

"In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks."

John Muir

Hi,

I am Somang - an artist and nature lover based in London. In this field guide you will find the stories of East and South East Asian women walkers who are members of the ESEA sisters community group as well as practical tips on what to bring and how to plan for a walk.

ESEA sisters was set up in the wake of the significant rise in anti - Asian hate crime and racist attacks during and after the pandemic. This group creates safe spaces where Asian women, trans and non-binary people can exchange knowledge and experiences.

I was born and raised in Germany to Korean parents and moved to the UK 20 years ago now. It has taken me a long time to bring my different identities together and walking has been a big help in processing some challenging experiences, to find a sense of freedom and connection.

Growing up I saw women who looked like me portrayed as weak and passive in the media but going on outdoor adventures- exploring Scotland by bike and planning solo and group long distance walks for example has given me a sense of empowerment and belonging. I am allowed to take up and reclaim space.

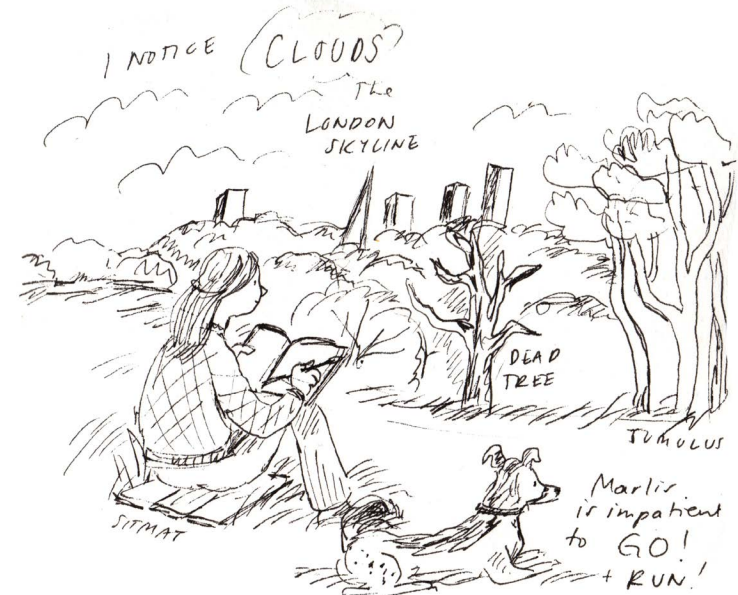
I receive a tremendous amount of joy and sense of meaning when I am exploring the outdoors and would like to inspire you to get out there and be part of it. There is so much beauty and mystery to be discovered in nature.

For a long time I avoided making friends with other Asian people - there was a sense that I was safer and more acceptable if I only had white friends. Only in recent years - especially after the pandemic hit, did I understand that returning to my roots, to the Asian community, was healing and necessary to accept all parts of myself.

Here I'll be sharing the stories of women walking and the benefits they receive from the activity and I hope the practical tips on how to plan for a walk will make it feel less daunting for those of you who may never have considered going on a long distance journey before.

Get out there and be part of it!

Much love, Somang



A day out with ESEA SISTERS

VICTORIA



Meeting the SISTERS for the FIRST TIME



Feeling a bit nervous at first but soon we are on the train chatting



LEAVING LONDON BEHIND ARRIVAL IN EASTBOURNE



Taking time to CONNECT

OPEN SPACE

WHITE CLIFFS



AND BACK TO LONDON

ARRIVAL AT

BIRLING GAP

TAI CHI on the BEACH



Sea swimming



HEALING CIRCLE & sharing our stories

Eating chicken + CHIPS





**Meet
Isabella Mei Yan Chen**

“I’ve always felt the need - especially if I find myself in a stressful situation, to leave and to go and find solitude or peace.”

Izzy and I met by Kensington Park where we grabbed some hot teas and sat by the shimmering lake while we talked. She radiates warmth and a great sense of humour. Speaking with her felt like we’d known each other for a long time.

How did you find ESEA sisters?

They were hosting a healing circle themed ‘Joyous resistance’. It really spoke to me as it came at a good time. I’d felt really isolated throughout the whole pandemic and my personal life was at a low point. I felt the need for community - especially having had time during the pandemic to reflect back on my childhood and teenage years, on not feeling accepted by the Chinese community in Manchester and also not fitting in with the white community there. I wanted to try again to find my people - whatever that might mean.

And then you got involved with organising the nature walks - what made you volunteer for that?

