



A rock climber scales a rock face on one of the karst mountains for which Guilin is famous.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Guilin marches to a leisurely, scenic beat

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During the process of rapid urbanization in China, many cities have seen scenic features lost to swaths of concrete, steel and glass. But Zhao Leqin, the Party chief of Guilin, is determined that his city will follow a different course and retain the attraction of its natural scenery.

Guilin is exceptional not just for its natural scenery but also for its economic strategy. While many Chinese tend to pledge they're going to build their cities into modern business centers, Guilin's leaders just want to make their city a favorite hangout for people.

Zhao said a main component of Guilin's tourism development program is the accommodation of more peo-

ple seeking "quiet leisure".

Quiet leisure is a new concept for Guilin to attract China's newly rich middle-class tourists.

"We welcome them to come to tour our mountains and rivers and have fun. And we also welcome them to come here just to look at our mountains and rivers, to idle away their day, and to spend time just staring blankly," said the secretary of the Communist Party of China's city committee, sounding almost like a psychotherapist.

Zhao's comment is a sign of how closely the city government has been following the pulse of the rest of the country. In Chinese Internet jargon, "staring blankly" is a luxury that many young urban professionals look forward to but cannot often afford in their hectic daily lives.

Only a few places are seen as venues for spending time staring blankly at the placid mountains and distant rivers.

Guilin is a leading scenic city in China and among the country's top 10 cities as a destination for international tourists. In 2013, it received more than 35 million tourists, of whom nearly 2 million were from overseas, Zhao said.

Tourism provides almost 20 percent of Guilin's GDP. In the first half of 2014, when GDP growth for the whole country saw a slowdown, Guilin registered more than 15 percent growth in its tourism revenues, despite an increase of less than 7 percent in the number of visitors — showing a marked increase in average spending.

Zhao said the local government views the city as still having untapped potential for

attracting more people other than the traditional group tours. One of its new offers is leisurely holidays for people to escape from the hustle and bustle of the modern business centers. New hotels are to be built for this purpose.

The possibility of receiving more tourists is enhanced by Guilin's connection to two high-speed railway lines. It takes only two hours for people from the industrial Pearl River Delta to reach Guilin by rail.

"Not many cities in China are so fortunate," Zhao said.

Guilin's Liangjiang International Airport, which became operational in 1996, handles 5.8 million passengers a year, already above its capacity. Work started in November to achieve the capacity for 12 million passengers by 2020.

While modernization of

the transportation system is bringing more visitors, the city has been trying every way to protect the local tourist attractions, especially the Lijiang River, one of the most beautiful rivers in China, which Zhao called "the soul of Guilin's scenery".

Guilin has been making progress in the ecological preservation, tree planting, and water protection in its upstream areas.

Despite Guilin's fame as a tourist city in China, Zhao admits more work still has to be done. It remains a challenge as to how to encourage visitors to spend more time in the city. Domestic tourists spend only on average 2.7 days in the city, and overseas tourists even less time.

Huo Yan and Zhou Chunyong contributed to this story.

## Lijiang River flows amid 'fairytale' landscape

By **LI YANG**  
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Wang Zhenggong, a governor of Guangxi in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) would not have expected his farewell toast to Guilin's imperial test-takers to become a household saying in Chinese for the next 1,000 years.

"Guilin's scenery is the best in the world," Wang said simply.

The Lijiang River and the unique karst mountain ranges extending along the river from Guilin to Yangshuo county are at the core of the renowned scenery.

The legendary scenery often includes bamboo rafts carrying old fishermen in straw hats and hawks highlighted against the green water of the Lijiang River. Bamboo-shaped karst hills are carpeted with thick growth throughout the year.

The karst mountains surrounding the river are not high, but they connect with one another in such an illusionary way that tourists feel they are sailing in a fairytale.

Lijiang was recognized in China's first batch of national key scenic spots in 1982 and one of the 13 rivers under the highest level of national protection measures in the 1990s.



Foreign tourists appreciate the Lijiang River views on a sightseeing boat.

Because of the difficulty in transportation, most of the ancient villages and towns in the mountains along the river, as well as their old lifestyles, are well preserved. More and more urban Chinese and foreigners are moving to the villages to escape the hustle and bustle of city life.

For most of the city's 2,000-year history, Guilin has been a political, cultural, military and economic center in South China. Local painters developed the famous Lijiang painting school by drawing the beauty of the natural landscape.

Lijiang also serves as important waterborne transport line connecting central and south China. Both sides of the Lijiang were home to several important airbases for the Flying Tigers, a US air force helping China resist Japanese invaders during World War II.

