

Lifestyle / Travel & Leisure



Adventure travel for retirees: Hong Kong agencies tailor trips for silver-haired globetrotters as their numbers rise

Senior citizens are packing up and heading off in growing numbers to remote destinations such as Greenland, Bhutan and Antarctica for bucket-list trips and adventures

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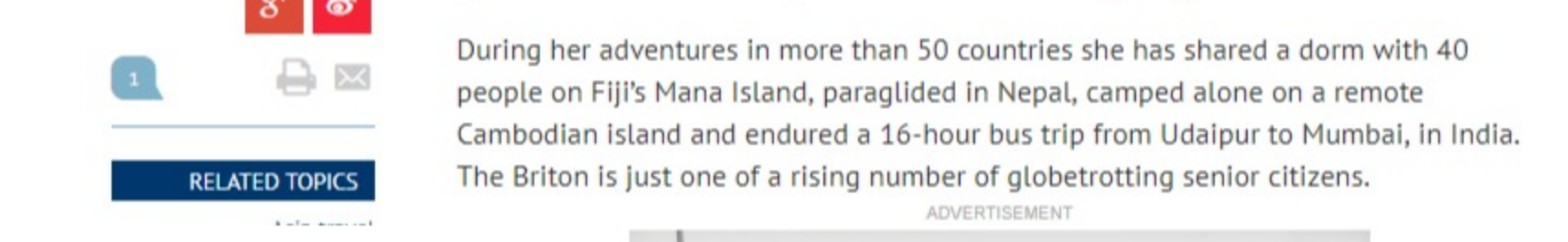


For nomadic grandmother of four Geraldine Ann Forster, age is no barrier to adventure.

“Seventy is the new 50,” says the 73-year-old, who bought a one-way ticket to Bangkok on her retirement eight years ago and has been backpacking across the globe ever since. “Nowadays we are more liberated, younger.”

During her adventures in more than 50 countries she has shared a dorm with 40 people on Fiji’s Mana Island, paraglided in Nepal, camped alone on a remote Cambodian island and endured a 16-hour bus trip from Udaipur to Mumbai, in India. The Briton is just one of a rising number of globetrotting senior citizens.

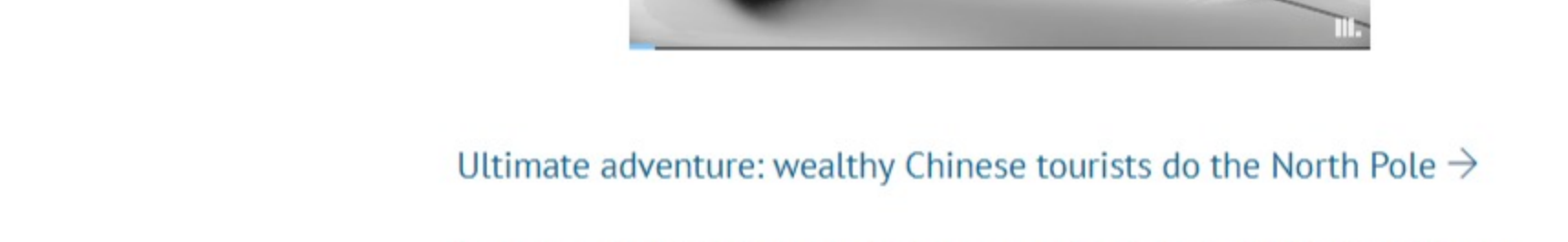
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A recent study by FUR Forecasts in Germany predicted that by 2025, 60- to 69-year-olds will account for 17 per cent of holidays worldwide, compared with the current 14 per cent. Travel by those aged 70 and above will grow from 16 per cent to 19 per cent of the market.

Doug Vogel, 72, who has lived in Hong Kong for 15 years, has been ticking off adventures with his wife Johanna, 75, since they retired. Their travels have included getting off the beaten track in Greenland, holidaying on Tanzania’s game-rich plains, exploring Antarctica and a taking trip to the Galapagos Islands.



Vogel says his passion for travel and nature, combined with a curiosity about the world, has spurred him to get out there. “A lot of seniors are travelling and taking more adventurous trips than before. I suspect the reason is a combination of money, good health and attractive offerings from agents.”

Sharon Mak, marketing executive of Hong Kong’s Lightfoot Travel, has observed the trend. “Seniors who have spent their whole lives working hard are now heading off to tick off their bucket list, which may well be more accessible these days than when they were young,” she says.

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Less time-pressed than younger generations, senior jet-setters are able to travel across the globe and explore remote surroundings at a leisurely pace. Hong Kong tour companies are responding to the trend by offering tailor-made trips.

“Retirees have the time to do these longer journeys and can move at their own pace, taking in the scenery without feeling the need to rush through treks to fit them into shorter holidays,” says Mak, who has helped organise expedition cruises in Antarctica and the Galapagos, African safaris and trekking in Peru.

