



# A winter refuge from the cold and smog

Island province proves popular with retirees, residents of northern cities hit by winter air pollution

Senior vacationers enjoy the sunshine in a park in Sanya, Hainan province. SHA XIAOFENG / XINHUA

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Widespread smog in many of China's northern cities is driving ever-larger crowds of winter tourists south to the island province of Hainan in search of cleaner air.

Located on the 18th parallel north, the same line of latitude as Kingston in Jamaica, Hainan's tropical climate means it is widely regarded by Chinese people as a winter paradise.

"The inroads that smog has made in northern cities have driven up air ticket prices remarkably to Haikou, capital of Hainan, and Sanya, a well-known resort at the southernmost part of the island," said an official from the Haikou city government.

"Tickets to get here are sometimes priced five times higher than tickets to leave."

In the past, tourists flocked from northern provinces and

regions just to escape the bitter cold, but avoiding smog has also become a popular motive for traveling to Hainan.

"Hearing now and then on TV about heavy snowfalls in my northern hometown and the red alerts for smog in many cities, I feel lucky that my family can retreat to a place where we can 'face the sea, with spring flowers blossoming,'" said retiree Lao Li, referencing a well-known poem by Chinese poet Hai Zi.

Known as the "Hawaii of China", and the nation's orchard, Hainan ranks highly among Chinese provinces for its level of ecology and clean air.

It is not uncommon for senior citizens with chronic illnesses, such as asthma or skin problems, to find their conditions have improved after spending time on the island.

The province's lush greenery, together with an ongoing program of infrastructure improvement, combine to



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Wang Hua, tourism researcher

make Hainan popular with senior vacationers — nicknamed "migratory birds" because they fly south to the island each year.

Lao Li is typical of this group: retirees with houses of their own who spend about six months a year on the island.

There are about 400,000 of these "migratory birds", who live life at a leisurely pace in



People attend a real estate trade show held in Haikou, Hainan province. SHI YAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

cities along the island's east and south coasts, socializing and enjoying the sunshine and sea views from the many beaches.

Sanya, population 740,000, is the most popular tourist city in China, according to official statistics, followed by Weihai in Shandong province, Hangzhou in Zhejiang province and Xiamen in Fujian province.

About 80 percent of the city's apartments have been purchased by mainlanders and it is common to spot vehicles with number plates registered to cities and provinces that are thousands of kilometers away, such as Beijing, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Xinjiang, Shanxi, Shandong and Chongqing.

The percentage of homes

owned by mainlanders is generally higher in other, smaller cities around the island, which has a total population of 9 million.

A series of events were held in Haikou earlier this month to mark the 980th birthday of Su Shi (1037-1101), an official and literary giant of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), who was banished to the island for many years.

The activities served as a reminder that Hainan was once thought of as a wild and unforgiving place.

It no longer has that reputation, however, and in 2009 it was designated an international tourist island by the State Council.

Infrastructure construction has been fast-tracked and 51 international flights now link Hainan with major cities in 20 countries and regions.

In late 2015, the world's first high-speed railway circling an island started operations and

an expressway network has also been built.

"Apart from the natural gifts such as the rainforests and volcanoes, the tropical island province has a lot more to offer: its unique history, rich ancient culture and delicious food — a top concern when traveling," said Wang Hua, a tourism researcher from nearby Guangdong province.

"Truly, Hainan is a paradise for food lovers — Wenchang chicken, Jiaji duck, Hele crab and Dongshan lamb, its various noodles, its 'Old Daddy's Tea' — just to name a few."

Zhan Lanlan, a mainland saleswoman who was traveling on the island, described it as a "romantic place to visit and a peaceful and leisurely place to stay".

Last year, about 60 million tourists visited Hainan and annual arrivals are expected to reach 80 million by 2020, according to a national strategy outlined in 2010.

# Building Hainan into a high-end tourist haven

By MA ZHIPING in Haikou  
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A world-class tourism destination is taking shape on the island province of Hainan, catering to those in search of culture, countryside, shopping or medical treatment.

