



Chinese sports travellers show penchant for global events, not just local heroes

Sports travel in China isn't just about following local stars and watching them play or compete globally. Rather Chinese consumers love global icons and long for an "upgraded experience" in addition to "watching action".

Sports travel is an emerging segment in China, growing in popularity over the last decade or so.

This can be attributed to the rising awareness of leisure tourism among Chinese consumers, the improvement of disposable income as well as the development of sports travel facilities at home and abroad.

Chinese travellers have shown penchant for a variety of sports, and love to be a part of popular sporting events and venues in big numbers. It is exemplified by the fact that Chinese consumers not only passionately support and view matches/ events featuring athletes or players from their own country, but they in general also enjoy competitive sports and travel across the globe as true sports connoisseurs.

In this context, it is imperative to ascertain what sports travel stands for.

Sports travel not just about viewing or playing

Zhang Jie, Head of Ctrip Theme Travel Platform, asserts that the term "sports travel" is a general idea.

"Nowadays, from the perspective of the market, all products that involve sports elements or labeled with sports IPs (intellectual property) are considered part of the sports travel category. By definition, sports travel should be a deep integration of the tourism industry and the sports industry, based on sports elements, including but not limited to travel products in the main forms of on-site viewing and event participation," said Jie.

It essentially means that tourists in essence would like to ensure various aspects of a trip including food, accommodation, transport, sightseeing, shopping and entertainment are inclusive in the journey they opt for.

The sports travel products on Ctrip's theme tour platform are divided into four categories, namely outdoor activities, event watching, sports competition and sports training, each of which represents a collection of products.

- Outdoor activities include hiking, cycling, diving, skiing and sky diving, such as round-the-island cycling in Taiwan and diving in Maldives.
- Event watching refers to Olympics, European Cup and other on-site viewing products.
- Sports competition refers to the products in which guests personally take part in competition, represented marathons.
- And sports training includes study tour products such as fencing, swimming and diving courses.

Penchant for global events over Chinese players

Jie said undoubtedly, the top five soccer league events in Europe - England, Germany, Spain, Italy and France - are the most popular (among Chinese sports travellers).

"(This is) because you can find existing products via search engines, which show nearly a hundred of football event products. However, Olympics, PGA (golf), F1 and other events are less popular," said Jie. "Five (soccer) league events (in Europe) are still the popular choices of overseas sport event tours. La Liga, Premier League and other major IPs are now familiar to Chinese consumers and present year-round events, which meets the needs of regular travel tours."

Jie highlighted that Asian Cup, 2020 European Cup and five major soccer leagues are expected to be top events from travel perspective in the next couple of years.

If one were to differentiate between trips undertaken to watch global personalities featuring in world-class events with those events where Chinese athletes excel, Jie said Chinese consumers favor more world-class events with global personalities. So this would be true for the UEFA European Championship or English Premier League where one wouldn't find any Chinese player versus badminton, table tennis etc. where China has ruled for years. This is probably because owing to inspiration factor or global popularity of the events.

This could have a direct result of local promotional events where global sports heroes visited China, and mingled with audience to give them a feel of the sport and even their respective personalities. It has been observed that global federations such as FIFA (soccer), ATP/ WTA (tennis) and even NBA have targeted China by holding local events with global icons in China. So how has this boosted the demand for sports-related tours among Chinese travellers? Jie admitted that such initiatives have played their part in taking sports travel forward.

"Consumers need to "be educated" and provided information. Take NBA for an example. Many tourists go to the United States, but they don't have time or the ability to buy a ticket to watch an NBA game, because there was no such consumer behavior before. They had no idea about the schedule and price of the ticket for a game and few travel agencies or platforms extensively informed their consumers how to better explore the United States by watching a game. However, after the comprehensive campaigns of major events in China, more people have access to such information or gain new ideas for their journeys in US. They are more willing to try sports-related products, watch games, visit universities and experience the basketball culture," acknowledged Jie.

Expertise of a travel agency

Travel specialists in China are offering both sports travel and outdoor tourism. In addition to sports watching tours, the company also tend to offer "doing/playing" products such as marathons, cycling, hiking etc. Referring to recent statistics on themed travel, Jie said the lighter sports travel products - with low barriers to both travel agencies and travelers - and due to their extraordinary experience, the likes of hiking, mountaineering, skiing and diving, are gaining popularity by Ctrip customers at an exponential rate.

Delving deeper into the role of a travel agency, Jie said it needs to be understood that "engagement and involvement in sports activities" are two distinct types of travel services.

"The former is more implemented by a brand or a company that is deeply involved in the sports industry. For example, Shankai Sports (an international Chinese company that develops and delivers China strategies for international sports organizations) owned 2018 Russian World Cup exclusive ticket program. Although the company is also selling travel products, its main business is sports brand agency, event sponsorship and public relations of international events, which all involve the barriers or qualifications that travel agencies do not have. Travel agencies are more involved in the latter category, by focusing on high-profile event IPs and mass-production products with developed approaches of travel operation," said Jie, adding that only few travel agencies actively seek key licenses, such as 2020 European Cup exclusive tickets, in order to engage in high-level sports travel operations.

But Jie also highlighted that Ctrip's expertise is now well entrenched.

"Given Ctrip's operations team, sophisticated travel resources, dedicated product teams in the sports travel division, we have covered all popular events, completed by extensive vertical sports-related products. For example, we organized travelers to play football with local fan groups, facilitated the interaction among fans and arranged other interesting travel activities," said Jie.

Jie recommended that sports travel products need to feature an upgraded experience.

"In addition to watching, they (Chinese travellers) seek more sports-related activities, such as interaction with other fans and experience (for example) as an amateur football player," concluded Jie.