

GROUND LEVEL: TOURISM

Southern paradise looks for Western guests

The authorities on Hainan Island are working flat out to make the province a major destination for international cruises and visitors from overseas. **Andrew Moody, Jiang Wanjuan and Wang Hao** report from Haikou.

Hainan Island has been a holiday destination for Chinese 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 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 47.89 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).

Because of the makeup of Hainan's existing tourist trade, hotels and other tourism locations often cater more to visitors from China than overseas.

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

Instead, the Western tourists Hainan's tourism chief is hoping to attract 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.

A big task ahead

Sitting in a restaurant in the capital, Haikou, Chen Tiejun, deputy director of the Hainan Provincial Tourism Development Commission, admitted that meeting the 2020 target will be a sizeable task.

"Yes, it is a big challenge. 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."

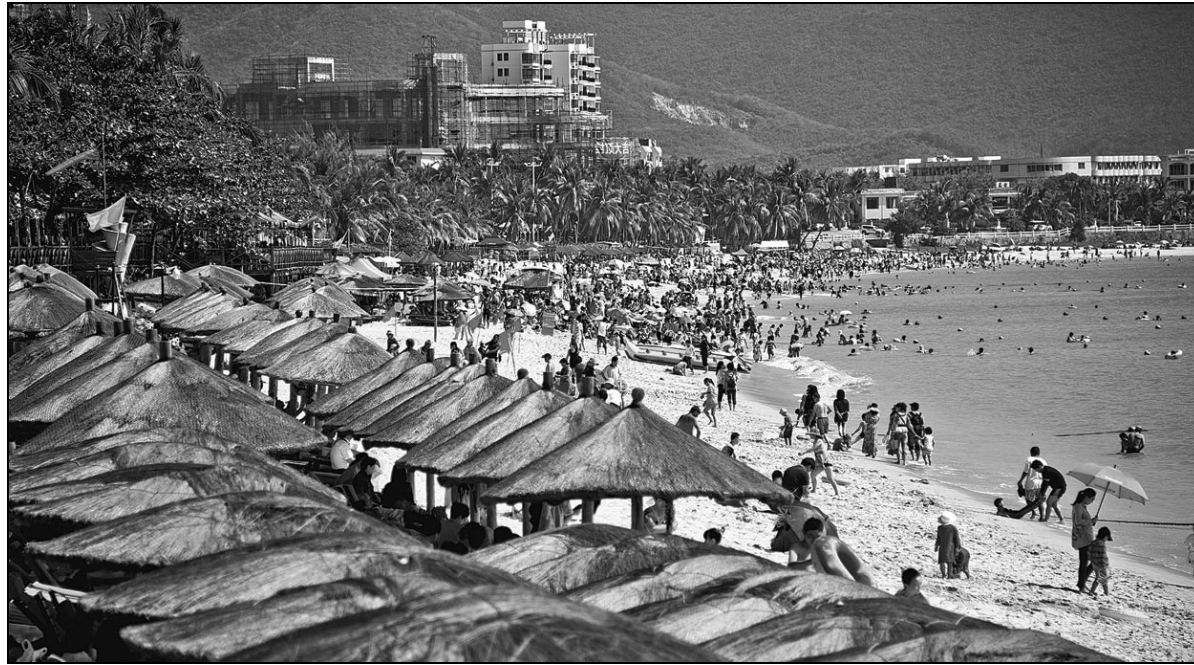
Yet tourism has made huge strides in Hainan. In 1988, the island played host to 1.2 million tourists, including 204,600 from outside China.

International tourists hit a peak 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 said 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 said.

However, the BBC's travel website now carries a Hainan page, which is updated twice a month, and a similar promotion in running on the online travel portal TripAdvisor. "We are adjusting our strategy by



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



Performers at the Binlang Valley Cultural Tourism Zone demonstrate how fire was traditionally made by rubbing sticks together. HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

Catering to foreign tastes



Li Bing works at the Changrong Tea House, which is owned by her parents, and at the visitors' center in Zhongyuan.

HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

Zhu Yingliang is one of many small-business owners likely to benefit from a rise in the number of international tourists visiting Hainan. The 53-year-old runs the Zhongyuan Yuantai Mini Market in Zhongyuan town in Qionghai, central Hainan.

"We've started to see an increase in the number of visitors during the past three years, particularly from the mainland," he said. "We have also seen a rise in the number of foreign tourists from Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, and we stock a

wide range of items for them, such as coffee."

Li Bing, 26, works in her parents' cafe, the Changrong Tea House, also in Zhongyuan, and also earns up to 2,000 yuan (\$322) a month by working at the local visitors' center.

She said opinion is divided in parts of the island, with some people believing the local government should invest more in healthcare, not just tourism, given that local wages are lower than in the mainland.

"I think that although the main resorts of Sanya and Haikou benefit

most from tourism, it also boosts businesses inland. Local businesses get revenue and jobs are created."

