



Running clubs and other group sports provide a social environment where participants can make new friends and meet old ones.

In 2009, he started DarkRunners, with quite a few expats as members.

“At that time, when we were running at night, passers-by would point at us and make unfriendly remarks. Today, they are cheering us on.”

The popularity of running at night — or running at any time, for that matter — dovetails with improvements Shanghai has made in its pedestrian and bike pathways. The beautifully landscaped trails along the Huangpu River and Suzhou Creek are ideal for running while soaking in the sights.

Some 400 Metro stations operate until 10pm, and more than 1,200 bus lines, or 80 percent of the city’s total, operate into the night. And for those who want to pause for refreshment during or after a run, the city has thousands of convenience stores and cafes open in the evening.

Buoyed by such amenities, number of runners in Shanghai started to surge around 2015.

By 2022, there were an estimated 800,000 night runners in Shanghai, according to Shanghai TV news.

DarkRunners alone boasts more than 9,000 members of all ages and from all walks of life. The youngest is 8; the oldest, 72.

It’s more than just a matter of running. The club provides a social environment where people can meet new friends.

Freelancer Nicole Chen joined

the club in March 2019, and now she runs with DarkRunners one or two times every week.

“Usually, we start the runs at 8pm every Wednesday or on weekends,” she said. “Sometimes we also go hiking, camping, paddleboarding or do other sports together.”

Photographer Marc Juan said: “I participate in night running not just for running but also for gathering with friends.”

According to Zhou, running can change a person’s whole outlook on life.

He has designed running routes, mainly in downtown areas such as Miaojiang Road, Wuyuan Road, Yongkang Road, Xujiahui Park and the Dongjiadu area.

“I personally love night running along the Suzhou Creek,” Zhou said. “Starting from South Suzhou Road, I pass through Waibaidu Bridge, then straight to the Bund. I enjoy the beautiful river scenery and the architecture along the way.”

Running in itself can be monotonous, he said, so spicing it up by exploring the history and culture of the city en route really makes a difference.

“You never know what scenery awaits you around the next corner,” Zhou said. “People discover things they may never have noticed during their daytime lives.”

Making runs more unpredictable, he never stops at a red light but turns right instead without breaking pace. Random



With the Oriental Pearl TV Tower in the background, an alley on the Bund is an enchanting route for night runners.

routes create surprises.

“Once, we ran in an old alleyway near the City God Temple, where elderly residents were sitting on doorsteps under dim street lighting,” he said. “There was a summer breeze and that distinctive smell of old *shikumen* (stone-gate) neighborhoods. So typically Shanghai!”

He added: “As we passed through these alleyways, the modern skyline of Lujiazui on the other side of the river suddenly came in view. It

created a fascinating visual contrast in an experience that cannot be replicated by other sports.”

Before the omnipresence of mobile phones equipped with GPS apps, many expats in Zhou’s club liked to run through old alleyways to experience the thrill of getting lost, he said.

The COVID pandemic put the brakes on running and other outdoor activities, but since then, urban sports have revived with a bang that goes

beyond running.

The popularity comes at a price, amid complaints about reckless cycling along the Huangpu River and disregard for traffic rules.

“When something becomes extremely popular and everyone gathers in the same place to do the same thing at the same time, it can lead to overcrowding,” Zhou said. “But actually, no matter whether it’s running or cycling, there are so many alternatives in Shanghai. We don’t need to crowd together.”