Next year, for example, Lightfoot Travel has organised a bespoke three-week trek for a couple of pensioners from Hong Kong in Mongolia’s far western mountains before they spend a week in Tibet, followed by Bhutan, staying in luxury lodges along the way.

“The older generation is getting younger and younger,” says Mark Bibby Jackson, who recently launched global online travel portal Travel Begins at 40. “They don’t necessarily want to be herded around on gentle sightseeing tours. I meet an increasing number of elderly people on my travels who are heading out on exciting adventures.”



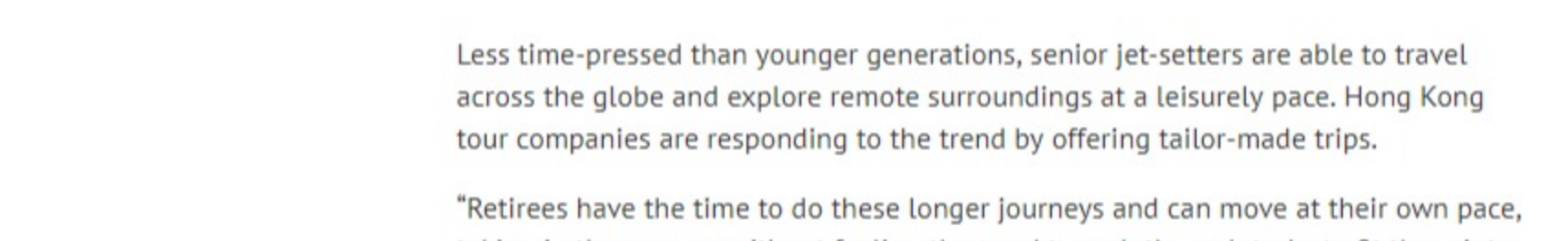
According to figures released by Japan’s health and welfare ministry in July, Hong Kong’s men and women have the world’s longest life expectancy. The average female lifespan in 87.32 years, with men living on average until 81.24. This compares to the global average of 68.4 years for males and 72.8 years for females, according to latest figures from United Nations World Population Prospects.

“Seniors are still quite healthy these days and you can also now have some great adventures without having to compromise on comfort, which we think is key for the oldies,” says Mak.

Charlotte Harris has also noted a “gradual” annual rise in “silver hair” travellers from Hong Kong seeking action-packed holidays during the past few years, says founder Charlotte Harris.

However, she says they tend to seek out adventure trips with a touch of luxury.

“As our clients are retiring at an earlier age, we’re finding they still enjoy adventurous trips, however in a luxurious way – we call this soft adventure shouldn’t mean slowing down and staying in. It should mean giving you the free time and opportunity to travel more and experience new places, or places you have already been but in a different way.”



Older Hong Kong-based clients are also choosing to hit the Himalayas with “glamping” expeditions in Bhutan and Nepal, and luxury treks to Everest base camp, hiking through the rainforest to spot wildlife in British Columbia and African safaris, says Harris.

Mak says Tibet is a popular choice. “Tibet is a very spiritually humbling experience with incredible monasteries, people and landscapes that really appeal to adventurous senior couples,” she says.

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For those looking for more of a raw adventure on a budget, Forster, who records her travels at backpackergnanny.com, is gearing up to launch Backpacker Granny Tours in January in a bid to inspire fellow female pensioners across the globe to follow in her footsteps. She will return to India to take her first group of grannies through the south of the country.

“I have many older ladies writing to me saying how much they would love to do what I do,” she says.

“Generally, they are too afraid to do it alone and a lot of them don’t have the means for a luxury holiday. Consequently, it came to me to set up Backpacker Granny Tours, where I can help and share with these wonderful ladies the joy of travelling on a budget as a backpacker.”



Not all elderly travellers are willing to improvise and “rough it,” says Harris, who recommends that those looking for a more upmarket adventure seek the help of a reputable travel adviser to plan their trip.

Mak says setting out on a tailor-made trip takes away the stress and avoids itineraries that are too strenuous, with the holidaymakers setting the tone and pace of their trip. “They also don’t need to think that daydreaming means sleeping in a tent, because you don’t need to compromise on quality,” she says.

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Investing in quality travel insurance is also essential, says Jackson. Reading the small print, such as ensuring medical evacuation is included, is also a must.

As for the rest, engage in the journey, take things as they come and enjoy the ride, advises Vogel. “Just do it,” he says. “You won’t get any younger.”

Life can be a constant adventure, says Forster. “For anyone wanting to get out there and explore the world, my advice is to just do it. Don’t let fear and taboos stop you living the life you dream of.”

There have been a few challenges along the way, she says. “Perhaps creaky knees when trying to climb on those little boats in Asia. However, there has always been some delightful young male to assist me. Possibly the biggest challenge has been to let the young man go once I was on the boat.”

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Creak season for senior adventurers

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