

Camping on the Wild Side

Why Hong Kong's wild campers take risks to pitch their tents outside official campsites

by **Gloria Lee and Li Sunpin**



It is a cloudless night and the sky is studded with stars. Klas and Perry, two young men in their twenties, make their way up a narrow steep path to a peak in the New Territories. They carry bulky backpacks and headlamps are their only source of light.

The pair, who do not wish to disclose their full identities or the location of their destination, are going “wild camping”, that is setting up tents without permission, outside one of the government’s 41 officially designated campsites. The government forbids camping in country parks outside of these sites and it is punishable by a fine of HK\$2,000 and up to three months imprisonment.

The camping conditions are obviously primitive. Unlike the government sites and private campsites run for profit, there are no toilets and no water source at Klas and Perry’s destination. Each of them make the tough journey carrying two to three litres of water.

Within an hour, they reach the top, where the wind is so strong they can hardly stand up straight. Despite this, Klas and Perry pull out a camping tent from a backpack and set up the fly-sheet and tent with seasoned efficiency. They roll out an air mattress and place their sleeping bags inside the tent.

In the morning, the pair can barely contain their excitement after waking up to a splendid view of the blue sky, sea and islands. Klas says he very much enjoys wild camping for the beautiful surroundings and views.

The founder of Go Out, an online community of camping enthusiasts, Klas says camping out in nature allows him a short escape from his busy work life. He says that compared with other places, nature is never very far away in Hong Kong. “It takes less than two hours to travel from the city to the rural areas,” he says.

The official campsites managed by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Con-

servation Department are located in country parks across the territory. Klas also camps in these sites, but he says they do not offer such splendid views.

Another reason he does not like to camp at the official campsites is that they are often difficult to get to by public transport. He says he sometimes chooses spots that are easier to reach, especially when he is carrying heavy equipment such as camping chairs.

When it comes to heavy equipment, another online camping community, which calls itself the Ultra Heavy Team, or UHT are advocates. On the coldest day of the year, they could be found camping in Ngong Ping in Lantau. With the temperature at four degrees celsius at noon, they enjoyed a lunch of hot noodles inside a huge tent.



Photo Courtesy of goout.hk



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While most campers try to keep their backpacks light, members of UHT pursue “ultraheavy”. To enrich their camping experience, they bring heavy and extra utensils or decorations, such as beautiful light fixtures to deck out their camps. Sometimes, they even bring a waffle maker so they can have waffles during their trip. To them, camping is not staying overnight to rest during a long hiking journey, but a process to be enjoyed in its own right.

Kong Chi-sing, who is 26 and works in the advertising industry, is a member of the Ultra Heavy Team. He tells *Varsity* that he also enjoys wild camping because it is an opportunity to be in touch with nature. Although he stays at official campsites, he finds them constraining. He feels the fences round the sites limit his sense of freedom. “I like nature and I do not like to be fenced in. I enjoy getting in touch with wildlife,” he says.

As a frequent camper, Kong is critical of the way official campsites are run. “In Hong Kong, the government officials who are responsible

for the planning of campsites may not have any camping experience,” he says, citing the small size of the tent berths at the Pui O campsite.

But this does not mean he is keen on the idea of the government opening more or bigger campsites. Recently, the Lantau Development Advisory Committee suggested developing observation decks and new campsites on Sunset Peak as part of plans to turn the island into a tourism hub. Kong warns that, if implemented, the plan could damage the natural environment and is an example of putting profit before people and the environment.

“They [the officials] are not genuinely providing recreational facilities for Hong Kong people, they do it for profit,” he says.

At the other end of the spectrum to the Ultra Heavy Team, members of the Mountaineering Council of Hong Kong aim for ultra-lightweight camping. Yvonne Lai Ying-ting, director of the council, explains that many campsites in Hong Kong are inac-

cessible by transport. Campers have to carry their backpacks and walk. Under these circumstances, they should aim for ultra-lightweight gear and not bring excess materials with them. For example, they should only bring two to six litres of water, a first aid kit, food, simple cooking implements and clothes in addition to their tent and bedding.

The group provides training on hiking and camping, most of which is held at the official campsites because they have facilities such as toilets and barbeque pits nearby.

However, Sunny Leung Chi-hiu, a mountaineering coach with the group, says that some official campsites are quite dirty, especially after festivals and holidays. For example, plastic bags and leftover food are strewn everywhere. He urges campers to follow the seven principles of “Leave No Trace” which include disposing of waste properly and leaving natural objects as they found them. Leung urges campers to take away all their belongings, including their rubbish when they leave.





PHOTO FEATURE

Another problem with official campsites is noise. Leung recalls a bad experience he had with a group of campers who had hotpot starting from the afternoon until 3 a.m. He could hardly sleep because of the noise they made.

He hopes campers can observe another of the seven principles, which is to be considerate of others. "I sleep at night [during camping] because I am considerate; I do not throw rubbish on the campsite because I am considerate."

Whether they prefer to travel heavy or light, or camp in government campsites or in the wild, all the campers *Varsity* met were self-professed nature lovers and for them, camping is an opportunity to commune with nature. And, as they remind us, nature is never far away in this frenetic, built-up city.

Edited by Jayce Lai

