

On the Road

Low budget travelling is becoming more and more popular **By Yuan Yuan**



UNDER THE BLUE SKY: This is the bicycle Yuan Song rode during his cycling trip along the Great Ocean Road in Australia

What stops you from traveling? Money? Time? Language? Visas? None of these may be as big an obstacle as you once thought.

Li He, a 25-year-old graduate from Shijiazhuang Tiedao University in north China's Hebei Province, spent more than two months traveling before his graduation this year. The whole trip covered more than 20 cities across China and more than 10 others in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. His trip cost him a mere 3,300 yuan (\$542) altogether.

"I started the trip when I was looking for a job," Li said. "I should have spent more time on job interviews, since I hadn't found a job when I set off and my budget for the trip was very low, but I didn't want to wait."

Li bought his air tickets months in advance, and as a member of the website Couchsurfing (www.couchsurfing.org)—an international network that connects travelers all over the world so that they can offer one another free accommodation—he was confident that his budget, while paltry, would be enough.

Li stayed with hosts he met through

Couchsurfing in every city he went to. "I saved a lot of money that way and made a lot of new friends," Li said. His host in Chengdu, in southwest China's Sichuan Province, was an American man. "He even gave me the key to his apartment and said I could stay as long as I wanted," he added.

Li canceled some of his job interviews for the trip but thinks it was worthwhile. "We always hear people complaining that they've either not got the money or the time to travel, but managing a trip doesn't cost that much," Li said. "Most of the perceived limitations are not really there."

Getting ready

When 33-year-old Zhang, who has asked that his given name be omitted, started traveling by himself in 2004, his salary was only 2,000 yuan (\$328) a month.

Living in Shanghai, China's largest business hub, this salary was just enough to make ends meet at that time, but Zhang still managed to travel with his spartan budget. "In those days, there was not as much information online and I

couldn't find out much about my destinations, but this added to the fun and made for more surprises," Zhang recalled.

So far, Zhang has visited 24 provinces and five foreign countries. "But the scenery is what I am most interested in when I choose somewhere to visit," he said. In his eyes, the scenery of west China is the most beautiful.

In February 2003, Zhang went on a seven-day hiking trip in Nepal. He spent the first four days as part of a group and the last three days by himself, later sharing his whole trip online.

"People reading my travel logs are inclined to think I have a lot of free time and a lot of money, but they are far off the mark," Zhang said. "My vacation time is as much as any other working person. Under the official holiday calendar, we normally have seven days off for the National Day and another seven for the Chinese lunar new year, as well as three days off each for five other festivals. If you add your five days of annual paid leave to one then you can make one trip a little more than 10 days and travel a bit longer and further."

Zhang said that his near 10 years of trav-

eling experience have changed him a lot. "I used to be a sentimental person and quite narrow in my field of vision," he said. "Now I am a lot more rational and peaceful. I benefit a lot from it."

Sometimes, Zhang organizes groups of people traveling to the same place online and travels together with them. Zhang will ask about applicants' traveling experiences and physical condition before accepting them into the group. "These are very important factors, especially for trips to places such as Tibet where altitude sickness can be a problem," he said.

Zhang is glad to see more and more people becoming interested in traveling and being bold enough to set out. However, he still advises caution, saying that many travelers, especially younger ones, act too foolhardy and fail to prepare adequately travels. "There are a lot of online posts about making a trip to Tibet for only 1,000 yuan (\$164). We all know it is impossible and I don't condone the methods they describe, such as hitchhiking or haggling for cheaper train tickets."

Normally Zhang does some research online before setting off, but usually not very much. "I seldom read travel logs written by others. Since different people have different circumstances, it is hard to follow their experiences or use them as a reference. I prefer to be there and get my own impression. It's not vivid until you see it with your own eyes," Zhang said.

Finding your own way

Yang Xiao, a designer and photographer, embarked on her first trip by herself to Cambodia, in 2008.

She now works for qyer.com, a website where travelers can share their travel experiences and information, advocating a smarter way to travel and explore the world, making all their time and money count.

Yang's interests are different from that of most of her fellow travelers. "I love night photography and urban exploration, such as visiting abandoned buildings, factories, derelict monuments, underground tunnels and castles," she said. As a fan of photography, Yang carries a professional-grade camera and a tripod with her to take pictures at night everywhere she goes.

The "urban exploration" that Yang partakes in at night can be difficult and dan-



COLORFUL HAZE: The inside of Buzludja in Bulgaria

gerous, but her desire to get the perfect photo wins over her fear and physical limits. Often using long exposures to create "light painting" with moving light sources, she finds a new perspective from which to discover the world, and creates her own unique form of beauty.

For Yang, the most impressive place she has visited so far is an abandoned UFO-shaped monument called Buzludja in Bulgaria. "Local people say that this giant monument is a symbol of history, the memory of a specific moment," Yang said. "The building itself represents a timeless message. For me, it is not related to history or politics, it is about eternity. I fell in love with it."

Now, Yang travels three or four times a year and has visited 20 countries. Sometimes, she goes on her own and at other times she travels with her boyfriend. As most of the places she is interested in are not popular destinations, she does a lot of research before setting off, usually starting about three months in advance. According to her, the budget needed for a 10- to 20-day trip to Europe is between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan (\$1,640-3,280).

"I think vacationing on a low budget means not comparing with other people, and exploring the world in your own way," Xiao said. "It is more about your own interests and targets and has nothing to do with those of others."

Yuan Song, who works in a state-owned

company in Beijing, echoed Yang's sentiments. In 2011, Yuan drew up a plan to travel to five continents in the next three years. After visiting more than 20 countries in Europe and Asia, he realized that his plan was more about competing with friends. "It is an impulse," Yuan said. "Only after you start doing it can you realize travel is not about the number of the countries you've been to, but the process of it."

His first four trips were all to Europe and he went on every one by himself. "Before that I had never left China, and I was worried about the uncertainties. But as long as I set off, all those problems are nowhere near as difficult as I had thought they would be," Yuan said.

Food and culture are the two main attractions for Yuan when traveling. Providing his budget allows, he will try all the local food he can, learn the local language and go to theaters and concerts at night.

"I don't try to attach any spiritual meaning to traveling that would ruin it," Yuan noted. "For me, it is just about having fun and experiencing it." ■

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