It stemmed back to that first event. I got so much out of it. It was only a few hours but I felt that the group of people who were organising it had such pure intentions. It was a passion for them and they really wanted to build this community and I wanted to be part of it by giving back.

I love walks and being outdoors and so it felt like a good fit. One of the early members Isabella Kajiwara had the idea to start the nature walks and the organising team grew around her. It is so important to uplift each other - and we can do that outdoors. You get the fresh air, exercise and meet new people and friends.

Have you always felt connected to nature?

My earliest memory is running away from school - it was quite rebellious. I lived in Malaysia from the age of 3 to 6 was going to school in Penang. We were so close to the sea we could literally see the beach from my school. I remember being at the fence thinking: ‘I don’t want to be here to have lunch - I want to have lunch over there on the other side.’ I was determined that me and my classmates were going to have lunch by the beach and so I led a group of kids out there across the road. I tried to find a way to climb under the fence and take everyone there. But we were caught obviously - and I got told off a lot! But I’ve always felt the need - especially if I find myself in a stressful situation, to leave and to go and find solitude or peace.

Growing up in Manchester, as a kid I couldn’t really go very far. But even if it was just the park or down the road I would go for a little loop. Now I am older I get to travel further and it is a way for me to process my thoughts. When you’re walking you don’t have to focus on what you are doing. You just have momentum and are doing something soothing, being stimulated by what’s around you.



What would you say to someone who doesn't have a lot of experience in walking?

Logistically - you can always start small. Your local park is always a good start if you feel a bit nervous about going too far afield. See what you are comfortable with and how far you're walking. Always bring water, layer up - so you can take off and put some on as you need to.

Snacks - really important. Protein bars or even something less fancy like rice crackers are great. Some sort of food to keep you nourished all the way through. Those three things. The right clothing, the right shoes - some snacks and hydrate! Water is very important.

Is there something you pack and always have with you?

I always have a flask of tea - even when it's hot. Usually green tea with some honey in it. When you get to the midpoint you can sit and take in the journey. You appreciate where you are and to sit there having tea is calming.

How do you approach finding a route and making sure you don't get lost?

Luckily we now have google which is a great resource. There are plenty of blogs out there that can guide you. You can also download maps before you go so that when you don't have signal you have the map ready for you on your phone. Also bring a battery pack in case your phone dies.

Are there any last words?

ESEA sisters nature walks are really important for the community. Being out in nature and connecting in nature and the outdoors is so special. It is a safe space for queer, non binary, trans folk, women - all of ESEA heritage. I hope we can continue doing this for a long time.



Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?

Mary Oliver

There are things you can't reach.
But you can reach out to them, and all day long.
The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.
The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.
Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.
And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.

And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.

At least, closer.
And, cordially.
Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of goldfluttering
around the corner of the sky
of God, the blue air.

It can be daunting to plan for your first walk. Just remember you can start small - you don't have to go far. Build your confidence over time or buddy up with someone you know has more experience.

Some essentials you could pack for a walk



Here are a few questions to help you plan for your day hike:

- 1) Get inspired! Decide where you'd like to go.
What do you enjoy?
The sea, forests, wildflower meadows or historical sites?
What is your fitness level/ ability level?
Is the terrain hilly or flat and will you be able to make it there and back? How long is the walk?
- 2) Do your research online or with the help of a walking guide (useful links and resources are at the back of this guide)
- 3) Have you downloaded the route onto your phone (Google Maps or a walking app such as the All Trails app) or do you have a physical map handy? Make sure you have access to a map even when you find yourself with no reception on your phone.
- 4) How will you get to the starting point of the route?
Can you walk or will you need to take public transport?
- 5) Check the weather - what gear will you need?
A hat and sunscreen or a rain jacket?
Do you have enough layers on you?
You will find that the temperature outside of the city can be cooler by a few degrees
- 6) Get packing: What tasty snacks can you bring?
Foods such as nuts and oat bars can give energy while you're walking.
Do you have enough water on you?
- 7) Do you want to do this on your own or would you like some company? You can ask friends or join a walking group



Meet Joyce Yik Ting Mak

“We travel together, we are having fun, we take up space in a way that is purposeful.”

I met Joyce at Primrose Hill by Regents Park on a sunny day. We sat under a tree and watched the dogs around us and the London skyline while talking. In very Asian fashion we both had snacks with us to share. Joyce has a wonderful smile and friendliness about her and is the kind of person you can't help but trust.

When did you start walking outdoors and why?

I first started walking outdoors during my years in high school.

