

'Ricing' to the challenge

Maqiao Farm offers more than just a day's work, Shi Yingying reports.

In just a 30-minute drive from Shanghai, one farm is giving city slickers a first-hand experience of farm life. Workers on Maqiao Farm, which is owned by the supermarket chain City Shop, still live the lives of those devoted to the rice fields, where people collect birds' nests from the roofs and trees, and orchids grow wild.

Each fall, the farm welcomes a special group of guests, ones who typically come from the city, to see and experience the intricacies of harvesting rice. Attracting everyone from Chinese families to curious foreigners, most visitors have no idea what rice paddies even look like, let alone how to harvest China's favorite starch.

"We have no ocean and no mountains, but what we do have plenty of is rice," said a local farmer surnamed Liu. "We didn't expect this would become an attraction or tourist spot."

The harvest usually begins in early October, after the water is drained from the fields. The farmers reap the rice with sickles. Only a bit of stubble is left from the stalk, and the rice is laid across the top so it will dry quickly.

But this process is not as easy as it sounds. For Cheng Cheng, the activity's organizer, one of her biggest missions is to ensure the safety of visitors. "They came for fun and we have to guarantee their safety," she said. "It's easy to cut yourself if it's your first time using a sickle."

"A large number of tourists are expats," Cheng said. "They're curious about what Chinese farmers look like and what they do in the rice fields. It's something you can't describe by words, and the only way for them to know how is to give it a try."

Beginning as "quarter hands", advancing to "half hands", then



Visitors cheer after learning to harvest rice at a farm on the outskirts of Shanghai.

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to "full hands", tourists enjoy the once-in-a-lifetime experience of working as a farmer in the middle of a rice field.

After a day or two, the reaped rice is tied in small sheaves and is then carried to the barn or stackyard. While visitors can't "hull" the rice, which requires professional skills and the qualification of running a threshing machine, tourists can still visit the site to see the whole process.

Threshing starts immediately after harvest, and some plantations still use the old method of flailing the rice by hand. This process is done in the open air so that the rice is cleaned naturally. Farmers carry the rice up a ladder and throw it into the air, allowing the wind to clean off the chaff and leaving the grain clean and pure. Threshing machines also do this, but Maqiao Farm gives visitors the

IF YOU GO

The activity is organized by the supermarket City Shop, which owns Maqiao Farm and other three farms in the suburbs of Shanghai. This year's rice reaping will be in October and November, dial 021-6232-2137 ext 811 for more information. The cost is expected to be about 100 yuan.

chance to see this process done the old-fashioned way.

Visitors receive small bags of freshly reaped rice as payment for their work. There is also a selection of Japanese Koshihikari, the type of sticky short-grain rice that is usually used to make sushi, and organic rice.

After a morning of hard work, visitors enjoy a hearty lunch offered by the trip. With



Traditional cooking methods are a special treat for city dwellers.

fresh rice and an assortment of organic vegetables, the food at the local restaurant that is associated with the farm will delight the pickiest of eaters. For an added treat, be sure to try the sweet potatoes.

This year visitors will be able to participate in the harvest on Oct 30, Oct 31, Nov 6 and Nov 7. It's an easy and convenient one-day excursion for families and friends looking for a short trip out of the city.