

DISCOVERY

TRAVEL TIPS

How to pick a group trip for your next holiday

Going on a group trip is a way to meet like-minded travellers. Since the others on your trip are interested in the itinerary, you're with people who share common interests, and the cost of the trip usually covers some meals, tours of popular attractions and other inclusions, which add up to big money savings. Here are some tips on picking a group trip.

Match a trip to your style

All group trips to the same destination aren't created equal, and it's important to book one based on your priorities — some are activity-based, while others focus on culture, gastronomy or luxury accommodations.

Is flexibility important?

Some group trips have itineraries with activities from morning through dinner and are ideal for travellers who won't have much free time. Others allow for more flexibility — they may include only a half day of activity while the rest of the day is left open for exploring on your own. Decide what appeals to you.

The case for a smaller group

Generally, a group trip shouldn't have more than 16 people. Everything takes longer when you have more, including hotel check-in and meals. Also, larger groups rely on buses for transportation, which are too big to get into the city centres of many small towns, especially in Europe. But a benefit of travelling with a larger group is the price — these trips are usually less expensive than with fewer people.

Age and diversity

If you want to travel with people in your age range, pick a trip accordingly. Many group trips aren't ideal if you're travelling with young children or teenagers, while some are meant specifically for families.

— *New York Times*



RELOCATION: Local governments in desert regions began relocating people away from the encroaching sands decades ago. But China's densely populated areas are pushing toward the deserts, as the deserts grow toward the cities



LIVING IN CHINA'S EXPANDING DESERTS

Liu Jiali, three, runs through the dunes behind her home in the Tengger Desert, China. China's deserts have spread making rural life near impossible for the farmers, herders and villagers who live on the edge of the expanding desert. Picture: New York Times

Josh Haner, Edward Wong, Derek Watkins and Jeremy White, New York Times

The Tengger Desert lies on the southern edge of the massive Gobi Desert, not far from major cities like Beijing. The Tengger is growing.

For years, China's deserts spread at an annual rate of more than 3,500 square km. Many villages have been lost. Climate change and human activities have accelerated the desertification. China says government efforts to relocate residents, plant trees and limit herding have slowed or reversed desert growth in some areas. But the deserts are expanding.

Nearly 20 per cent of China is desert, and drought across northern China is getting worse. One recent estimate said China had 54,000 square km more desert than what existed in 1975. As the Tengger expands, it is merging with two other deserts to form a vast sea of sand that could become uninhabitable.

Across northern China, generations of families have made a living herding animals on the edge of the desert. Officials say that along with climate change, overgrazing is contributing to the desert's growth. But some experiments suggest moderate grazing may actually mitigate the effects of climate change on grasslands.

In an area called Alxa League, the government has relocated about 30,000 people, who are called "ecological migrants," because of desertification. Officials have given Liu Jiali, four, and

her family a home in a village about 10km from Swan Lake, the oasis where they run a tourist park. To get them to move and sell off their herd of more than 70 sheep, 30 cows and eight camels, the officials have offered an annual subsidy equivalent to \$1,500 for each of her parents and \$1,200 for a grandmother who lives with them.

Jiali's mother, Du Jinping, 45, said the family would live in the new village in the winter, but return to Swan Lake in the summer.

Local governments in desert regions began relocating people away from the encroaching sands decades ago. But China's densely populated areas are pushing toward the deserts, as the deserts grow toward the cities.

Storms of wind-driven sand have become increasingly frequent and intense, reaching Beijing and other large cities. "We dread the sandstorms," Du said.

Residents who live on the edge of the deserts try to limit the steady march of the sand. Along with local governments, they plant trees in an effort to block the wind and stabilise the soil.

Many people in this area are from families that fled Mingjin, at the western end of the Tengger Desert, during China's Great Famine from 1958-62, when tens of millions died.

Guo Kaiming, 40, a farmer who also manages a tourist park at the edge of the Tengger Desert, planted rows of trees by a new cross-desert highway in June.

Guo took saplings the government had left behind after it completed a tree-planting operation. He said he was not ready to join the climate refugees. He has his corn and wheat fields, plus income from running the tourist park.

The government encourages farmers like Guo because, it says, agriculture can help reclaim land from the desert. Officials offer subsidies: Guo gets \$600 per year for "grassland ecological protection."

About 17 per cent of the population in Alxa League are ethnic Mongolians, whose lives and livelihoods have long been tied to the herding the government is trying to halt.

Mengkebuyin, 42, and his wife, Mandula, 41, grow corn and sunflowers, but their 200 sheep provide most of their income. They sell the meat to a hotel restaurant in a nearby city.

The sheep graze in the desert, where grass is growing scarce. They roam near his old family home, near the shores of a lake that dried up years ago. He would like to move to better pasture, but the government will not let him. Mengkebuyin and his wife maintain the old home but do not stay for long periods. They have moved to a village 8km away.

Mengkebuyin and Mandula have decided that they want their 16-year-old daughter to live and work in a city.

Four generations of Mengkebuyin's family lived by the lake in a thriving community. But gradually, everyone left. The desert has taken over.