu xi shiba jian) in Hangzhou. We had 10 people from six different countries all together, so it was very international and a good size group."

Although no so lucky with the weather, it rained most of the day, "everyone had high spirits, and I was glad that no one had decided to turn back at the last minute because of the rain."

At some point during the hiking course the group ended up in the woods their trail separated and went off in two different directions, there were no signs.

"We were lost. I tried to call the park's office for assistance, only to find later that a nice stone path was just tree minutes away from where we were. We all had a good laugh about it."

They later realized that they must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, and ended up in the mountains as opposed to following the nine Creeks and 18 Gullies.

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"However, we were rewarded by breathtaking views of the tea terraces and sweet fresh air cleansed by the rain, and I have not heard any complaints so far."

It is important to get out of Shanghai so that one can see another side of China, the travel consultant says.

"Shanghai is very modern, and many call it cosmopolitan, but it definitely does not represent all of China. So for those who are living here or visiting friends or families in Shanghai by getting out Shanghai they are seeing a more complete picture of China. They can start to appreciate the many different things China has to offer in terms of nature, history and traditions."

(Shanghai Daily October 18, 2007)

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