

Lu Feiran and Chen Yian

You can get on a plane and fly to Bangkok or hop a train to visit the ancient city of Xi'an. Then again, if you are looking for a very satisfying getaway, you can simply hoof it closer to home.

Wei Liang is a 37-year-old clerk who loves to roam randomly around Shanghai in her spare time. She often starts at Xiangshan Road in Huangpu District and then lets serendipity plot her course — passing exquisitely decorated shops, old workshops with courtyards and parks filled with senior citizens.

“Every time I go for a city walk, I adopt a fresh perspective about something I would have otherwise taken for

granted. Randomness is exciting,” she said. “Walking is just so accessible. All you need to do is leave your doorstep and start exploring.”

Walking the city streets has become a popular pastime with many locals. It's not only excellent exercise but also a way to clear the head, reduce stress and improve your carbon footprint.

Urban walks, which actually originated in London, focus on ordinary neighborhoods rather than traditional tourist destinations. Sometimes walkers join tours guided by locals who explain the history and culture of passing sights.

But now, many young people have embraced Wei's attitude toward walking: no fixed route, no destination, no guide except fate.

A netizen with the screen name “Shijujua” explained in detail how this style of city walk is conducted in a video posted on the online platform Douyin.

“Roam aimlessly on the streets of the city with friends, and use rock-paper-scissors to decide whether to turn left or right at crossroads,” the uploader said in a video. “If you see a green light, go straight; if you see a red light, turn. You might come across a shop with awesome food or a coffee place hidden at the end of an alleyway. It's like opening a mystery box. You never know what surprise is in store.”

The video drew nearly 1.5 million “likes.”

On the lifestyle platform Xiaohongshu, a search for “city walk” turned up more than 690,000 entries. Netizens share pictures taken on walks and look for people to join them on weekend jaunts.

Participants come up with innovations to enrich the activity. For example, a recent city walk event published on Xiaohongshu called for people to communicate only in English, or, if you don't speak English, to communicate in gestures.

Whatever method is adopted and whatever route is chosen, the city walk has become an ideal way for young people to become more intimate with their city of residence.

“Take the Embankment Building near Suzhou Creek, for example,” explained Wei. “I must have walked past that



People walk on Anfu Road in Shanghai. — CFP

building a hundred times, but I never stopped to really look at it. But suddenly on a city walk last week, I discovered from an auntie along the way that the building is famously known as the ‘first apartment in the Far East.’”

Shen Yuchen, another avid city walker, has similar experiences.

“My best memory is walking under the paulownia trees and looking at the old townhouses along Hengshan Road,” she told Shanghai Daily. “I hear stories of old-time generals or rich merchants who built gardens that were ‘paradises on earth.’ My footsteps narrow the gap between the past and present, between the East and West. It's exactly what I love about Shanghai.”

Walking city streets can also be an excellent way of meeting people who share similar interests.

“I originally started walking when I tagged along with a photographer friend of mine,” said Peng Xiuyu, who has since logged more than a decade on foot. “It was such a pleasant experience that before I knew it, I was involved with six different groups of walkers and made new friends.”

Organized city walking tours still attract many people. On social media, countless young people sign up for the tours, which typically last for a couple of hours and rarely cost more than 130 yuan (US\$18). Indeed, many tours are free and run by volunteers.

Lavater Ye has been

organizing walking tours for many years, especially focusing on older areas designated for demolition.

Ye said he introduces walkers to the history of older neighborhoods and takes participants to snack shops favored by locals.

“A recent tour to Hongkou District was very popular,” he said. “We originally expected no more than 15 participants, but more than 20 signed up as soon as the event was published.”

COVID lockdowns whetted the public appetite to get out and about when restrictions were lifted. During Spring Festival earlier this year, domestic trips increased by about 50 million and tourism revenue rose by nearly 100 billion yuan.

Although many people want to travel outside Shanghai or even outside the country, many were just as happy to exercise their newfound wanderlust with city walks, which don't necessarily add much to tourism profitability.

Liu Deyan, associate professor at College of Tourism at Shanghai Normal University, told Shanghai Daily that city walk tours were becoming popular in China before the pandemic hit the tourism industry hard. However, many travel agencies don't have the manpower or initiative to develop city walking tours that don't generate much revenue.

“City walking tours are fundamentally a type of micro tourism — a small addition to the vast tourism market,” she said.

Menghua Street



Embankment Building

