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Nov 12 2015 at 7:54 AM | Updated Nov 12 2015 at 7:54 AM

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Chinese travellers reflect new social status

In less than a decade, the profile of the Chinese traveller has changed from shoestring innocent to sophisticated savant, writes Simon Westcott



China's modern-day luxury millennial is a very sophisticated and influential traveller indeed. iStock

by **Simon Westcott**

Well into the noughties, in cities across China, when the words internet and café were still used together to denote special, exotic places of connectivity, I met hundreds if not thousands of sophisticated mainland millennials seeking the truth about travel. Lawyers, engineers, LVMH brand marketers, they were, to an eager, note-taking person, a cohort of world explorers both highly committed and newly cashed up. They had access to places and experiences their parents could only have dreamt of; they broadcast the familiar retail roll call of branded watches, initialled bags and snazzy sneakers. Just a few years earlier, there were still fewer than 30 countries in the Approved Destination Status scheme for outbound tourism, all travel was undertaken

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in groups and only a privileged minority had the means to take up these slim pickings anyway.

But overwhelmingly, the single biggest preoccupation of the young people I met on that trip remained travelling on a shoestring. Jeunesse dorée at home, they were still, in relative terms, *Les Misérables* at large in the world. "Can I sleep in a park in Edinburgh?", a Prada-clad doctor asked. "How much does coffee cost in Prague?" mused his bling-ed up management consultant girlfriend. Luckily, I was there as publisher of Lonely Planet, launching Mandarin editions to the gathering army of travel neophytes, and I knew enough wizened, sandal-wearing guide authors to give them an answer.

How different my experience last year, on a return trip to Beijing as the new owner of swank and frank travel media company, LUXE City Guides. I'm now at the Wi-Fi-enabled Village Café in the Opposite House, China's best contemporary design hotel, surrounded by Li Xiaofeng ceramic dress sculptures and sipping Formosa Oolong with whip-smart, jodhpur-wearing entrepreneur Sara Jane Ho. A "third culture" Hong Kong millennial herself, Sara Jane runs Institute Sarita, a finishing school based on the Swiss model. It's dedicated to equipping the next wave of bright young things with very different practical tips and tricks as they enter the wider world – not just on equal terms but reflecting an enhanced social standing consistent with China's global economic leadership. "In less than ten years, we've gone from Interrail smarts to international savoir-vivre," she says.

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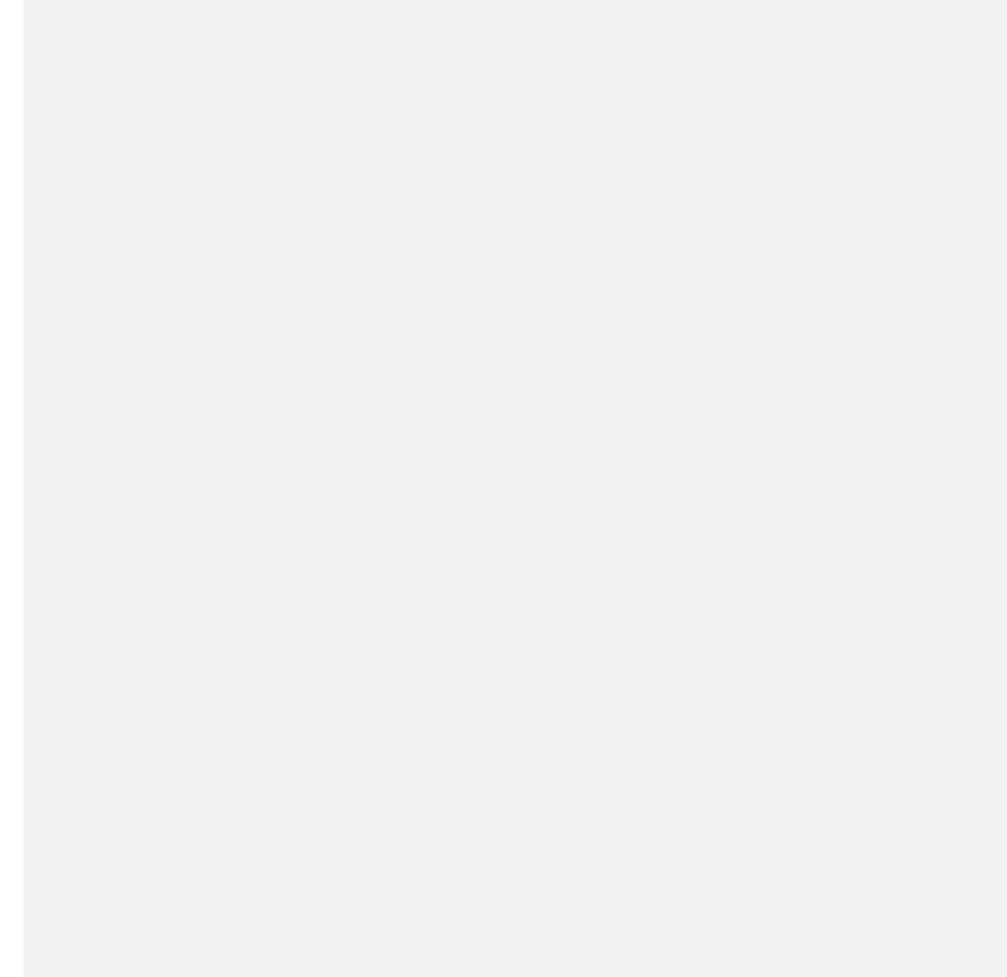
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CEO of Luxe City Guides, Simon Westcott says the new breed of Chinese travellers are a "radically more adventurous and independent cohort."

