

SERBIA ENJOYS GROWING NUMBERS OF CHINESE TOURISTS



Chinese tourism numbers show strong growth in Serbia, a country which until recently slipped under the radar of Asian travel agencies.

The boom in Chinese tourists is so impressive that **out of the 1.2 million foreign visitors that arrived in the country in the first eight months of the year, 92,000 are Chinese**, according to Serbian authorities: five times more than in all of 2016.

The visa exemption, good bilateral political and economic relations, and moderate prices are the main features that explain this newly found interest.

In this favorable climate, the Serbians are not wasting any time: Chinese restaurants have flourished in places frequently visited by these tourists, street signs are in Mandarin, and the Chinese police even arrived in Belgrade to help their fellow countrymen.

With a population of 7.1 million, Serbia attempts to recover its economic delay compared to the rest of Western Europe. Tourism, which only accounts for 3% of its GDP, is concentrated mainly in Belgrade and represents an opportunity for development. The adventure, originally planned for all types of tourists, managed to captivate Chinese clientele mostly.

The rise in the number of Chinese tourists began in 2017 when Serbia became the first country in Europe to introduce a visa exemption for Chinese visitors. It was followed by Bosnia, while Albania and Montenegro eased the entry requirements.

“The political relations between both countries have been excellent for several years now,” says Miodrag Popovic, head of the Tourist Organization of Belgrade. Just recently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic hailed China as “the most honest and trustworthy friend”.

The Serbians thank the Chinese for not recognizing the independence of their former southern province of Kosovo.

Such kind of relationship is reflected at an economic level. The Chinese build bridges and roads and have bought mines and the immense steel complex of Smederevo (to the east).

Serbia is also considered as an access road to the rest of the region, says Flora Xu, a tourist guide for the Chinese tourism agency. Since “neighboring countries opened the doors to the Chinese tourists” by reducing visa requirements, “people have begun to be interested in this part of the world they had never heard of,” she says. After Serbia, the guide will take the group to Montenegro and Albania.

For Serbia, which does not have the beautiful coasts of its neighboring Croatia, tourists are a welcomed source of international receipts. Last year, the industry generated over 1.5 billion euros, according to the central bank.

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