

CHINA'S INBOUND TOURISM TOWARD A TRILLION-YUAN INDUSTRY



Years dragged on before China's inbound tourism scene shifted, weighed down by slow visa processing, split-up digital payments, spotty web access for international visitors, too few long-haul flight links, along with thin outreach abroad. Lately, though, each hurdle has quietly faded, clearing space for faster visitor increases, reshaping how the planet sees China's travel appeal.

Visa Easing Delivers Immediate Results

Visa changes stand out as the main driver. **Citizens from close to 80 nations can enter China without a visa today, while travelers from 55 others benefit from a ten-day transit option** - available across two dozen regions and three times as many entry points. Results followed quickly.

Thirty-five million international visitors - excluding those from Hong Kong and Macau - had arrived in 2025, representing a rise of 30 percent compared to the previous year. Arrivals benefiting from visa exemptions totaled 30.08 million, reflecting an increase close to 50 percent. That same year, international tourism earnings climbed almost 40 percent, according to Ctrip Group's chief executive, Sun Jie. Globally, such performance positioned China at number six in terms of revenue expansion.

A Shift in Global Industry Mindset

Beyond official guidelines, something broader has started shifting. Where foreign travel companies once came to China focused only on attracting tourists heading abroad, they're now spending time understanding how to draw people into the country instead. Their attention turns toward bringing guests here - fewer pitches about their home regions, more questions about access, experience, convenience. Such moves suggest belief in what China might offer years ahead: not merely a top exporter of travelers, but an increasingly magnetic place to visit. A quiet repositioning reveals confidence building slowly beneath the surface.

China's tourism experts share similar thoughts. Around seventy million people visit the United States every year - each one spending on average more than 3600 dollars, adding up to over 250 billion in income. In contrast, thirty-five million tourists arrive in China, where individual spending stands near two thousand dollars, bringing total earnings to 78.8 billion. Even though Chinese travelers abroad spend almost as much as Americans do overseas, money coming back into China falls short by about two hundred billion. People working in travel say this imbalance does not come from weak interest; instead, offerings and support systems simply have not grown enough.

Among global destinations, China stands out through its rich landscapes, heritage sites, and efficient transport networks, backed by competitive pricing. Shifting inbound tourism's contribution from today's 0.5% of GDP toward 2% might add vast sums to national output - each percentage point unlocking flows worth tens of billions annually.

Surge in Market Participation

A market worth a trillion yuan is pulling in heavy funding. By June 3, Chinese firms tied to incoming

tourists reached 104,000, according to Qichacha. Growth surged - 9,600 new entries appeared in 2023 alone, tripling from the prior year. Since then, another 21,500 have been added across two years. Already this year, 3,200 businesses joined the count.

Tiered Destinations and the Move to Immersive Experiences

Success now hinges on moving beyond “check-in” sightseeing to deeper, immersive stays. Ctrip’s latest report on China’s inbound tourism categorizes Chinese destinations into four tiers:

Tier 1: Gateway cities like Beijing and Shanghai, targeting high-value travelers from Europe, America, and Australia.

Tier 2: Greater Bay Area hubs (Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai), leveraging Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern markets.

Tier 3: Western cultural cities (Chengdu, Chongqing, Xi’an), drawing from Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asia.

Tier 4: Specialty cities (Hangzhou, Qingdao) building on unique local strengths.

Surge in Thai travelers - up 664% - reveals Qingdao’s edge through seaside allure paired with brewing heritage. Dramatic spikes follow elsewhere: Russian tourist numbers climb 301% in Zhangjiajie, drawn by jagged limestone towers rising from misty valleys. Meanwhile, in Guilin, arrivals swell 229%, shifting perception beyond old postcard views toward broader experiences. Regional momentum builds not from singular draws, but layered identities emerging over time.

Last year, Beijing welcomed 5.48 million international travelers - a rise of 39 percent - spending totaled \$7.08 billion, up nearly 45%. Each visitor spent roughly \$1,365 on average, a modest climb of 5%. Returning guests now favor wandering through hutongs rather than sticking strictly to well-known landmarks. Cultural practices once passed down quietly are gaining attention. Wellness-focused stays have also grown more common. The Forbidden City and Great Wall still draw crowds, yet interests are shifting subtly elsewhere.

Backed by strong connectivity, Shanghai drew 9.36 million international visitors - an increase of 39 percent. Programs such as cultural heritage trips targeting Koreans, alongside complimentary short tours during layovers, gained rapid traction online.

Among Chinese cities, few have transformed their natural landscapes into immersive experiences quite like Guilin. Moving beyond passive sightseeing, visitors now step directly into rivers, cliffs, and rural life. Wellness centered on karst peaks draws increasing numbers each year. Cultural journeys through ancient villages offer depth alongside scenic beauty. Rather than just observing nature, travelers engage with it physically - through climbing, hiking, or paddling. Each month, more than a hundred thousand follow trails along the Li River. Meanwhile, Yangshuo has become known for some of the country’s most challenging climbs. A network of farms turned guest stays adds another layer to its appeal. By 2025, foreign guests staying at least one night reached 1.6227 million. This volume secured the city a spot within the top ten nationwide.

Persistent Supply-Side Challenges

Even with progress, shortcomings persist. Services in Spanish, Italian, and Arabic fall short, while offerings in Chinese, English, Korean, and Thai see steady uptake. Smaller sites often miss fundamental English resources.

Evening activities and major entertainment options remain limited, holding back how much tourists spend. Though places such as London and New York earn heavily from live shows, the majority of urban centers in China depend mainly on meals and basic visual displays. Offerings like premium cultural acts or engaging programs designed for foreign guests are still scarce. Despite growth in travel numbers, meaningful nighttime attractions have not kept pace.

Deep shifts in workforce training and customer expectations are becoming impossible to ignore. According to Ge Lei, head of the China Tourism Association, machines cannot replicate genuine personal interaction - no matter how advanced technology becomes. From airport counters to hotel desks, human presence remains central. Visas, flights, accommodations, tour guidance - all rely on people making real connections. Automated systems may assist, yet warmth comes only through individuals showing up fully.

Though demand surges, programs shaping multilingual experts and elite butlers lag behind. Growth outpaces the ability to prepare skilled personnel consistently. Rapid market expansion pulls ahead of educational pipelines. These training systems fail to match rising needs. Supply cannot catch up with increasing requirements.

Outlook of China's Inbound Tourism

China's inbound tourism industry finds itself at a turning moment. Though policy shifts have cleared the path, growing interest among travelers hints at deeper potential. Some locations lead by example - offering hands-on experiences that others could replicate. **Progress depends less on permission now, more on execution: refining services, lifting standards steadily.** Momentum builds quietly, shaped by choices ahead rather than barriers behind. What matters most emerges slowly - not in grand declarations, but consistent effort. Entry is no longer blocked; next comes purposeful movement forward.

Date: 2026-06-08

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/chinas-inbound-tourism-develops-substantially-news15497>