

《中国南方城市力求吸引更多外国游客》

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In 2009, the Chinese government announced plans to transform its tropical southern island province of Hainan into a world-class tourist draw. Since then the island has seen a phenomenal rise in visitors, but outside of Russia and expats already living in China, it's failed to gain much traction internationally. The island's popularity with overseas travellers has suffered from a lack of direct international flights and some cumbersome visa regulations.

Sun, sea, and sand. Hainan has the necessary ingredients to be a top tropical get-away and Beijing has set its sights on turning this island into the 'Hawaii of the South China Sea'.

While the province has seen year-on-year double digit tourism growth, with recent estimates putting arrivals last year as high as 50 million, the vast majority of the holidaymakers are coming from the mainland.

The name Hainan with its natural and manmade attractions is struggling to make a dent on the global travel market.

"I think we need to enhance the direct flights. Build a brand image, destination image, what the destination will offer to visitors," Zheng Zhe with Mason Events Management in London said.

At its peak the island attracted upwards of 200,000 Russians, but that figure plummeted to just 30,000 last year, a combination of a weak rouble and a growing debt burden that sunk dozens of tour operators.

"Most of the European flights need to change from Hong Kong, Shanghai and Guangzhou," Zheng said.

The island's tourism officials are working to address the problem of attracting more direct flights by easing visa restrictions for international travellers.

Nationals from 26 countries can get a visa on arrival at Hainan, but the catch is they must be attached to an organised tour group.

"Government should work to make visa Policy a little easier for international travellers, not so complicated," Russian Hainan resident Yulia Sirkina said.

The provincial government, meanwhile, is pouring billions into making the island more traveller-friendly including modernising customs and immigration facilities.

That has helped ease the way for a significant source of foreign visitors – the cruise ship crowd. 170 passenger

ships are expected to call into the port of Sanya this year.

"So far this is China's first exclusive cruise ship port and we want to make it the biggest one in the country," Zuo Zhenghe with Sanya Port Authority said.

once again the majority of passengers are coming come from Hong Kong or South East Asia, but the ship operators see a potential for future growth.

"China could become an important destination, even for Europeans and American people," Benedetto Minuto, hotel director of Costa Victoria, said.

One industry insider believes for the time being Hainan's tourism catchment should be within a five hours flight radius.

"I think initially the short haul destinations that have easier access to the island and then eventually you can actually go for longer haul destinations. – So if they create Hawaii without the mistakes then it's a clear winner," Andreas Trauttmansdorff, gneral manger of St. Regis Hotel, said.

To compete against regional rival like Thailand and Vietnam, Hianan will need more than picture postcard scenery like this, but if there recent history has taught us one thing it's to never underestimate China's will to achieve.