

FRANCE WELCOMES A NEW TYPE OF CHINESE TRAVELLER



The Chinese relationship with France, on a tourist level, has been strong for a number of years, with tour groups visiting the capital to shop and enjoy the nation's romantic side through traditional "French style" packages. Asia will always be the most popular region for holidays but Europe is not far behind and France is the country within it that always tops the must-see lists. Recently, visitor figures have increased significantly and even though the Chinese only make up 2% of foreign visitors to France, the growth seen is impossible to ignore: three times as many Chinese tourists have arrived in the past four years, 84,000 stayed in the country in 2013 alone and many are starting to explore beyond Paris to regions like Bordeaux and the Rhone-Alpes.

Interest in France is on the rise and some interesting new trends are emerging regarding the types of travellers that are visiting and their attitudes towards exploring the country.

The old stereotype of Chinese tourists visiting France is of large tour groups of older visitors visiting the capital to see the sights and indulge in some luxury shopping. Shopping is still high on their priorities list; many are keen to buy gifts for relatives at designer stores like Louis Vuitton, Cartier, Chanel and Dior - deliberately booking cheaper accommodation in order to have more spending money - and France is considered to be the preferred destination for Chinese luxury shopping, with 34% choosing it over American destinations or Singapore. However, many younger tourists are branching out from the traditional tours and becoming more adventurous.

Students and young adults are becoming more aware of the potential of other regions thanks to internet access and social media and there has been a surge in popularity for tours that take in a wider area away from the capital. What makes this development even more interesting is that while Chinese tourists are known for their desire to eat Asian cuisine abroad, these youthful explorers are shunning the old-fashioned traditions of their elders and embracing the local food and wine as well as the culture.

Not only is the French tourism industry recognising these changes, they are also adapting to meet the specific needs of this growing market and encouraging more to follow.

With so many more Chinese visitors arriving, it is important that French agencies meet their needs, for those that expect the old-fashioned hospitality and courtesies on arrival and for this younger group of tourists. The plan to increase the issuance of 48-hour individual visas to visitors from China is clearly a great first step at encouraging more tourists but French officials are not stopping there. Tour operator ParisCityVision is a great example of an opportunistic business because they are acknowledging the 50% increase in Chinese customers and working to provide Chinese translations, Chinese guides and improve dealings with customers through their current, inexperienced Chinese representatives. Back in those highly-frequented fashion stores, Chinese staff are being hired to aid transactions and the Chinese Union Pay payment system has been added. Additionally, two new tourist-friendly schemes, "Do You Speak Tourist" and "Yes I Speak Tourist", are being implemented in June to help retailers understand the needs of tourists and help those tourists locate friendly, understanding businesses.

On the subject of technology, French agencies are also taking full advantage of the rise in social

media in China, targeting the nation's youth with a series of campaigns on Weibo, China's number one social network. Atout France are tapping into the Chinese view of France being the ideal romantic destination with their "France Romance" campaign and, later in the year, another will begin that targets both the unyielding needs of Chinese tourists and the adventurous nature of the youth market by dealing with wine, cultural heritage, romance and - unsurprisingly - shopping.

There is hope for long term gains in this market and a strong desire to keep this growing market happy.

While there is potential for long-term benefits with this growth in Chinese visitor numbers, there is also a strong acknowledgement of the inconsistency of the Chinese traveller profile and resulting, changing trends. It is hoped that these new measures will increase interest further as French businesses continue to accommodate their clientèle in more beneficial ways and agencies tap into the growing youth market. After all, 2014 does mark the 50th anniversary of Franco-Chinese diplomatic relations.

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