

CHINA'S SUMMER TRAVEL MARKET DEMONSTRATES A STRUCTURAL SHIFT



China's summer travel market in 2026 is characterized by stable modal patterns, experiential upgrade, and expanding outbound reach — from local road trips and night tours to long-haul flights and increasing numbers of inbound tourists.

Road still dominates short-haul travel, and aviation becomes the dominant mode for long-distance travel. According to the statistics of DAST, **more than 93% of short-haul trips with a radius of less than 100 kilometers are road trips.** The 500-800 kilometer distance is the mainstay of China's railways, which accounts for about 72% of the passenger volume. When the travel distance exceeds 1,200 kilometers, civil aviation becomes the preferred mode of transportation, and the competition between air and rail is most intense in the 800-1,500 kilometer range.

Railways as Mobile Vacation Platforms

Tourist trains become a key force in stimulating local consumption. China State Railway Group data show that a total of 699 tourist trains were operated during the China's summer travel market season, including 415 tourist trains and 284 tourist special lines. The railway sector has customized 351 "Fan trains" for summer concerts and sporting events. Specialized services such as panda special trains, cultural relic study trains, and folk culture lines have enriched the tourism product system and innovated the concept of "train + tourism".

Cross-border rail travel was also a highlight of this summer. A total of 6,271,000 people took the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong high-speed rail line, an increase of 3.3% year-on-year, and 56,000 took the China-Laos Railway line, an increase of 55.8%. International passenger trains running between China and Mongolia, Russia, Vietnam and North Korea have also played an important role in "cross-border tourism". According to the national railway sector, a total of 4,447,000 foreign passengers were transported by railways, a year-on-year increase of 32.2%.

Aviation's Strong Performance and Differentiated Recovery

According to DAST estimates, 1.076 million passenger flights transported approximately 154 million passengers during the summer season, with an average load factor of 87.4%. In terms of international routes, the performance of South Korea, Malaysia and Russia has all exceeded the level of 2019, while some routes to Japan and Thailand have not yet recovered to the level of 2019. Domestic routes were concentrated in Xinjiang, Beijing, Yunnan and other destinations, reflecting the strong demand for long-distance summer travel.

The platform's data also reflects changes in travelers' summer travel behavior: the proportion of long-distance summer travel orders on Ctrip increased to 32%, the proportion of cross-province travel exceeded 55%, and the proportion of summer travel itineraries of more than two consecutive nights rose from 38% to 64%. Travelers are more willing to stay in one place and have a slow travel experience. This "fast and slow" travel model has become popular among families and young people.

The Rise of Experiential Consumption

Ticketed scenic spots are no longer the mainstream of consumption. Cultural exhibitions, night tours, performances and film and television IP scenic spots have become new consumption growth points. A single high-quality performance, music festival, or museum visit can be the core attraction for cross-city travel.

The performance market has become a major force. The number of orders for “Camel Bell Legend” and “Princess Wencheng” increased by more than 1.5 times year-on-year, and Ctrip’s “A Journey Like a Song” concert tour has been held in many cities. The Wulong Station Music Festival increased local tourism by 70% and scenic spot ticket orders by 230%. Film and television location tourism in Datong, Shantou and Jieyang saw an increase of 20%, 18% and 8% in tourist numbers, respectively, and has become an important marketing tool for film and television IP.

Museums are also upgrading their offer. Beijing Prince Gong’s Palace Museum, Tsingtao Beer Museum, and Jinci Museum reported year-on-year increases in visitor numbers, with Beijing Prince Gong’s Palace Museum, Tsingtao Beer Museum and Jinci Museum seeing double-digit increases. Nighttime visiting has become a major trend, with XR immersive exhibitions and “Museum Marvel Night” events drawing large audiences. Tongcheng data show that summer night museum bookings were up 52% year-on-year, and in Guangdong and Luoyang, immersive cultural relic programs, theater performances and intangible cultural heritage experiences were combined to create popular products.

