THE FIRST TIME... you travel without family

In this monthly series on firsts for youth, Soh Wee Ling looks at how travelling without your family can be an unforgettable experience.

YANG Xinrong has been bitten by the travel bug — and she's enjoying it.

She was just 16 when she went abroad without her family for the first time, and she has been doing so as often as she can.

But that first trip, to faraway Hawaii with two girl-friends, was undertaken with some hesitation.

"I was afraid my money wouldn't be enough, but I also didn't want to spend too much of my mother's money. I was stressed and money worries weighed constantly on my mind," said Xinrong, now 21 and a communication research undergraduate at Nanyang Technological University.

"But now I plan a daily budget and try hard to stick to it. While money is still an issue whenever I travel, I think I can handle it better now — although at times my shopping still does get me in trouble."

Most first-time travellers will relate to Xinrong's initial apprehensions — of not having enough money, of crime statistics.

But more and more young Singaporeans are boarding aeroplanes now, ticket stub in hand and a spark for adventure in the heart. Some travel to nearby places — such as Bangkok, Bali, Kuala Lumpur — while others venture as far away as Italy and Turkey.

Still others try destinations off the beaten track — such as Xinrong, who trooped off to Mongolia in June with two friends. It was a two-week backpacking holiday — the most popular form of travel among young Singaporeans.

However, unlike their Western counterparts, who usually backpack for six months to a year, Singapore youth typically opt for a few weeks at most.

Ten-bed hostel rooms, fellow backpackers from other countries and cheap fare from roadside eateries form a large part of the novelty experience, which wears off with a when nothing less than a five-star hotel room will do.

Ms Tan Shi Hui, 23, a customer service representative, recalls heading to Istanbul, Turkey, in May to see for herself the intricate architecture of the Topkapi palace, centre of the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

"The guides told us about some incredibly interesting things — such as how advanced Ottoman technology was for the time.

"I could have studied that in some history book, but being there... walking the same floors these long-gone people did — that's quite something else."

The writer graduated from Singapore Management University this year.

» BEGINNERS' BASICS

1. **SCARF/JACKET**

   No need to to empty out your backpack in public view just because you suddenly feel a bit cold.

2. **EXTRA GUIDEBOOKS**

   The ones that did not seem quite so important, but may come in handy.

3. **SOAP'N STUFF**

   The first thing you are going to do after reaching a hotel is shower. So don't keep that shower gel at the bottom.

4. **CLOTHES**

   Keep extra shorts and T-shirts on top, and then sleepwear. Finally, a nice outfit in case you meet a cute prospect.

5. **ALL AND SUNDRY**

   Extra slippers and sandals go here. Also stuff like swimwear and things you need for specific activities that you can afford to pull out in the comfort of a hostel room.

10 THINGS TO REMEMBER...

- Take along photocopies of your passport, credit cards and travel insurance certificate — they will be a great help if the originals get lost.
- Give family members copies of your itinerary and hostel contact information.
- Don't keep all your money in one place, spend it out — in your wallet, backpack, and maybe even with a travel companion.
- Meals at airport cafes are expensive, so ask airport employees where the staff canteens are located (usually hidden away and very affordable). Take along some instant noodles too.
- Carry postcards showing Singapore scenes and photos of your family and friends. They are useful when you are asked where you come from.
- Singapore airlines make great and inexpensive souvenirs for people you meet on route.
- Keep an open mind — you never know who you will meet. But also be cautious of strangers who seem overly friendly.
- Always keep a notebook and pen handy to jot down random thoughts and addresses of new friends, as well as keep track of expenses.
- Help yourself to the free brochures at airports and hostel information booths. They contain up-to-date and important information like subway and location maps.

While travelling, Yang Xinrong keeps a daily budget and sticks to it — well, she tries to anyway.

WEB HELP

www.hostelz.com/
Compare prices and book beds or rooms in hostels worldwide — after reading reviews by backpackers.

www.search1.com/
Travelling by air is not the only way to cross borders. This site offers comprehensive information on rail travel around the globe — from the Trans-Siberian Railway to the Eurom 

www.globalhostels.com/
Want to save some money and understand new cultures at the same time? You can't go wrong by booking in with a local. Find out how on this site.

www.travelpop.com/
Want to travel to an exotic country but don't know if you are quite ready to venture out into the big unknown? Read about experiences of fellow travellers who have been there and done that and decide if you want to do the same.