

Focus: Hainan Province

Hoping to hook more foreigners

HAINAN OFFICIAL SAYS TARGETED MARKETING AND EXTRA FLIGHTS WILL HELP TO WOO MORE GLOBAL VISITORS

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The Chinese government has set a target for Hainan, the country's tropical island province, to become an international tourism destination by 2020. Last year, it received more than 47 million tourists, but only 1.4 percent of them came from outside China.

Chen Tiejun, deputy director-general of the Hainan Tourism Development Commission, is keen to attract more international holidaymakers to the island. He explains how the province plans to broaden its appeal.

Q: The plan to make Hainan an international tourism destination was launched in 2010, however, facilities still seem very Chinese. For example, the hotels are more used to dealing with Chinese than international tourists.

A: I don't think there is a contradiction here. We now have 28 international hotel groups with 36 brands operating in Hainan. Many of the executives of the hotels are, in fact, foreign, and the aim of the hotels is to provide an international standard of service to both Chinese and international tourists.

The international hotels do not drop their standards just because Chinese tourists outnumber foreign ones.

We do admit we have a number of deficiencies we need to address. We need to improve the skills of our hotel professionals and workers.

We have been working with local universities to create more tourism-related courses so that students can major in the subject. People who take these courses will not only have better skills, but also by studying in Hainan they will have a better understanding of the local culture.

Many hotel staff speak only Chinese. Is the lack of language skills an issue?

I don't think the language issue is a significant problem, certainly not one just specific to Hainan. When Chinese people travel to other countries, very few hotel staff speak to them in Chinese, but it doesn't stop them traveling abroad.

What is the current level of international tourists coming to Hainan?

Last year, we received 47.89 million tourists, with just 650,000 or 1.4 percent coming from outside China. This is a long way from 1988 when we had just 1.2 million tourists, with 204,600 from outside China.



HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

Chen Tiejun, deputy director-general of the Hainan Tourism Development Commission, talks about plans to put Hainan on the global tourist map.

The domestic market is increasing rapidly but the international market is not growing as fast. We need to change that.

One of the problems of marketing Hainan as an international tourism destination is that there is so much competition from Southeast Asian countries. How do you deal with that?

Yes, it is a big challenge. One problem we face is that the development of Hainan's tourism started much later than the surrounding islands of Southeast Asian countries, like Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia, where tourism facilities and services are more mature.

Another issue is that it is generally cheaper for international tourists to travel to these neighboring countries. This has been particularly the case in recent years with the value of the Chinese yuan rising, increasing the travel costs for visitors.

So, comparatively, the price of the Hainan tourism product or offering is relatively high. This makes competing even more difficult.

To some extent, you are a victim of your own success, in the sense that Hainan has become a very success-

ful resort for Chinese, particularly the wealthy ones who have been seen as driving up prices. Do you agree Hainan is far from a cheap destination?

This is true, but it is not the whole picture. I think a big problem for developing international tourism has actually been being able to establish sufficient direct international flights.

We are only a small province with a relatively small economy, so the cost of developing international air links is relatively high for us. That is why we still have relatively few direct international flights.

Having said this, we do now have direct flights to Singapore, Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Sanya (in southern Hainan) also has two new international flight routes, Osaka and Moscow, with connections for the latter through Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Is it true that Hainan is not actually that well known as a tourist destination, particularly in the West?

Yes, and that means we have a lot of work to do. We are better known internationally in certain countries, such as Russia and South Korea, from where many of our existing

tourists come. We are certainly not as well known as other Southeast Asian countries that have developed their tourism much earlier. That is clear.

If you can't compete with the bigger budgets of rivals, how have you decided to promote Hainan?

We have to make better use of the money we have. For example, we place billboard ads in the baggage reclaim areas of the airports of target countries such as in Russia, Australia, Thailand and South Korea.

We are also actually adjusting our strategy by doing more online marketing, which is more cost-effective. For example, we have worked with the BBC to build a special webpage featuring Hainan. We update the page twice a month with the latest news, photos and videos.

We also cooperate similarly with TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel site. Both these promotions have brought a good response.

Many people come to China each year, but they tend to go mainly to Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an and Hong Kong. What success have you had in persuading some of these tourists who are coming to China anyway to

take a short break in Hainan?

We do have a strategy for this. We are working with international travel agencies to include Hainan in their packages along with Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an. What we need to get across is that China has this beautiful tropical island called Hainan and that you don't always have to go to other Southeast Asian destinations to get beaches.

Hainan has quite a distinct, separate culture from the mainland. Is this also important for promoting tourism?

Yes, this is something that is very important. The culture of Hainan is a very interesting aspect and not widely known. The Li, Miao and Hui people are the three main minority ethnic groups living in Hainan.

Li people are the original inhabitants of Hainan and they are actually unique to the island. There are also many migrant Han people who have lived here for centuries as well as those who have recently settled. It is important we get across all the cultural aspects of Hainan, too.

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