Tourism: Island paradise throws gates open

Hainan, however, faces a tough challenge attracting international tourists. Last year, only 650,000, or 1.6 percent, of its 47.89 million visitors came from outside China. The island is partly handicapped by its own success. Many wealthy Chinese have multimillion-dollar second homes and their yachts moored in Sanya, Hainan’s main resort, which has become a playground of the rich. At certain times of the year, particularly Chinese New Year, hotel room rates can skyrocket in the resort, with the starting price for a week's accommodation often not leaving much much change from 50,000 yuan (88,050; 7,300 euros).

This can make an expensive destination compared with established resorts in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, which are also more international.

Luo Baoming, the top Party official in Hainan, is keen to take on the challenge.

“To build Hainan into a world-class specialist tourist zone is vital for the province to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative,” he says.

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Hainan has certainly made huge strides as a tourism center. In 1988, it just had 1.2 million tourists, with 204,600 from outside China. In 2008, it hit a peak of 1 million when the overall total number of tourists was 20 million, less than half the current total.

The number of domestic tourists to the island continues to increase at a much faster rate than those from abroad.

Yet a number of policies are in place to attract more international tourists, including visa-free entry for up to 15 days for tour groups of more than five from 26 specified countries. One of the problems for the Hainan government is that it only has a limited annual tourism advertising budget of 82 million (1.81 million euros) — excluding what the cities spend — and this also has been squeezed in recent years.

The local government has been working with the BCC to build a special Hainan webpage, which is updated twice a month. It also cooperates similarly with TripAdvisor, the world’s largest travel site.

In addition, it places billboard ads in the baggage reclaim areas of airports in key target countries such as Russia, Australia, Thailand and South Korea.

At a restaurant in the center of Haikou, Chen Tiejun, deputy director-general of the Hainan Tourism Development Commission, admits it is a challenge.

“We have to make better use of the money we have. We are also actually adjusting our strategy by doing more online marketing, which is more cost-effective,” he says.

In London, Ben Briggs, marketing manager of Wendy Wu Tours UK, the leading China specialist tour operator, does believe some of this marketing is paying off.

“It (Hainan) is definitely becoming a bit more prominent in the UK. They (Hainan tourism officials) have been a little bit more proactive in terms of attending trade shows,” he says.

“I think there is a big awareness problem about Hainan generally. Not many people know of it. It is definitely important for them to get tour operators on board to help them promote their messages.”

Ed Robertson, consulting editor of the Travel Trade Gazette, a leading travel trade magazine, believes Hainan might have chosen the right time to promote itself as an international tourism destination.

“Many European tourists are looking for alternative destinations after the terrorist attack on a beach near Sousse in Tunisia on June 26, which killed 38.

“Traditionally, the Mediterranean has always been popular, but it has been susceptible to problems of late. Sadly, the whole of north Africa is not great. The UK foreign office is advising none but essential travel to Tunisia. There have been problems in Egypt, and even Turkey is having a tough time because people see it being near Syria. So new destinations are going to need to open up.”

One resort city that could be a magnet for international tourists is Sanya. Some are confident it has the potential to be the Dubai or Miami of the South China Sea.

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Sanya’s man-made Phoenix Island will soon have a 7-star hotel.

Zhou Chunhua, director of the Sanya Tourism Development Commission

Lily Chen, marketing manager of Sanya VSion Royal Yacht Club

Li Li, deputy general manager of the Sanya Phoenix Island Investment Group

Colin Cheng Wen Thay, owner of the Xingjion Tropical Garden