

WORLD FOCUS

China's tourism calls for better coordination

Nation must align visitor experience to boost travel service exports, experts believe

By LI JING
ljing2009@chinadaily.com.cn

China has largely cleared the primary hurdles to reviving its inbound tourism. Through a steady expansion of visa-free policies, optimized payment solutions, and streamlined tax refund procedures, China has made it easier than ever for foreign visitors to enter and travel.

However, as arrivals surge, the focus of policymakers and industry business leaders is shifting. The challenge is no longer just getting visitors through the door. It is ensuring they can stay longer, travel to more places and leave with experiences worth sharing.

The shift reflects Beijing's broader push to promote high-quality service sector development and strengthen the service sector as a new driver of economic growth.

Xu Guangqian, a professor at Renmin University of China's School of Public Administration and Policy, said expanding exports of travel services is an integral part of China's drive toward high-standard opening-up.

Developing inbound tourism has emerged as a new growth driver for China to expand its travel service exports and boost inbound consumption. With fueling domestic consumer spending, it will effectively optimize the country's trade structure and help accelerate the narrowing of the service trade deficit.

Data from the Ministry of Commerce underscore that momentum. China's travel service exports surged 32.2 percent year-on-year to 105.35 billion yuan (\$15.5 billion) in the first quarter of 2026, the fastest growth among all service export categories.

In 2025, China recorded 82.04 million foreign arrivals, a 26.4 percent year-on-year increase, data from the National Immigration Administration show. Visa-free entries surged nearly 50 percent to 20.08 million, highlighting the impact of relaxed entry policies.

Spending by inbound tourists on dining, accommodation, transport, sightseeing, shopping and entertainment all counts toward China's travel service exports. The category reached 30.98 billion yuan in 2025, a 46.5 percent year-on-year increase and 1.6 times the 2019 level, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

The policy continues to widen. In March, nine government departments including the Ministry of Culture and Tourism jointly issued measures to promote travel service exports and expand inbound travel and consumption. The policy package covers tourism, business travel, education, healthcare, culture and sports, reflecting a growing effort to diversify the country's export structure and broaden its service trade strategy.

More recently, six ministries



Foreign visitors take selfies at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing on June 17. CHEN QIANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

unveiled upgraded departure tax refund rules aimed at reducing processing times, expanding refund outlets and digitizing procedures. Beginning Wednesday, tax refund processing for most eligible purchases becomes largely paperless, while the authorities will expand nationwide recognition of "buy now, refund now" programs.

"We used to sell Chinese products to the world. Now it is time to sell China's services and experiences to the world," said Liang Jianzhang, co-founder and executive chairman of the board at Trip.com Group, China's largest online travel agency.

The company recently announced plans to invest 15 billion yuan over five years to market China as a travel destination globally with large-scale overseas marketing campaigns, influencer partnerships and destination promotion initiatives, while targeting to bring as many as 200 million inbound visitors to China no later than the year 2030.

While hard barriers like visas continue to fall, shortcomings in the visitor experience are becoming more apparent.

A 2025-26 tourism development report published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and its tourism research center identified payment services, information access and transportation as key areas requiring further improvement.

The most significant of these challenges is what some experts describe as a "reverse digital divide".

China's digital ecosystem is among the world's most advanced,



A self-service retail kiosk offers local souvenirs for foreign tourists in Beijing on June 1.

JIA HUANGZONG / XINHUA

but many services were designed primarily around domestic users. Shao Zhiling, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, China's top advisory body, said the country's digital identity infrastructure was originally built around a single national identification system and has yet to fully accommodate multiple forms of foreign digital identification.

From purchasing high-speed rail tickets to reserving attractions, using shared bicycles or registering

at hotels, many travel services increasingly rely on mobile applications that assume users possess Chinese identification credentials, said Shao, who is also chairman of the Shanghai Committee of China Zhi Gong Party.

"The issue is not whether digital services exist, but whether international visitors can access them as easily as domestic users," Shao said. Progress is being made. In May, Tencent's cross-border platform TenPay Global and US fintech firm PayPal announced a payment-interoperability

agreement, allowing international PayPal users to make purchases directly across WeChat Pay's vast merchant network in China.

Analysts described the move as an important step toward addressing one of the most common frustrations among foreign visitors: difficulty navigating China's highly digitalized payment ecosystem.

Beyond digital services, foreign tourists frequently cite inconsistent English-language signage, varying hotel reception practices and uneven service quality across destinations.

Xiao Xin, secretary-general of the commercial sub-council of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, said many recurring problems arise because China lacks a unified service-standard framework covering the entire visitor journey.

Multilingual signage, ticketing systems, accommodation procedures and tourism information services are often managed by different authorities and implemented unevenly across regions, he said.

"Many places have services, but not standards," Xiao said.

Shanghai has emerged as one example of how greater coordination can improve the visitor experience. According to Wang Zhihua, deputy director of the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Culture and Tourism, the city has coordinated 15 government departments to implement more than 60 measures covering customs clearance, transportation, accommodation, payments and tax refunds.

The city received 9.36 million inbound visitors in 2025, up 39 percent year-on-year. While tourism foreign-exchange revenue rose 33 percent to \$14.8 billion, both hitting record highs.

