

Off the beaten



Pauline Lee Po-lin is showing the Chinese national flag when she travelled to the North Pole in July 2007.

track

by Christine Fung

While travelling to Taiwan and Japan are popular among Hong Kongers, some choose exotic places for vacations. Other than shopping and eating, they want to feel the different environment and lifestyles in other places of the world.

Pauline Lee Po-lin, who has had a great interest in travelling since childhood, has travelled to more than 110 countries, over all seven continents and five oceans. She just returned from her tenth visit to the North Pole in January.

"I was never fond of going on shopping trips. I look for history, nature, and wild animals on my trips," said Miss Lee, who is in her 20s. In her trips to the Polar regions, she saw different species of penguins and whales, witnessed auroras and even almost got attacked by a polar bear.

According to Miss Lee, she was travelling in the North Polar region on a cruise. "The polar bear was so close to me, only about two metres away. I didn't know what to do," she said. "If the captain (of the cruise) did not shoot it, it would have attacked us."

Other than her encounter with nature, Miss Lee also witnessed a historical moment in her previous visit to North Pole in 2007.

When British explorer Lewis Gordon Pugh set the world record for

the longest time swimming in the North Pole on July 15, 2007, Miss Lee was swimming alongside him. Mr Pugh set the record for 18 minutes and 50 seconds. "I swam for 15 minutes, but I was proud of myself for at least trying and having witnessed history making," she said.

Miss Lee's travels allowed her to form a network of pen pals, some of whom are Eskimos, academic professionals, film crews and relatives of great explorers.

"Travelling to exotic places is better than learning from books, because you get to make friends and mingle with extraordinary people this way," she said.

Two years ago, when Miss Lee went hiking with a friend in southern Brazil, they came upon a group of aboriginals who are still living frugal lives, wearing no clothes. She said one of them was very interested in meeting them as it was rare for them to see outsiders with a different skin colour.

"He gradually fell in love with me and did not want me to leave. He even asked my friend for a photo of me and to post it to his house," said Miss Lee. "My friend who still has contact with him told me he has been praying and having periapt for me."

However, these extraordinary experiences are never free of charge. Miss Lee, who is working as a

freelance advertising designer, has been working to finance her trips since she was 15 years old. She said she had never asked for money from her family since then. Instead, she works wherever she goes.

"I took up all kinds of jobs – cleaning and cooking in restaurants, helping out in hostels that I like, cleaning boats and even babysitting," she said.

Although exotic trips are not offered by many travel agencies in Hong Kong, she can easily find her way to exotic spots online. "I sign up for tours through the Internet. There are a lot of worldwide companies that offer tour packages," said Miss Lee.



The polar bear is right next to Pauline Lee Po-lin's Cruise.

COURTESY OF PAULINE LEE PO-LIN

While some exotic places are defined by their natural environment, others are by their mysteries.

"I like different and odd places," said James Chapman, 35, who was lucky enough to be one of the few thousand tourists in 2007 to visit North Korea with a package tour offered by a tourist agency in Beijing.

"The trip was strictly on the government's terms and required quite a bit of luck," said the British schoolteacher who has been residing in Hong Kong for around ten years.

According to Mr Chapman who holds a British passport, the application for the visa to North Korea required a personal resume, a letter from his employer and calls to the consulate for affirmation. Moreover, it would only be granted through a travel agency with connections to the North Korean government.

There are no direct flights from Hong Kong to North Korea. However, little did Mr Chapman know that the journey would take him more than a day, which included a flight from Hong Kong to Beijing, a 23-hour train ride from Beijing to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea.

In Pyongyang, Mr Chapman only got to see what the government wanted him to see. "We were accompanied by two government-approved local tour guides at all times," said Mr Chapman, who had to leave behind his mobile phone in Beijing as it is a prohibited item in North Korea.

While visiting the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, Mr Chapman said they had to walk in one straight line, like a funeral procession. The palace houses the embalmed body of Kim Il-Sung, the former president and the father of current president Kim Jong-il.

Before entering the tomb, tourists have to be screened by metal detectors, stand on a moving rubber floor with rollers to have their footwear cleaned, and enter a wind tunnel where every speck of dust was to be blown off.

"Kim Il-Sung's body was displayed in a glass enclosure. The room was tightly guarded by soldiers and visitors would be marched into the room in lines of four," said Mr Chapman. "The experience was surreal."

Although the entire trip involved no interaction with locals and tourists were under surveillance all the time, Mr Chapman said the HK\$20,000 travel fee he spent was worthwhile.

"Simply to see a country where the Cold War was fought, where mobile phones and the Internet are unknown, and where total obedience to the state is unquestioned, for many, is the reason enough to visit a



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COURTESY OF JAMES CHAPMAN



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1. James Chapman at the Kaesong border of North Korea.
2. A propaganda painting in the street.
3. A tour guide with official uniform.
4. Tourists are looking over the Kaesong border to the South Korea.

land in a walking, breathing, living totalitarian dictatorship mode,” said Mr Chapman.

Travelling to exotic places is not exclusive for people who are working. Tiffany Yong Li-jun, a freshman at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, spent six weeks in Nepal and visited the Himalayas with her friends in summer last year.

“My priority was to see their lifestyle, historic sights and treasure opportunities to interact with the locals,” said the 23-year-old.

During her trip in Nepal, Miss Yong received a warm reception from the villagers who offered her guest-houses to stay in. She spent a lot of time with the villagers to experience their way of life on the edge of civilisation.

Miss Yong learnt some of the local languages and discovered numerous customs, including the strict gender segregation. Women are not allowed to be alone with men.

“There was an awkward moment when some of the locals mentioned that I was too friendly towards the guys, because I used to greet people whenever they walked into the room,” said Miss Yong.

Exotic travelling requires not only time and money, but also good health. The climax of her trip turned bittersweet when altitude sickness kicked in.

“By the time I got to about 4,000 metres, I was walking a few steps forward then resting, because my head hurt so much that I could hardly breathe,” said Miss Yong.

When she got to a guesthouse, she was so sick that she could not open her eyes and could not walk straight. She then vomited a few times. After about an hour, her team decided that she had to go back down the mountain.

“I was so disappointed that I had to go,” said Miss Yong, who then recovered after resting in the guesthouse at the bottom of the mountain.

“Exotic travel 20 years ago was not as common (as now),” said Diana Kong, a former managing director of Lotus Tours who retired 12 years ago. She was one of the tourists who went to North Korea in 1990 when it first welcomed foreigners. “I think the main reason was not because the lack of interest of Hong Kongers in exotic travel back then, but the difficulty in getting a visa.”



COURTESY OF TIFFANY YONG LI-JUN

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Mak Wan-sheung, the product director of Sincerity Travel, sees a market for exotic travel in Hong Kong.

“Surprisingly, the financial crisis has not reduced the demand for such (exotic) travels, perhaps it is because more people want to go on a vacation to relieve stress,” said Miss Mak.

According to the company, there were less than 10 travellers each year when they introduced trips to the Polar regions in 2001. However, they had more than 200 in 2008. The travellers included teachers and retirees aged between 20 and 60.

“I definitely see a growing trend,” said Miss Mak. “We hope to target more students by helping them understand that there is more to travelling than shopping.”



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1. Tiffany Yong Li-jun with an orphan in Nepal.
2. Tiffany Yong Li-jun stayed in a guesthouse in the village of Nepal.