

Cover story

How Hainan plans to hook foreigners

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 47.89 million tourists with only 650,000 or 1.4 percent, from outside China.

Chen Tiejun, deputy director-general of the Hainan Tourism Development Commission, is keen to attract more Western and other international holidaymakers to the island. Developing tourism in the province — strategically lo-

cated in the South China Sea — is part of the government's Belt and Road Initiative. The tourism chief talks to **Andrew Moody, Jiang Wanjuan and Liu Xiaoli** in Haikou about the plan to firmly put Hainan on the tourist map.

Q: The plan to make Hainan an international tourism destination was launched in 2010. Despite it being five years old, the island's tourism facilities still seem very Chinese. For example, the hotels here are more used to dealing with Chinese than international tourists, and many hotel staff only speak Chinese.

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.

But what about the lack of language skills?

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.

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 has to be that there is already so much competition from Southeast Asian countries, particularly from nearby Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. 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



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

BIO

CHEN TIEJUN

Chen, 45, has been deputy director-general of the Hainan Tourism commission since 2010.

He worked previously in developing tourism in Yunnan, another major China tourism center, in the Yunnan Provincial Tourism Administration.

Originally from Sichuan, he studied at Yunnan University before doing a master's in management at the Kunming University of Science and Technology.

He also has a PhD in economics from the University of Bonn in Germany.

In his current role, he is responsible for developing Hainan's tourism strategy and international marketing.

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 of 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 successful tourist resort for Chinese and, particularly, wealthy Chinese. These upscale Chinese are driving up prices, too. Do you agree Hainan is far from a cheap destination?

This is true but 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 actually 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 also has two new international flight routes, Osaka and Moscow with connections for the latter through Guangzhou and Shanghai.

Hainan seems to attract a particular category of international tourist. There are those who like golf who want to take advantage of the island's many golf courses and, of course, you have the Boao Forum, which every year attracts politicians, thinkers, academics and authors from throughout the world. But outside these categories, is it true that Hainan is not actually that

well known, 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 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 is not all about beaches and golf. Despite being separated from the mainland by the narrow Qiongzhou Strait, it has quite a distinct, separate culture. Is this also important for promoting tourism?

Yes, and 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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