

Cover story

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Sanya is at the vanguard of Hainan's efforts to become an international tourist destination by 2020, with visitor numbers growing 17.9 percent annually for the past five years. Hotel room capacity has increased by 7 percent over the past five years, and another 50 hotels are set to be built within four years.

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

Lily Chen, marketing manager of Sanya Visun Royal Yacht Club, a prime haunt of the Chinese superrich, says business has been affected by the government's anti-corruption campaign.

The club has 800 members — almost all Chinese — paying 198,000 yuan for five years' membership.

"The economy also has not really been that good over the past two years, and that has affected business."

She says many Chinese buy yachts just to entertain people in the marina.

"Many actually don't know how to sail, so they use the yacht to meet friends. We are keen to educate members and teach them how to sail," she adds.

Briggs at Wendy Wu Tours says one of the best opportunities for Hainan is to attract second- and third-time visitors to China who have already seen the Great Wall, the Forbidden City in Beijing and the 21st-century Shanghai shopping malls.

"It could be attractive for those who have been to China before and have done all the bucket list sites," he says.

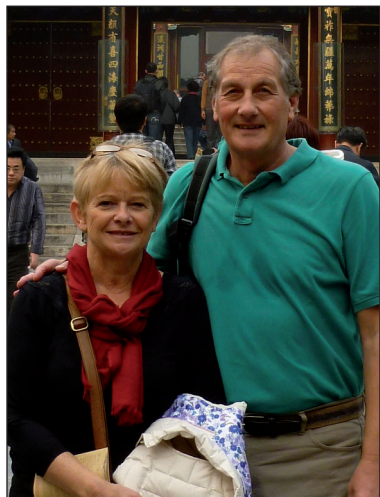
"They might want to add a beach destination for a few days at the end of the trip."

Retired teachers Lynne Skeith, 63, and her husband, Trevor, 66, from Repton in Derbyshire in the UK, who visited Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an on their first China trip in 2011, are among those who might be receptive to this.

"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 beach, but we like sightseeing and culture. We are more likely to use it as a drop-off point on a cruise," says Lynne Skeith.

One of the aims of the tourism planners is to open up the inland areas to tourism to boost the local economies.

Qionghai in eastern Hainan has villages that date back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Wanning boasts tropical forests and magnificent landscapes.



Retired teachers Lynne Skeith, 63, and her husband, Trevor, 66, from Repton in Derbyshire in the UK.

Speaking late at night at Qionghai's Old House coffee shop — with its green-tiled roof an example of centuries old traditional architecture — Yang Fen, director of Qionghai Tourism, says tourism is now vital for the local economy.

Before 2012, 85 percent of the city's GDP came from real estate sales with tourism generating just 10 percent. But that model became unsustainable. Last year, up to 30 percent of the local economy was generated by tourism, he says.

"We are very keen to promote our culture to the outside world. Most of our tourists are currently from Southeast Asia, but we are keen to attract Westerners, too," he says.

There are a number of theme parks and other attractions in central Hainan.

One is the Xinglong Tropical Garden, which has been recognized by the United Nations for its environmental work, and was set up by former architect Colin Cheng Wen Thay in 1992.

Spread over 400 hectares, it has 4,000 different species of plants.

It is the lifework of the lithe and sun-burnished Cheng, 70, who was born in Indonesia.

"The visitors often assume I am the gardener since I am often doing physical work," he says, puffing on a State Express 555 in his magnificent wood-constructed house on the estate.

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

Some may question whether tourism should be part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is often seen as geopolitical and about securing trade routes.

Jim Stoopman, program coordinator of the European Institute for Asian Studies, a think tank based in Brussels and Luxembourg, insists tourism could actually be central to the initiative.

"Despite maybe not being strategic in the pure political or economic sense, tourism could be the foundation from which the Belt and Road Initiative turns into a global success," he says.

"I think it is more than just about infrastructure building and the enhancement of intraregional trade. I see it as a grand 'social project' in which people from different regions, social classes, religions and cultures get a better chance to interact. Tourism and other people-to-people exchanges are a great vehicle for this."

Agustinus Wibowo, an Indonesian travel writer and photojournalist, agrees.

"I think tourism is, in fact, a strategic aspect of the initiative. By making Hainan an international tourism destination, it will act as an important transport hub for the region."

What part tourism will play in the initiative might depend partly on whether Hainan succeeds in its mission to become an international tourism destination.

Robertson at TTG believes it at least has a chance.

"It is seen perhaps as a Chinese destination now, but you are beginning to see international brands like Mandarin Oriental and Raffles. With it being only a three-hour flight from Beijing, I think it has potential."

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HUANG YIMING / CHINA DAILY

Hundreds of tourists pass through Su Yingli's living room every day just to look at her and how she lives after a theme park was built around her home in Baoting county.

Action away from the beach

By **ANDREW MOODY,**
JIANG WANJUAN
and **LIU XIAOLI**

Zhu Yingliang is one of the many small-business owners as well as local people who could benefit from more international tourists heading to Hainan.

The 53-year-old runs Zhongyuan Yuntai Mini Market in Zhongyuan town in Qionghai, eastern Hainan.

"We have started to see more visitors over the past three years, particularly from the mainland," he says.

"We increasingly do have foreign tourists from Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia, and we stock more items for them such as coffee."

Li Bing, 26, works in her parents' cafe, Changrong Tea House, also in Zhongyuan, as well as earning up to 2,000 yuan (\$322; 292 euros) a month in the local tourist visitor center.

She says opinion is divided in some parts of the island, with some believing the local government should invest more in healthcare and not just tourism, given local wages are lower than other cities.

"Although the main resorts of Sanya and Haikou benefit most from tourism, it does also boost businesses inland. Local businesses get revenue and it does create jobs."

Tourism has already benefited many of the ethnic groups on the island.

Hundreds of tourists pass through the 63-year widow Su Yingli's living room every day just to look at her and how she lives.

Although she has lived in the house all her life, a multimillion dollar theme park dedicated to the Li and Miao ethnic groups — the Bin-



Li Bing works in her parents' cafe, Changrong Tea House, in Hainan.

lang Valley Cultural Tourism Zone in Baoting county — 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 talk to them," she says.

Su struggles to understand Mandarin and speaks *Sai*, one of five dialects spoken by Li people, who are unique to Hainan.

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

The house is basic, but one of the advantages of having a theme park on your doorstep is that there are 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 here. I just have to keep my house neat and tidy for the visitors."

In exchange for being a tourist

attraction, Su receives 1,800 yuan a month.

She also has been given a free villa outside the 59-hectare site, which her family members live in. One of her sons, Tan Jinjiang, 30, works as a builder on the site, and his wife, Chen Li, as a fruit seller.

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

When entering the tourist park, the Li and Miao people greet you with the name of the park, "Bloon", in the native Hainan dialect.

Huang Jingyun, 27, from the nearby town of Xinzhen, is one of a number of women who make traditional clothes so the mainly Han tourists can observe the traditional craft skills involved.

She normally does farm work at home but is being paid to be at the site for three days.

"It is actually quite good because I am 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 says.

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

For businesses, dealing with foreign tourists may still present a challenge.

Wu Jieguang, 64, who has run the eponymous Wu Jieguang traditional Chinese medicine clinic in Zhongyuan, says language skills are an issue.

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