The Duke of Edinburgh award was part of the curriculum and when I was fifteen I had to plan routes and go on an expedition at least twice a year with my classmates.

This was after I moved from Hong Kong to the UK for boarding school.

Did you go outdoors in Hong Kong?

Yes I did - I was part of the scouts. Not just the girls scouts but the scouts. I really enjoyed everything we did outdoors. This was when I was ten. We were taught how to navigate and be out in the wild.

So you've had a connection with the wild since you were young?

Even before that every year our family would go on an annual hike. It's more of a tradition because the actual festival is a time of year you pay respect to your ancestors.

My grandparent's tombstone was in the city but as part of the tradition we would plan a day trip to go further out. I loved that and I would pack my own little backpack.

What would you pack?

The snacks I like - chocolate bars and sweets. But most importantly I always had a first aid kit. This was when I was five! I used to have a first aid kit with different sizes of bandages and antiseptic. My mum would ask: Why are you lugging that useless stuff around? But then there was one time my cousin actually hurt himself and I was like: 'Here you go!'



When did you start going on walks with ESEA sisters and how was the experience?

By the time I joined the walk I had already met a few people. I was excited. With the format of the walk you can choose to engage and have in depth conversation. At the same time you can be on your own and take it all in. That was also why I was keen to get involved in the organising of the walks soon after. I could see how great it is to get an opportunity to bring people together in a comfortable and natural way.

Do you feel being a person of colour makes a difference to your experiences in the outdoors?

I think it does. Once you step out of London it tends to be a lot less diverse. You don't notice it until you get quite judgy looks as if you're not welcome or you shouldn't be here. This is one of the reasons it's great we do what we do with these nature walks with ESEA sisters. We travel together, we are having fun, we take up space - all in a way that is purposeful. We are doing it together. Often when you're on your own people tend to ask you a lot of questions - and do I need to have any of the answers? No! It helps if you travel all together as I have not encountered any anti-social behaviour.

If you were to speak to someone who is planning a longer hike for their first time, what tips would you give them?

First of all, do you have proper footwear? If not it's worth investing in comfortable hiking shoes. Make sure to break them in before you go. It does make a huge difference to have comfortable footwear - there is one less thing to worry about and you're able to focus on the joy of the walk itself.

The other thing is hydration - even though there are places with taps it's good to bring your own water to stay hydrated. And bring a first aid kit of course.

Is there one thing you can not do without when you go walking now as an adult?

Comfy shoes - when I was younger I thought I'll just tough it out. But now I know better.

I also enjoy preparing my own lunch the night before. I feel like a kid again.

My go to is peanut butter and cucumber sandwich and a milk bun or brioche if you like those.



Attention is the beginning of devotion.

Mary Oliver

Take a moment to enjoy
your surroundings on your walk

Look around you and find a place to stop comfortably.
You might find a patch of grass or a log to sit on.

How do you feel?



What can you see?



What can you smell?





Meet Sin Heng Chow

**“I love
to get out of
London -
to specifically go
somewhere and
appreciate my
surroundings.”**

Sin and I spoke via video call. She sat in her kitchen and I on my sofa. I again felt like I was speaking with someone I already knew well. She has a calm and kind presence about her and I loved hearing about her dog Shakira.

How did you get into walking?

Purposefully going for a walk was not something that was done in my nuclear family.

I do remember visiting my maternal grandparents in Asia and I thought it was a nice tradition of my grandfather to go out for a walk after dinner.

We would all join him for a walk to end the day and after dinner.

Outdoor hiking was something I discovered later in life.

I wouldn't be able to tell you a specific time but it was in my mid 20s after university. Before that I would go on walks in the city but now I have started to appreciate nature a lot more.

I love to get out of London to specifically go somewhere and appreciate my surroundings.

You've been organising the walks with the Esea sisters core team. How long have you involved with that?

Its been going on for over a year now - there is an organising committee.

In terms of the places we have been there is a real variety - we've been to Ramsgate, Epping forest, parts of south east London and we would love to get further out of London.

We have plans to go to the New Forest for example. It's very much a joint effort and it's all on a volunteer basis.

Somang: It's so meaningful to create this space. It's not just about getting people out to walk but it goes deeper than that - to create a place for women, trans and non binary people to get together.

How do you chose a walk?

We throw out ideas and it comes down to group consensus. We are very much conscious of finances want to make the walks as accessible as possible. Generally its places we want to go to - or it may be places we have been to before. For example chess valley which is in North West London which was really accessible. We met by Baker street and took the metropolitan line out.

