

GILT TRIPS

Overseas study tours are on the rise, but some put five-star luxury before cultural and academic enrichment, writes Luisa Tam

Summer schools were once designed simply to promote academic success or billed as cram centres, adding an unnecessary burden on students when they were supposed to be enjoying themselves.

But in recent years, they have evolved into enrichment programmes aimed at expanding the horizons of students beyond the four walls of a classroom through study tours.

Increasing demand for summer study tours has prompted a proliferation of programmes, some of which resemble five-star private holiday packages more than academic pursuits, says the Professional Teachers Union president Fung Wai-wah.

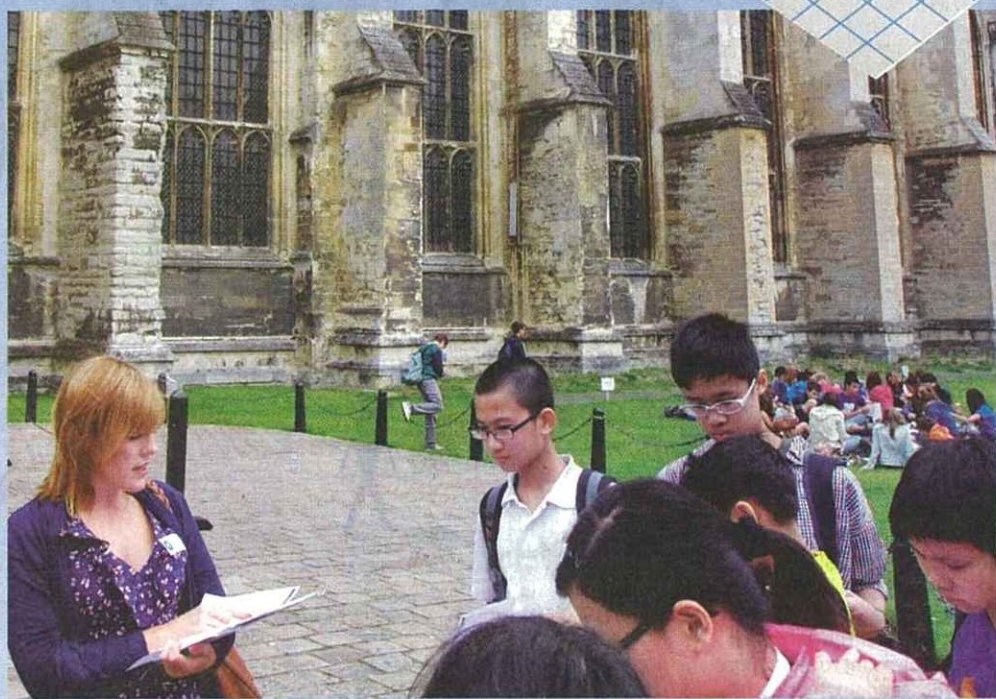
"It's a matter of supply and demand. When the market is thriving, we are bound to see people jumping at the opportunity to come up with all kinds of products to attract business. Many of the tours run by non-academic institutions are very commercial and tend to focus on the luxury travel side rather than the academic content," Fung says.

He says a mistake most parents make is placing priority on the destination rather than the content of the programme.

"Many parents have the misconception that going to an English-speaking country will help improve their children's standard of English. That's so wrong. The focus should be about enhancing their personal growth by expanding their horizons. We used to organise these summer study tours and our focus was on helping students to learn a new culture and boost personal interaction with the locals rather than selecting high-end hotels in an advanced Western country," he says.

Ng Hok-ling, vice-principal of Heung To Middle School in Tin Shui Wai, agrees that overseas summer study tours have become too commercially focused. Unfortunately, some parents still buy into these glossy traps, he says.

His advice is for schools to



A British teacher introduces Canterbury Cathedral in England to students from St Paul's Co-educational College in Hong Kong, as part of a cultural enrichment tour.

design their own study tours and then subcontract the travel component to an agency. That way you get the best of both worlds, the academic professionals take care of the educational content, while the travel experts handle logistics.

Study tours organised by non-academic institutions are not necessarily bad, Ng says. But educators tend to make the best choices for their students based on academic needs.

His school organises summer study tours to Taiwan and the mainland for about 30 students each year. This summer, Heung To Middle School will have a Liberal Studies study tour to Taipei in late June, a mainland study tour for junior secondary students in mid-July, and a

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Students from St Paul's Co-educational College attend a drama workshop on *Romeo and Juliet* at Oxford University.

number of sister school exchange programmes on the mainland. The school also has an English study tour to Britain in late July. Every year it offers two students with the best English-language scores a tour at half price. A 10-day study tour to Britain costs more than HK\$20,000 per student.

Ng says their mainland study tours are mostly national education themed. "But it's not [teaching] them about the Chinese Communist Party; it's a culture-based tour, looking at the wider concept of local culture. A good study tour should be thematic, to an extent, so students can get a better grasp of one subject per trip and be more focused. For example, our Taiwan trip this year is focused on the environment," he adds.

Ng says most parents like to pamper their children and, if they can afford it, will choose tours that offer total comfort. "I believe children learn more in adversity and under tough circumstances. The tougher it is, the better it is for them when they are away from home," Ng says.

Kim Tsoi Kin-ming, director of community relations of St Paul's Co-educational College, says comfort doesn't necessarily mean staying in an extravagant hotel.

"Our study tours often put students up for home-stay or put them in school

dormitories. It serves many purposes because in that way students can have an up close and personal experience with local families and learn their culture in a warm and safe environment."

When it comes to choosing a good summer study tour, Hong Kong students are spoiled for choice. An example is the ARCH Education's Summer Programmes for students aged 10 to 18 in the local, US or British school systems.

ARCH Education, appointed as the sole representative in charge of the recruitment of high-calibre students from the Greater China region for the Oxford Pembroke College Summer Programme, focuses on providing services and programmes that enhance, secure, and even multiply a student's future educational opportunities. The programmes take more than 30 students per year. Each one costs about HK\$58,000 for three weeks and that covers tutorials, outing expenses, meals in college, and accommodation.

This multitude of summer programmes is designed to invoke deep thinking, debate skills, critical thinking, and writing fluidity, as well as prepare students for standard admissions tests for top British and foreign institutions or medical programmes.

On the question of whether summer study tours have become too extravagant in recent years, focusing too much on travel and not enough on education, Jennifer Ma, co-founder of ARCH Education, says: "For certain study tours, this may be the case – as a large part of the programme may be focused on recreational activities, travelling and sightseeing."

"But the Pembroke Summer Programme is purely academic and educational and outings are discipline specific. For example, science students would visit science-related museums while law students would visit legal institutions."

"There are plenty of options out there, just open your eyes. Ignorance is a choice," says Fung of the PTU.

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\$20,000

The price per student, in Hong Kong dollars, of a 10-day study tour of Britain