For many economists, inbound tourism has become a test of China's broader institutional opening-up.

Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy, argues that fragmented government remains one of the biggest constraints.

He said inbound tourism involves the immigration authorities, transport agencies, telecommunications providers, financial institutions, tourism regulators and local governments, yet coordination among them often remains incomplete.

As a result, foreign visitors can still encounter what Dai describes as a service system with "multiple faces", where individual segments improve, but the overall experience remains inconsistent.

Yang Ruifeng, a professor at Renmin University of China, said addressing these problems requires more than technical upgrades. China ultimately needs a more open service framework capable of accommodating overseas passports, international payment methods and multilingual digital services, he said.

"The deeper issue is a transition from systems designed around administrative convenience to systems designed around user experience," Yang said.

That transition may prove critical if China hopes to unlock the full economic potential of inbound tourism. Liang estimates that China can triple inbound visitor numbers and increase per-capita spending by 60 percent to 70 percent over the coming years. The sector could generate an additional 10 billion dollars in foreign-exchange earnings.

China's inbound tourism revenue currently accounts for less than 1 percent of GDP, well below levels seen in major tourism economies such as the United States, suggesting substantial room for growth, he said.

Tourists travel deeper to discover 'real China'

By LI JING

When Egyptian scholar Mohamed Nouredine traveled to Xiangyang, a small city in Central China's Hubei province, he expected to explore its ancient city walls. Instead, he found himself watching a humanoid robot patrol a power-grid maintenance site.

Moving quickly between rows of digital control screens, the robot monitors real-time data from nearly 100 substations and alerts engineers when anomalies appear.

"It works like an AI guardian for power grids," Nouredine said for Nouredine, who spent more than a decade studying at the University of Science and Technology of China in Hefei, Anhui province, the trip reinforced his belief that understanding China increasingly requires traveling beyond its biggest cities.

"China is changing quickly," he said. "You need to travel deeper into the country to really see it."

That deeper exploration is becoming a defining feature of China's inbound tourism. While China's As visa-free policies expand and

digital payment systems become easier for foreigners to use, overseas visitors are increasingly skipping the traditional "China checklist" of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in Guangdong province, opting instead for smaller cities, counties and rural towns that offer a more immersive experience of everyday Chinese life.

In the first quarter, foreign nationals made 21.33 million border crossings, up 22.3 percent year-on-year. Visa-free entries reached 8.32 million, making up 77.9 percent of all inbound foreign trips, according to the National Immigration Administration.

But tourism analysts say the more significant shift is happening geographically. Instead of concentrating in China's megacities, foreign travelers increasingly seek out lesser-known destinations in search of what many online describe as the "real China" — places with strong local character, lower commercialization and closer access to daily life.

The trend is being amplified by social media platforms such as Tik-

Tok and Xiaohongshu, also known as RedNote, where foreign creators increasingly share travel experiences from smaller Chinese cities.

According to a 2026 tourism trend report released by Xiaohongshu, posts about traveling in China created by overseas users increased fivefold over the past year, spanning nearly 500 cities nationwide.

Among the fastest-rising destinations are Zhengzhou in Henan province, Taiyuan in Shanxi province and Yiwu in Zhejiang province — cities that rarely featured prominently on international travel itineraries in the past.

Australian travel vlogger Luke, who runs the channel "Rebelcain", recently posted about an immersive theater performance he stumbled upon in Datong, Shanxi.

"He said to hundreds of shows," he said in the video. "But I've never experienced anything like this. You're not watching — you're inside the action."

Yiwu presents a different attraction. Known globally as the "world's supermarket", the city has evolved

from a wholesale trading hub into a tourism spot where visitors combine shopping with local cultural experiences.

Meanwhile, Zhangjiajie in Hunan province continues to attract growing numbers of overseas visitors through its combination of dramatic mountain scenery, rural tourism and outdoor adventure experiences.

The movement toward smaller destinations is also extending into China's countryside.

Earlier this year, US vloggers Ludwig and Michael cycled through a village in Shaoyang, Hunan, accidentally walking into a traditional fan gathering they initially mistook for a festive banquet.

Rather than reacting with annoyance, local villagers invited them to share a meal and showed them around the community. The vlog later spread widely online, with many foreign viewers saying it challenged long-held assumptions about rural China.

Wu Luyun, a professor at the China Academy of Culture and Tourism at Beijing International Studies Uni-



Foreign tourists try traditional architecture at a rural tourist spot in Ganzhou, Jiangxi province, on May 10. ZHU HAPING / FOR CHINA DAILY

versity, said improved transportation infrastructure — particularly China's high-speed rail network and expanding regional flight connections — has made smaller cities far more accessible to international travelers.

"This isn't a short-term phenomenon," Wu said. "It marks a new stage of more geographically diverse inbound tourism."

Challenges remain. While China's physical infrastructure ranks

among the world's most advanced, many smaller destinations still lag in multilingual services, international payment compatibility and comprehensive travel information.

But for visitors like Nouredine, those inconveniences are outweighed by the insights smaller cities reveal about the country itself. "The big cities show you China's economic side, but the smaller cities show you its depth."