

A long, happy life by the sea

People in Xiangshan county live longer than people in other parts of China, **Gao Changxin** finds out why.

Shanghai summers can be brutal. With the humid air, high temperatures and the haze that lingers above the city, one wonders if fresh air can be found anywhere close to the bustling metropolis.

For times like these, an escape to quiet and peaceful Xiangshan county should be on every Shanghai summer survival guide.

Perched along the East China Sea with a coastline of nearly 800 kilometers, Xiangshan county, under the jurisdiction of Ningbo, Zhejiang province, is about a four-hour drive from Shanghai. In fact, Shanghai residents make up half of the visitors to the county every year.

Offering some excitement to the otherwise tedious drive is crossing the world's longest ocean bridge, the Hangzhou Bay Bridge. The 36-kilometer bridge, which has been in operation since 2008, provides beautiful sea views from any vehicle you may be traveling in.

The county is famous for its pure air and water in the Yangtze River Delta area. Arriving in Xiangshan, the difference in air quality between the county and Shanghai is instantly discernable as soon as you hop out of your vehicle. Visibility is greater and the sky is a shade of blue that can't be found in a big city.

One of its many claims to fame is that Xiangshan is often referred to as the "county of centenarians" for the inordinate number of people who live more than 100 years.

According to Ji Yunfei, head of Xiangshan County Tourism Bureau, residents in Xiangshan live eight years longer than the national average.

"It is normal to find four or five centenarians in each local village," said Ji. "It is all because of the water we drink and air we breathe."

Despite its beauty and serenity, Xiangshan's tourism industry has only been developed in the past 10 years. Although hotels and other facilities may not be as developed, the attractions and environment



Seafood barbecues are a must-try dining experience on the beach in Xiangshan.

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are preserved in their natural, original state.

Of the only nine star-rated hotels, the four-star Gold Coast Hotel at the foot of Songlan Mountain is one of the best places to stay. With the beach right at its doorstep, the hotel is cradled between green mountains. Some of the rooms have views of the beach from one window and views of the mountains and hills from the other.

There's no need for in-room air-conditioning — just leave the windows open at night and the ocean breeze will keep you cool. In the morning, the chirping birds offer a peaceful alternative to a wake-up call for your fun-filled day at the beach.

The sand on the beach in Xiangshan is especially fine, a rarity for

East China, where sand on most of the beaches is rough, rocky and unfit for bare feet. After a stroll along the beach, cool off and relax with a dip in the ocean's clean, cool water.

Vendors sell homemade shell necklaces, bracelets and other handicrafts on the beach at incredibly low prices. The average price for a shell bracelet is a steal at only 5 yuan.

And when the inevitable rumble of hunger sets in, seafood at the barbecue stalls on the beach opposite the hotel provide some fresh and juicy tastes. A stall owner recommended the grilled oysters as a must-try item in Xiangshan.

The oysters are delicious not because of how they are cooked, but because of their freshness and plumpness. Nurtured by the rich

minerals in the local waters, these slippery shellfish make a great snack or a full meal.

Despite its high-quality beaches, most visitors from Shanghai and nearby cities come to Xiangshan for its seafood.

Sitting right next to the well-known Damuyang Fishery, the waters surrounding Xiangshan harbor a huge variety of fish and shellfish.

Ji said the most famous and distinctive seafood here is sea bream, adding that Xiangshan is the best place in northeast Asia for sea bream fishing.

"Sea bream fishing is very challenging because the fish are strong and stubborn," said Ji. "It is very hard and involves a lot technique. If you like fishing, you won't be disappointed in Xiangshan."

IF YOU GO

By car, the Hangzhou Bay Bridge is the quickest route from Shanghai. The total highway toll costs 320 yuan.

While there are no direct flights or rail lines from Shanghai to Xiangshan, direct buses leave from the Shanghai Railway Station Long Distance Bus Station every day at 9:20 am, 2:30 pm and 5 pm. A single ticket costs 146 yuan.

Book hotel rooms early or with travel agencies to receive discounts.

With its untarnished charm, delectable seafood and sandy beaches, an escape to Xiangshan may be just the treatment for those in a rut in the hot Shanghai summer.