Can you tell me about a memorable walk you enjoyed?

I had a beautiful walk with my husband, dog and mother in law up in Cheshire. It was around Christmas day and we went to this beautiful country house just south of Manchester.

It was a really easy walk and you drive into the area where you can walk all around the country estate. Towards the top of a hill we found a Victorian hunting lodge from which you can see across 5 counties. It was a really windy but beautiful crisp winter day.

Do you feel different walking with people who are people of colour compared to walking with a group of friends who are not POC?

I remember going on one of our first walks to Epping forest with ESEA sisters. And I do remember there was a feeling of - 'why are they here?'

We had an exchange with this British family - a mum, dad, two kids.

We had a little chat and they asked: 'What are you guys doing here?'

This question didn't really surprise me but it made me think about the way we were perceived in that space. We were 30 women who were all East and South East Asian walking past - it gave this impression that they thought we were some sort of school group. It was kind of funny that this kind of question was raised. I don't think if I'd been with my British partner or friends anyone would have asked why we were there or what we were doing there.

Somang: When we went to Birling Gap it really reminded me of growing up in Germany as a child and teenager and every time my family and myself were on the road together it was a spectacle. I felt very much that all eyes were on us and felt self conscious when we were travelling together like that. You do feel more self aware when you're out there as a person of colour.

How do you plan for a day hike? What could I find in your backpack?

The first thing would be a hat!
 I am a practical person - anything to keep you away from the elements.
 I tend to be an overpacker - I will plan for any eventuality. So a rain jacket, layers, extra socks - given I have a dog as well I tend to pack all of her stuff. It is definitely quite a full bag.
 I also enjoy the train journey too and like to bring a book. It's really nice to grab a book and shove that in the bag as well. So that is very personal to me - I like to keep something physical on me to just keep me going and keep me disconnected from my phone.



Some sketches I made on a hiking trip to Wales

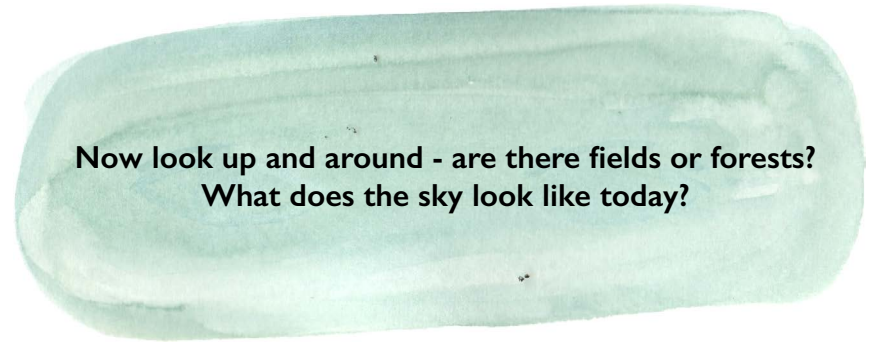
Take pen in hand and record what you see around you in words or drawings.

Take around 10-15 minutes for this exercise

Look closely at what is right by your feet.
What plants can you see? Are there any birds or insects?



Now look up and around - are there fields or forests?
What does the sky look like today?



Useful links and references

The Slow Ways website and journey planner

Slow Ways is an initiative to create a national network of walking routes connecting all of Great Britain towns and cities as well as thousands of villages. You can choose from 8000 routes.

<https://beta.slowways.org/>

The Ramblers is a walking charity who have set up a fantastic website with lots of great information on walking

<https://www.ramblers.org.uk/>

Find out more about **ESEA sisters** and the amazing work they do here by following them on IG @esea.sisters

Follow

Izzy @izzymycjoyce

Joyce @joycentrism

Sin @mssn_chz

Somang @somangleestudio

Other UK based outdoor communities for POC:

@wanderersofcolour

@steppers_uk

@alltheelements

Guide books:

Wild guide books

Great guide books with lots of inspiring adventures to chose from

<https://wildthingspublishing.com>

Apps:

The AllTrails App: This is a great hiking app that has lots of free walks to choose from

OS Maps App Also a great app to download maps from but you will need to pay for a subscription

Google Maps You can now download maps to view offline

Song of the Open Road

Walt Whitman

The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first,
Be not discouraged, keep on,
there are divine things well envelop'd,
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful
than words can tell.



Thank you so much Izzy, Joyce and Sin for speaking with me and sharing your experience. And thank you to Slow Ways to make this project possible.