Night tourism has seen explosive growth: Summer night tour bookings were up 52% year-on-year, with out-of-town travelers making up 56% of orders. Changsha, Xi’an, and Chongqing ranked among the top, while the number of night tour bookings at the county level increased by 67%. Anji, Fenghuang and Yangshuo attracted many tourists to enjoy stargazing and night market snacks. Tongcheng Research Institute notes that instead of simply extending the travel time, night tourism is moving towards “scene recreation.” Scripted performances, intangible cultural heritage tourism products, and live performance experiences, combined with digital art, have stimulated consumption of accommodation, dining, and transportation.

County-Level Tourism Upgrades

County-level tourism destinations have seen upgraded consumption. According to Qunar data, post-80s parents are the main force in consumption, and the average hotel rate in county-level destinations reached 526 yuan. In Fusong and Changli, the average room rate even exceeded that of first-tier cities, and more than 20% of county hotel bookings were for four-star and above hotels. Travelers are willing to experience the local flavor of the county, such as visiting markets and picking tea, rather than simply visiting scenic spots. Some “dark horse” counties have seen rapid growth in popularity, but the accommodation, transportation and emergency rescue capabilities in such counties have been tested.

Core Customer Segments: Families and Silver-Haired Travelers

Family and silver-haired tourists were the two major pillars of the Chinese summer travel market, but the former showed more diverse demand. According to Ctrip data, family travelers spent 1.8 times the amount of non-family travelers on average. Family travelers favored natural landscape and theme park attractions (such as Zhijin Cave and Beijing Universal Resort), study tours, and immersive educational products, as well as museum classes and industrial tourism. Demand for high-quality group tours and charter tours has also grown rapidly. Tongcheng Statistics show that about 38% of people who took civil aviation flights this summer were families with children, and Chengdu, Beijing and Shanghai were the top three tourist destinations.

Silver-haired tourists have also changed their summer travel model, shifting from multi-scenic spot touring to extended stays and extended viewing. Liupanshui has ranked first in migratory bird-style senior summer tourism for four consecutive years, and there are dedicated wellness itineraries in Yichun and Qinghai. "Health and wellness trains" have been popular among silver-haired tourists. Senior travelers also accounted for the largest proportion of growth in night tourism, reflecting the expansion of their activity radius.

Inbound Tourism Reaches a Turning Point

Inbound tourism was the biggest surprise in the China's summer travel market. With the improvement of visa-free policies and payment facilitation, "China Travel" is accelerating its transformation into "China Cool."

According to Ctrip's data, European long-haul travel orders increased by 91% year-on-year, with Russia leading the way at 210%, followed by Spain (123%), the UK and Malaysia (59% each) and Australia (49%). In addition to neighboring countries in the East, a more diversified group of international tourists traveled to China this summer. The number of inbound tourists to Zhangjiajie increased by 197% year-on-year, and there were significant increases in Sanya, Chongqing and Dali. Tianjin's 240-hour visa-free policy has facilitated a "cruise entry + return flight" model that accommodated nearly 66,000 cruise passengers. Suzhou's inbound tourism incentive policies attracted many Korean tourists.

Some less well-known destinations also benefited from the surge in inbound tourism. The number of foreign tourists by air to Qionghai increased more than sevenfold, to Qinhuangdao more than fivefold, and doubled to Enshi, Luoyang and Yining. Inbound tourists also seek a lifestyle experience, such as visiting markets, practicing Baduanjin and intangible cultural heritage crafts, in addition to the traditional Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors and panda bases. **Nearly 60% of summer inbound tourists chose private groups and were willing to pay extra for quality cultural interpretation and itineraries.**

However, experts have pointed out problems such as the shortage of multilingual services in many small and medium-sized cities, the inconvenience of overseas payment and the lack of overseas promotion channels. How to convert these inbound tourists into sustained local consumption is still a problem for the industry. Overall, China's 2026 summer travel market is showing a mature trend: stable modal patterns by distance, differentiated innovations in railways and aviation, a decisive shift to experiential and nighttime products, upgraded county-level tourism, strong family and silver-haired demand, and a significant increase in inbound tourists.

Date: 2026-09-06

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/chinas-summer-travel-market-relies-more-on-families-news15599>