That is the vision of the province's 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) for Tourism, which looks to build on the area's natural assets and develop it as a high-end tourist destination.

"Hainan has all the basic elements an international traveler would love to see: warm sunshine, gorgeous sea views, soft beaches, beautiful greenery and clean air," said Jason Shield, an Italian tourist with extensive travel experience.

"It is a paradise for vacationers with which I would say only Bali in Indonesia, the Australian Gold Coast and the Maldives can compare."

In line with the island's development plan, more international cooperation will be sought to train talent for tourism cultivation and management, according to officials with the Hainan provincial tourism bureau.

The tourism infrastructure is also being upgraded and new tourism products are being developed to meet the demands of high-end visitors.

In Sanya, a tourist hot spot, and Haikou, the provincial capital, large duty-free shops and online purchasing chan-

nels have been established, providing imported luxuries and numerous branded goods.

The central government has revised its duty-free policy for the island four times since it was introduced in 2010, expanding it to benefit more visitors with more competitive prices and a better experience. Air passengers used to be the only travelers allowed to buy duty-free goods, limited to a maximum of 16,000 yuan (\$2,300) per year, but starting on Jan 15, visitors who leave the island by train are also eligible to buy duty-free.

In the latter half of last year, even more shopping options became available when four supersized shopping centers opened in Haikou.

The shopping center, injoy, which features more than 100 fashion, sports, food and entertainment outlets, attracted 700,000 customers in the first three days after it opened in late October. In December, a further three giant shopping malls developed by the HNA Group, Dalian Wanda Group and China Grand Enterprises Group opened in prime locations in Haikou, all aiming to serve as commercial hubs.

Elsewhere on the island, the Boao Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone, the first of its kind in China, has attracted more than 20 international cooperation projects. It enjoys nine preferential policies, including special permission for medical talent, technology, devices and drugs,



Tourists enjoy drinking coconut water at a tourism festival held in Sanya, Hainan on Jan 7.

LIAN GUOQING / FOR CHINA DAILY

and it is an entry point for foreign capital and international communications.

The pilot zone also has permission to carry out cutting-edge medical technology research, such as stem cell clinical research.

"High-quality medical health services are indispensable for Hainan as an international tourist destination," said He Dongni, vice-president of the China Institute of Reform and Development, in Haikou.

"These efforts may divert some of the Chinese who currently fly to countries like

Japan, South Korea and Thailand for medical treatment. It will also meet domestic demand, which is growing rapidly."

In addition to shopping and medical tourism, Hainan is also being built into a center for thrill-seekers and adventurers.

Tourists can go diving and explore the island's coral reefs, as well as view the many tropical fish that inhabit its coastal waters. They can take helicopter flights and venture deep into the jungles and mountains of the Wuzhishan, Yinggeling and Bawangling nature

reserves, or book a cruiser trip to the Sansha Islands, about 340 kilometers away in the South China Sea.

Meanwhile, motor homes are becoming increasingly popular on Hainan, with camp sites providing space for up to 150 cars or recreational vehicles near the beaches of Haikou and Sanya.

The island is also a paradise for golf lovers, with course fees set at about one-third of the international market price despite a plethora of quality resorts and world-class hospitality. Golfers, both professional and amateur, from Japan,



Tourists flock to Hainan in search of sunshine, white beaches and clean air. CHEN WENWU / FOR CHINA DAILY

South Korea, Singapore and elsewhere have flocked to the island in recent years.

"Hainan Island is one of the most exciting emerging destinations in the Asia-Pacific today," said Herve Humler, president and CEO of Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co, which opened its first China golf resort in Haikou earlier this month.

"The island is rich in culture and off-the-beaten track experiences that reflect a China many have not seen, making it an ideal spot for families and friends to travel and explore."

In addition to the Ritz-Carlton, a number of other leading international hotel groups have opened facilities on Hainan in recent years.