

Editor's Note:

This new weekly series focuses on individuals who have lived in China for a while and have a tale that's worth telling. Field, age, gender, nationality and race, all are unimportant in comparison with what adventures the subject has been up to, the experiences they can recount. Get in touch with a tip about a China story that deserves to be told.

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John Mckenna

Nationality: New Zealand

Age: 44

Profession: Travel consultant

Picks and hates

✓ Love the dynamism, energy and the way it changes so quickly.

✗ Don't hate anything about Shanghai, I love the place.

Q&A

Favorite way to spend a weekend?

I like to get out and about and explore the small, charming, nearby places like Changshu.

What can be done to improve Shanghai?

Time will improve Shanghai.

Life's motto?

Attitude is everything, don't be afraid of the big decisions.

Three words to describe yourself?

Excited (about life), happy and adventurous.

Advice to new expats?

Take your time when trying to understand things here. Relax and enjoy yourself, things in Shanghai have a way of working themselves out.



Above: John Mckenna competing in last year's Xinjiang Around Taklimakan Off Road Rally with a more leisurely mode of transport (far above).



Keeping it real in China

Douglas Williams

There's something about the Antipodean people, they are the terns of the human kingdom. Drifting from continent to continent, wherever they hang their hat, Aussies and Kiwis turn up anywhere and usually with tales about the far-flung corners where they've just been.

John Mckenna is one such example. The Auckland native who left New Zealand in 1984 has traveled far and wide, living and working in a number of cities and countries. Here in Shanghai he has turned his passion for travel into his livelihood with his one-stop travel consultancy (www.travel-the-real-china.com).

Mckenna first arrived in China in 1995, fresh off the Trans-Siberian railway, having journeyed all the way overland from London, via Helsinki and St Petersburg.

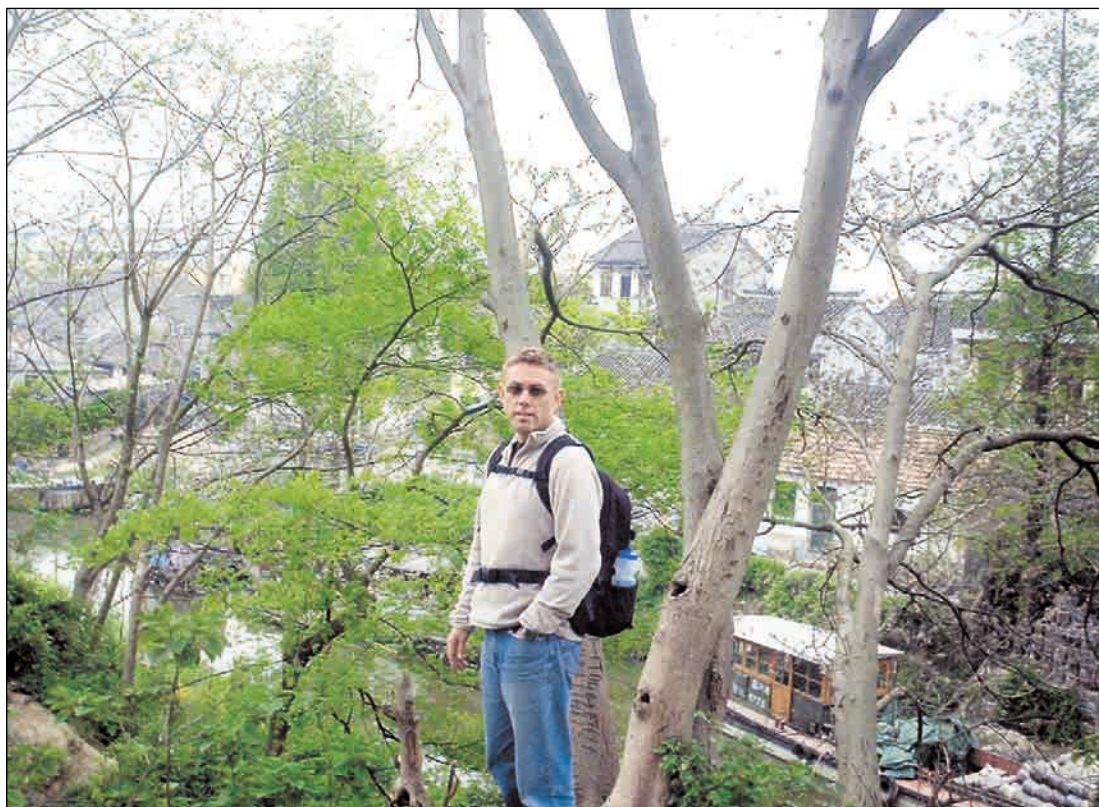
"I was on my way home and I'd planned on being here for about a month. I ended up traveling around for three months," says the fitness fanatic between training sessions for his upcoming 250-kilometer Gobi Desert run that begins on June 17.