Yet there are also environmental concerns. While Guilin authorities shut down factories in the 1970s and 1980s, it is difficult to resist the temptation of revenues from tourism.

The sharp rise in sewage, household garbage and emis-

sions from cars and motorboats now pose the harshest environmental challenge since the industrialization of Guilin in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1980s, only five wooden sightseeing boats with a total of 440 seats worked on the Lijiang River. Today more than 300 large boats shuttle along the river, transporting more than 6 million visitors a year.

In contrast with about six million tourists annually and a local population of a million residents 20 years ago, the city now has six million resi-

dents and attracts more than 35 million travelers each year. About 2 million Guilin locals make their living from tourism along the Lijiang River.

"A worrisome phenomenon is the invasion of consumerism to local farmers," said a village head in Yangshuo. "It is necessary for the government to raise local people's environmental consciousness. Otherwise, tourism will not be a sustainable cash cow in the long run."

Huo Yan and Li Ziyu contributed to this story.

## Modern infrastructure serves today's tourists

By **LI YANG**  
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Renowned for its picturesque karst landscape and unique local cultures, Guilin was recommended by the World Tourism Organization immediately after China opened up to the world in the late 1970s.

The Chinese government selected Guilin as a tourist destination for foreign visitors in 1973 during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76). Nearly 200 state leaders from around the world have visited the city.

In addition to 45 national-level tourist sites and four ancient villages, Guilin also has 187 travel agencies and about 200,000 beds for tourists in 3,471 hotels, 68 of them star-rated.

Last year, 36 million people visited Guilin, up 8.9 percent compared to 2012, including 2 million foreign tourists. The annual revenue from tourism was about 35 billion yuan (\$5.8 billion), a rise of 26 percent.

Tourism revenue is projected to account for 20 percent of Guilin's economy next year and 40 percent of annual added value is estimated to come from the sector. By 2020, the two proportions are planned to reach 25 percent and 50 percent respectively.

With transportation infrastructure key to Guilin's connectivity, local authorities have a range of plans to improve networks on land and in the air. It now takes about nine hours

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of Guilin's economy expected to be from tourism in 2015

to reach Guilin from Beijing on a high-speed train that went into service last year. It is estimated about 16 million people will take the high-speed train to and from Guilin this year.

The city's highway system is connected to the national network and now carries about 200 million passengers a year.

The airport in Guilin handles nearly 6 million people a year following growth of 20 percent annually in recent years.

Two years ago, the State Council, China's cabinet, decided to provide all necessary support to build Guilin into an international tourist resort, a target to be realized in about eight years, according plans by the Guilin government.

The central authority's support ushers the city into a new phase of development, with increased investment in environmental preservation and infrastructure, and modernization in line with international standards to improve services for better traveling and consumer experiences.



A range of ethnic cultures add to the appeal of Guilin.

## FORUM MILESTONES

The Guilin government started cooperation with the World Tourism Organization of the United Nations in 2003 to initiate a series of meetings to become more international and well known to the world as a picturesque city, according local officials.

- 2003 Seminar on regional cooperation in UNWTO tourist destination development and management.

- 2005 Seminar on a sustainable development index for tourism.

- 2007 The first conference on tourism trends and study of UNWTO and the Pacific Asia Travel Association. Some 200 distinguished guests and speakers from more than 20 countries and regions attended the conference.

- 2008 The second UNWTO/PATA international forum on tourism trends and outlook focused on the impact from the global financial crisis and cooperation among tourist sites around the world.

- 2009 The third UNWTO/PATA international forum discussed the recovery of the global tourism industry. Guilin became the permanent host city for the forum.

- 2010 The theme of the fourth UNWTO/PATA forum is domestic and regional tourism, an effective way to promote the recovery of tourism industry after the financial crisis.

- 2011 The theme of the fifth UNWTO/PATA forum was innovation and diversification. Attendees agreed that innovation is needed after the global crisis.

- 2012 The theme of the sixth UNWTO/PATA forum is to share experience and mutual benefits. The forum discussed and analyzed development trends and future strategies and prospects.

- 2013 The theme of the seventh UNWTO/PATA forum on tourism was new knowledge, practices and challenges.

### Organizers

One of the annual forum's organizers, UNWTO is the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.

It promotes tourism as a driver of economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability and offers leadership and support to the sector in advancing knowledge and tourism policies worldwide.

Another organizer, PATA, is a membership association that acts as a catalyst for the responsible development of Asia-Pacific travel and tourism industry.

The association provides leadership and counsel on an individual and collective basis to more than 80 government, state and city tourism organizations across the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

— LI YANG