

ChinaTravel

Hainan gets a makeover

TROPICAL ISLAND HAS MADE BIG STRIDES BUT MUST ADDRESS IMAGE ISSUES TO BECOME A GLOBAL DESTINATION

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Hainan Island has been a holiday destination for domestic tourists for many years, but now China's only tropical island is looking to attract Westerners and other tourists from overseas.

In 2010, the central government set a target for the island province in the South China Sea to become an international tourism destination by 2020, but five years on, there is still some way to go.

Last year, just 650,000 or 1.4 percent of Hainan's 48 million tourists, came from outside China, with many hailing from South Korea and Russia, rather than the United States or Europe.

The island is partly handicapped by its own success. Many wealthy Chinese own multimillion-dollar second homes there, and their yachts are moored in Sanya, the main resort, which has become a playground of the rich.

At certain times of the year, particularly lunar new year, room rates at the resort's hotels can skyrocket, with starting prices for a week's accommodation often leaving little change out of 50,000 yuan (\$7,200).

Hotels and other tourism locations often cater more to visitors from China than overseas.

The other problem is that the island lacks name recognition with Westerners, who have simply never heard of it and don't associate tropical beaches with China.

Instead, Western tourists remain drawn to alternative locations in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia, which are often cheaper and also typically more international in feel.

Chen Tiejun, deputy director of the Hainan Provincial Tourism Development Commission, admits that meeting the 2020 target will be a sizeable task.

"Yes, it is a big challenge," Chen says. "First, the development of Hainan's tourist industry started later than in other locations in Southeast Asia whose facilities and services are now more mature.

"Second, the cost of traveling to surrounding countries has become cheaper, especially in recent years as the value of the yuan has risen."

Yet tourism has made huge strides in Hainan. In 1988, the island played host to 1.2 million tourists, including 204,600 from outside China.

International tourists hit a peak



Tourists enjoy the sunshine on a beach in Sanya, Hainan province, a popular tourist destination. CHEN GANG / CHINA DAILY



HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

Binlang Valley Cultural Tourism Zone performers demonstrate how fire was traditionally made by rubbing sticks together.

of 1 million in 2008 when the overall number was 20 million, less than half the current total.

Although Chen wants to see the number of international visitors rise far above that level, he says the province's advertising budget is just \$2 million a year, far lower than in previous years.

"I always see commercials for Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam during July and August, but they cost around 20 million yuan for two months, and we don't have that kind of budget," he says.

However, the BBC's travel website now carries a Hainan page, which is updated twice a month, and a similar promotion is running on the online travel portal TripAdvisor.

"We are adjusting our strategy by doing more online marketing, which is more cost-effective. These promotions have received good responses," Chen says.

In Sanya, the goal is to transform the resort into the Dubai or Miami of the South China Sea.

The man-made 365,000-square-meter Phoenix Island certainly resembles The Palm and other reclamation developments in the United Arab Emirates' city, and will soon also have a seven-star hotel to equal the Burj Al Arab, designed by Chinese architect Ma Yansong.

Li Li, deputy general manager of the Sanya Phoenix Island Investment Group, which has sunk a substantial sum into the area and now plans to invest a further 17.6 billion yuan, says she can see Sanya being firmly on the international map within 10 years.

"I can see it becoming like Dubai, a place where celebrities like David Beckham have homes, and also a center for international film festivals such as Cannes," she says.

Key to the success of the development will be to make Sanya an established destination for international cruises.

By the end of next year, the port will have a 225,000-metric-ton berth capable of handling even the

largest cruise ships. The luxury liner *Queen Mary 2* docked at Sanya during Spring Festival earlier this year.

Cruise liners drop anchor at Sanya after Hong Kong en route to Vietnam, but there are only likely to be 33 visits this year, compared with 113 in 2013, because of operators' concerns about territorial disputes in the area.

Speaking in a 28th floor executive apartment overlooking the azure blue bay, Zhou Chunhua, director of the Sanya Tourism Development Commission, says cruise ships are the key to popularizing Sanya among foreign tourists. "A cruise ship can stop for seven or eight hours and people can visit the city. When they go home, they will tell people about Sanya," she says.

Sanya is spearheading the island's efforts to meet the 2020 target, with visitor numbers growing 15.1 percent annually for the past five years. Hotel capacity has increased by 52

percent over the past five years and another 46 hotels will be built in the next four years.

"One of the problems for Sanya is that it's known only in China and by people who own yachts, but not by the mass market, and that's what we want to address," Zhou adds.

The Hainan tourism authorities also want to attract Western tourists who have visited China before and are looking for something out of the ordinary.

Retired teacher Lynne Skeith, 63, from Derbyshire in the United Kingdom, visited Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an on a trip to China with her husband in 2011.

"If we were to go back, we are not really fully aware of what Hainan has to offer. We are not averse to a couple of days by the pool or on the beach, but we like sightseeing and culture. We are more likely to use it as a drop-off point on a cruise," says Skeith.

Some of the island's ancient culture lies inland, such as villages like those in the city of Qionghai that date back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

The island also boasts tropical forests, volcanoes and magnificent landscapes. One of its most famous attractions, the Xinglong Tropical Garden — which has been recognized by the United Nations for its environmental work — was founded by former architect Colin Cheng Wen Thay in 1992.

Spread over 400 hectares, the garden has 4,000 different plant species and has been the lifework of the lithe and sun-burnished Cheng, 70, who was born in Indonesia.

"Visitors often assume that I'm the gardener because I often do physical work," he says. "We get many international tourists, but they're mostly from Southeast Asia. Those from the US or Europe are mainly overseas Chinese."

Chen, from the island's tourism development commission, believes investment in attractions such as gardens and in tourism skills will ensure that Hainan achieves the 2020 visitor target.

"We lack tourism professionals who can speak foreign languages. Wages in Hainan are quite low, so people are more likely to work in hotels in Beijing and Shanghai.

"We have been working with local universities and developing tourism-related majors. I think developing these skills is the key," he says.

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