Wu Jieguang, 64, who has run the eponymous Wu Jieguang TCM clinic in Zhongyuan, said it is sometimes difficult for some local businesses to serve foreign tourists.

"I don't speak English, so I would have to hire someone with English skills for it to work. Whether we make that investment really depends on how many foreign tourists there are," he said.

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doing more online marketing, which is more cost-effective. These promotions have received good responses," Chen said.

Down 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 Invest-

ment Group, which has sunk a substantial sum into the area and now plans to invest a further 17.6 billion yuan, said she believes Sanya will be very 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 said.

Luring cruise liners

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.

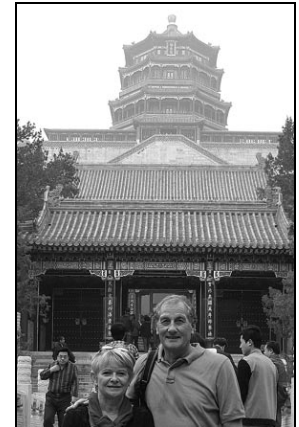
Speaking in a 28th floor executive apartment overlooking the azure blue bay, Zhou Chunhua, director of the Sanya Tourism Development

Commission, said 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 said.

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 room capacity has increased by 52 percent over the past five years and another 46 hotels will be built within the next four years.

"One of the problems for Sanya is that it's known only in China and by



Lynne and Trevor Skeith, from the United Kingdom, visited China in 2011. Hainan's tourism authorities are hoping to lure visitors away from China's better-known attractions. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

people who own yachts, but not by the mass market, and that's what we want to address," she added.

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 teachers Lynne Skeith, 63, and her husband, Trevor, 65, from Repton in Derbyshire in the United Kingdom, visited Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an on a trip to China 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," said Lynne 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 the most famous attractions is the Xinglong Tropical Garden — which has been recognized by the UN for its environmental work — which was founded by former architect Colin Cheng Wen Thy in 1992. Spread over 400 hectares, the garden has 4,000 different plant species and has been the lifework of the lithe and sun-burned Cheng, 70, who was born in Indonesia.

"Visitors often assume that I'm the gardener because I often do physical work."

"We get many international tourists, but they're mostly from Southeast Asia. Those from the US or Europe are mainly overseas Chinese," he said.

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

"We lack tourism professionals who can speak foreign languages. Wages are in Hainan quite low, so people are more likely to want to work in hotels in Beijing and Shanghai rather than in Hainan. We have been working with local universities and developing tourism-related majors. I think developing these skills is the key," he said.

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Living attractions help boost incomes among island's ethnic groups

Few people get as up close and personal with Hainan's tourists as Su Yingli. Hundreds of visitors pass through the 63-year-old widow's living room every day just to look at her and see how she lives.

Although she has lived in the house all her life, the Binlang Valley Cultural Tourism Zone in Baoting county — a multimillion-dollar theme park dedicated to the Li and Miao ethnic groups — was built around it 18 years ago.

"I have never seen so many people in my life before this. I actually don't pay too much attention to them as they walk through, and rarely speak to them," she said.

Su struggles to understand Mandarin and speaks Sai, one of five dialects spoken by the Li people, who



Su Yingli, a 72-year-old widow, lives in the Binlang Valley Cultural Tourism Zone in Baoting county.

HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

are unique to Hainan.

Having lost her husband, Tan Jianrong, four years ago when he was 72, Su now lives with two other women.

The house is very basic, but one of

the advantages of having a theme park on your doorstep is that there are plenty of cafes, places to watch TV and other modern facilities.

"There is plenty to do here. It is actually quite sociable. There are no special rules. I just have to keep my house neat and tidy for the visitors," she said.

In exchange for being a tourist attraction, Su receives 1,800 yuan (\$290) a month. She also has been given a free villa outside the 59-hectare site, which is used by family members. One of her sons, Tan Jinjiang, 30, works as a builder on the site. His wife, Chen Li, is a fruit seller.

"Before the park was built, we actually led a very poor life. Now everything is subsidized," Su said.

When visitors enter the attraction,

the Li and Miao people greet them with the name of the park. "Bloon", in the Hainan dialect.

Huang Jingyun, 27, from the nearby town of Xinzhen, was one of a number of women making traditional clothes, so the tourists, mainly Han, can observe the traditional skills involved. She usually works on the family farm, but is paid to work at the site for three days.

"It is actually quite good, because I'm making my own clothes and being paid for it. Young Li people do not normally dress like this, only at weddings and other occasions," she said.

"We wear jeans and T-shirts at home just like everyone else, although my 86-year-old grandmother does wear traditional dress all the time."

ANDREW MOODY AND JIANG WANJUAN



Two girls watch a demonstration of traditional Li weaving techniques at a museum in Sanya, the main resort in Hainan. The Li ethnic group is unique to Hainan. WANG HAO / CHINA DAILY