

It's trendy: Young out-of-towners visit city to lay hands on 'novelty souvenirs'

Ke Jiayun

My old school friend Lisa traveled nearly 200 kilometers from Hangzhou to Shanghai during the May Day holiday just to buy some loaves of bread. It took her more than 5 hours.

I expressed surprise at her fervor. She shrugged off my reaction and said it was just the latest lifestyle trend. So, I went to check the Xiaohongshu app, which is dominated by people generally born between 1995 and 2010, and discovered she's right.

It's apparently commonplace for young people living in the Yangtze River Delta and beyond to drive or take trains to Shanghai over weekends and holidays not just to soak up the city's vibes but also to search for what are called "novelty souvenirs."

The young visitors head to Shanghai Disney Resort to buy LinaBell dolls, they go to popular bakeries for breads and cakes they can't buy at home, they ferret cultural products at sightseeing venues.

A Xiaohongshu user calling herself "Cream Pilot," who hails from the northern city of Tianjin, said she bought more than 20 loaves of specialty breads in Shanghai to take home.

"I have a sweet tooth and eat sugary snacks for breakfast every morning," she wrote. "I took scones and bagels back and will share them with my friends at home. Here you can find high-quality bakeries everywhere, and many of them provides products at lower prices than those in Tianjin."

A Wuxi uploader bought eight LinaBell dolls in different sizes and versions from Shanghai Disney Resort, calling them "specialties from Shanghai."

"It was perfect," she wrote. "I got all different sizes of the dolls."

When visiting Wukang Building, a popular historical building in Shanghai, an uploader using the screen name Yuanyishaonu reported buying a set of fridge magnets, one in the shape of the building.

It seems almost anything can qualify as a "novelty souvenir." The purchases out-of-towners take home also include coffee, replications of animated



A user on the Xiaohongshu platform said she satisfies her sweet tooth by buying up "souvenirs" from specialty Shanghai bakeries.

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Associate professor at the College of Tourism of Shanghai Normal University

characters, bookmarks and even programs from shows and exhibitions.

Xing Jianrong, a researcher at the Shanghai Archives, has pointed out that Shanghai historically was a city of immigrants, and the melting pot of cultures brought in new products that eventually morphed into Shanghai specialties.

He noted that traditional local snacks like tiger paws (老虎脚爪), yellow crab



Left: LinaBell dolls are popular with out-of-town youngsters. Right: A fridge magnet shaped like the historical Wukang Building is considered a Shanghai specialty souvenir.

shell (蟹壳黄) and fried buns (生煎包) actually originated in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces but became associated with Shanghai because of the city's artful packaging and promotion.

In 2014, the local newspaper Xinmin Evening News listed spiced beans, White Rabbit brand candy and Nanxiang steamed buns as the three old Shanghai specialties. Many young visitors shun the traditional.



Editor's note:

Generation-Z is seizing opportunity with new business models, cultural adventures and trendy lifestyles. This series explores how people born between the mid-1990s and the early 21st century are impacting society.

Liu Deyan, associate professor at the College of Tourism of Shanghai Normal University, told Shanghai Daily that she thinks domestic tourists pay more attention to local culture nowadays.

"In the past, when people traveled to a place, they might think that local scenic spots are a must-see," she said. "But now, travel has become more casual and there is more interest in the culture of destination spots."

Modern transport, like high-speed rail and expressways have made travel between cities much easier, according to Liu.

"It's simply more convenient for more people to come to Shanghai on weekends," she said.

The city is also very adept in promoting tourism and touting its culture and vast array of specialty products.

"People think that when they come to Shanghai, a city that draws in things from all over the world, they will find whatever they want," Liu said.

It does give the city the gloss of a thriving, exciting hub of limitless diversion. It's a place to shop for things not found at home, a place to sample cuisines from around the country and around the world, a place to enjoy the creative output of artistic talent that congregates here and a place to attend world-famous performances and exhibitions.

And all of this wonderland gets recorded online in videos and chat groups, spreading its charm far and wide.

And why not? We Shanghai natives have long known that our city is special in more ways than just trendy new souvenirs. There is a heart and soul here that's hard to resist.