There are five key words in that last sentence that might be worth reviewing: Gobi, desert and June are three with the other two being 250 kilometers and run. That's another thing about those Antipodeans!

"We've got to carry all our own food," he says jovially. Luckily, and perhaps crucially, organizers provide the competitors with 1.5 liters of water every 12 kilometers. "I'm trying to average 100 kilometers per week in training," says the robust and cheery Kiwi. "We will be carrying an 11.5-kilogram pack. I've been learning a lot about shoes. My New Balance ones are ideal because your feet swell quite a lot in those conditions."

Last year Mckenna competed in the 3,500-kilometer China Xinjiang Around Taklimakan Off Road Rally. He rode one of the 55 motorbikes, there were also 140 four-by-four vehicles. "We stayed in 10-yuan (US\$1.3) hostels riddled with scorpions," says the intrepid adventurer. "One day we'd be in sandy desert, the next on snowy mountains, it was great."

The 10 foreigners who competed were classified together and Mckenna came in the fourth. "The last stage's cut-off time was eight hours, I came in at eight hours and 20 minutes. If I had made the cut-off time, I would have actually come first. It was pretty tough out there."



New Zealander John Mckenna in nearby Changshu, Jiangsu Province, an unknown gem that's easy to visit. Top and below: China scenes Mckenna takes during his extensive trips.

June's run involves six stages and competitors should take seven days, averaging 35 kilometers per day with stage five an epic 90 kilometers.

During initial travels in China with his then-limited Mandarin, Mckenna says: "I always had two phrase books, one I could give the person I was trying to communicate with while I searched for the next

China, so I just went for it — I've always been confident," he says. "That corporate stuff gets to you after a while."

Within a week of setting up his Website he'd sold a tour. He doesn't advertise at all, relying purely on word of mouth. "About 60 percent of our clients are expats living in China," says 44-year-old Mckenna. "The other 40 percent are from

it's close to Shanghai yet few Westerners go there. It's beautiful and historic and it's always busy because it has a huge market selling to traders from all over the country. Prepare to be stared at a lot."

Mckenna, like many others, bemoans the absence of budget airlines operating in China: His forthcoming flight to Kashgar will cost more than a flight back to New Zealand. He also talks about the sheer quantity of adventure and history available in China, but how frustrating it is trying to find out for those who can't read Mandarin.

"For example, Ctrip is an amazing Website with lots and lots of information about even the smallest, most remote places, but if you can't read Mandarin, it's no use," Mckenna says.

Most of Mckenna's tours are booked by the wives. "We take on board-time pressures, husband's work pressures and various family pressures, a typical tour is five days and four nights long. We generally budget on slightly more than 1,000 yuan per person per day, with three-star-plus accommodation," he says. "Most of our clients are former backpackers who now appreciate their basic comforts."

A Shanghai resident, Mckenna loves his life in China and hopes he can keep his travel agency small and the tours customized. "I can't see me leaving China, I think I might retire down around Kunming, somewhere in Yunnan," he smiles.

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thing I wanted to communicate in the other book."

In London, Mckenna worked as an electrician on the London underground. In Scotland he worked on the North Sea oil rigs, helping with employee welfare, mainly keeping the riggers fit enough to carry out safety evacuations. Two major accidents in the United Kingdom at the time, the Kings Cross underground station fire and the Piper Alpha explosion, in 1987 and 1988 respectively, meant his skills were very much in demand.

He came to Shanghai four years ago to set up a regional headquarters for a large multinational corporation. "Two years later I'd had enough, I had this idea about having an Internet travel business in

overseas, new to China."

It's an important difference. "Those who have been in the country know when somebody is trying to rip them off, if they haven't, they don't," he adds.

The clue to Mckenna's travel business lies in the name. He believes in showing visitors the real China, be it Kashgar in the faraway Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region or Changshu in neighboring Jiangsu Province, a charming market town an hour and a half out of Shanghai. Obviously the latter is considerably easier. Buses leave Shanghai General Bus Station every 15 minutes, take about an hour and 40 minutes and cost only 35 yuan each way.

"Changshu is great," says Mckenna. "It's a wealthy town and