

Chinese Compete for Worst Tourist Label

Influx of visitors from mainland China provokes culture clash at Taiwan's tourist sites. They deface Taiwan's scenic rock formations. They spit in public, cut in line and talk too loud. And to top it off, some even take shelter from the rain — and smoke cigarettes! — inside one of Taiwan's "sacred trees."



A year after the island threw open its doors to Chinese tourist groups, Taiwan has a long list of complaints. Chinese tourists were supposed to give Taiwan's sagging economy a much-needed jolt, and help increase exchanges and mutual understanding between people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. But whatever economic benefits they've brought have been canceled out by the worst global economic downturn since the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, the Chinese tourists' habits have gotten on many people's nerves. "Since Chinese tourists began coming here, not as many English- or Japanese-speaking people visit anymore, because Chinese people have some bad attitudes and habits," said Chris Lin, a 25-year-old who answers phones and helps foreign guests at the Alishan National Park, a scenic mountain area and one of the island's top tourist draws.

"They litter, smoke and talk loudly, and some people don't like it. Actually, most people don't like it." Alishan was the site of the latest outrage. The park includes a much-beloved "sacred tree" that's said to be some 3,000 years old, and is hollowed out by the ravages of time. In May, Taiwan TV stations broadcast footage of Chinese tourists smoking and waiting out a downpour inside the tree.



To be sure, not everyone's unhappy. Some Taiwanese hotel managers are happy to see visitor numbers up, and downplay the complaints. The tourism bureau recently reported that some 365,000 Chinese tourists visited in the first half of this year. The bureau said each Chinese tourist spent an average of \$295 per day, helping drive up 2008 tourism revenue nearly 14 percent year-on-year, to about \$6 billion.

Others here say Taiwanese just need to give Chinese more time to learn to curb inappropriate behaviors while traveling abroad. Taiwan holds special allure for many Chinese, who learn about top scenic sites in school, and call Taiwan their "treasure island" (or *bao dao* — a term that causes eye-rolling among pro-independence Taiwanese).

The top draws for them include Alishan and Sun Moon Lake in central Taiwan, the National Palace Museum in Taipei (which includes many treasures snatched by the Kuomintang from Beijing's Forbidden City) and sites relating to former KMT dictator Chiang Kai-shek.

At Sun Moon Lake, the Chinese invasion has lowered the quality of tourism, said Tim Hsu, a volunteer interpreter and guide. Tourist sites at the lake are overcrowded, and Chinese tourists need etiquette lessons. "We have to tell them [the Chinese] they have to stand in line, otherwise everyone will constantly be arguing."

Hsu says Chinese are also touchy about Japan's historical legacy on the island. But that's hard to gloss over when talking about the lake. The Japanese engineered Sun Moon Lake in its current form, during its 1895 to 1945 colonization of the island. They built an underground channel to divert water from a nearby river and a dam on one side of the lake. But when Hsu talks to Chinese about such things, "they'll tell me privately, don't talk about Japan so much, it's too sensitive."



At a former residence of Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei, Alva Li, a restaurant employee, said they get about 10 busloads of Chinese tourists per day. Most behave themselves. "But we do have some problems — a few spit, or cough loudly, or smoke inside the restaurant," she said. "We have to tell them to go outside." Taiwan banned smoking in restaurants and most other indoor facilities in January — a rule that's chafing for the many chain-smoking male Chinese tourists.

The Chinese tourists have their gripes, too. They've kvetched about tyrannical tour guides, rushed visits and price-gouging by unscrupulous vendors. And for now, they can only come on strictly-regimented tour groups (Taiwan hopes to allow individual or small groups of Chinese tourists soon).

Safety concerns were also raised in April, after two Chinese tourists were killed near the landmark Taipei 101 skyscraper, when a construction crane plunged off of a rooftop and crushed the back of their tour bus. But that freak accident hasn't deterred other tourists. At the National Palace Museum, hordes of Chinese pour out of buses on group tours, and swarm the gift shop.

"They cut in line and talk loudly, pick up items and then just throw them carelessly back," said one 24-year-old gift shop employee, who gave only the English name he uses, Pride Stark. "They're not nearly as polite as the Japanese." But he also voiced a commonly heard sentiment here: "They're like Taiwanese were in the 1960s, when we started traveling abroad," Stark said. "We just have to be more patient with them."

Photos: TR, Flickr

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