It's fair to say that China's modern-day luxury millennial is a very sophisticated and influential traveller indeed. A 2015 report from Hong Kong and Beijing-based agency Marc & Chantal, with Acorn marketing and research consultants, put the 25 – 34-year-old cohort at close to 40 per cent of all outbound travel from China. This is a work hard, play hard group; all available free time is used to chalk up both iconic and exotic experiences around the world – two to three times a year for an average of over 10 days, with an individual trip value for a couple topping US\$10,000 (\$13,500) a time. Italy and France grace the upper echelons of the destination bestseller lists, but they are complemented with the edgier likes of Egypt, Istanbul, Sri Lanka and Peru. Indeed, Antarctica is the Nieuw Amsterdam.

And it's more than just about shopping, notwithstanding recent news from tax refund brand Global Blue that Chinese consumers are now the absolute number one spenders abroad (with 35 per cent of the total consumption of luxury goods, trailed in distant second by new rich/new poor Russians at 13 per cent). The motivations for these soigné sojourners are as much esoteric as acquisitive. The desire to find pristine environments in which to escape the polluted, over-crowded reality of life in the world's soon-to-be largest economy ranks as the number one driver for travel; getting away to get closer (both as couples and as friendship groups) and deep exposure to

local cultures (both for the thrill of the new and the educative updraft) follow closely. In many ways, this a radically more adventurous and independent cohort than the generation of new Japanese travellers that preceded it 20 years earlier; it has also moved quickly past the ostentatious "bragging rights" of luxury travel in the West to an individualistic philosophy of better-ment as opposed to better-than. Beyond the stereotypes of spitting in the street and big bus bonanzas, it's a highly observant, even wry community of travellers: "boutique hotels are hotels where the staff got tattoos", one highly observant respondent to the Marc & Chantal / Acorn research reports.

Maybe recent currency volatility, and the characteristically strong-arm approach to limiting Chinese yuan withdrawals from overseas ATMs in partial response, will put a damper on all this millennial poetry in motion. The new 100,000 yuan (\$22,000) annual cap on Union Pay cards is pretty much a blanket ban, given the company's 90 per cent market share of all cards in China (according to a 2014 Nilson report). But the Chinese are nothing if not enterprising, and there aren't many destinations left in the world where reliance on cash in hand is paramount.

Indeed, the underlying trends suggest the opposite: more people travelling, more frequent trips, and more spending by everyone. Market-leading Chinese luxury researchers The Hurun Report provide the clearest bellwether for predictive modelling. Their "super-travellers" are, on average, 40 years old; they have a net worth of more than US\$10 million; last year they spent US\$58,000 on travel with family, and more than 50 per cent of them booked their whole group in business class; they've now been to more than 25 countries since they started travelling, perhaps as little as 10 years ago. Yes - even the perkier millennial has to graduate at some point; park-bench Prada man from the Chengdu internet café will be in the *Hurun Report* soon enough.

Simon Westcott is the owner and CEO of LUXE City Guides.

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