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15 -17 May 2019 · Shanghai · itb-china.com



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Bahamas gears up to showcase its tourism prowess to Chinese travellers

There are several factors which attract Chinese visitors to The Bahamas. These include its beautiful beaches, world class resorts, multiple islands and more importantly, its famous swimming pigs!

Located between the North Atlantic and Florida's eastern coast, the Bahamas is renowned for attracting tourists from all over the globe. With more than 700 islands, the destination has plenty to offer.

There is so much to fascinate about – pulsating pineapple fields, secluded coves, charming coastlines etc. and the list of spots is enticing - the Exumas, Lucayan archeological sites, Inagua, Eleuthera & Harbour Island, Cat Island etc. There is no dearth of mesmerizing experiences in this part of the world.

"The Bahamas stands out as a premier island destination primarily because unlike other Caribbean destinations, The Bahamas is made up 700 islands, so vacationers can choose from multi-islands, and have various types of vacation experiences all during one vacation," says *Paul Strachan, Senior Director, Canada, Bahamas Ministry of Tourism and Aviation*.

Strachan specifically spoke about the popularity of swimming pigs among the visitors.

"Our famous swimming pigs is an attraction that has been making The Bahamas stand out all over the world," he said. Various established media brands have covered the rising popularity of swimming with pigs on Major Big Cay Island. Visitors can interact with the pigs in the warm water or on the island's white-sand beach.

"Additionally, The Bahamas continues to stand out because our two major resorts – Atlantis Paradise Island (the world's largest open-air marine habitat; Aquaventure, a 141-acre water park etc.) and Baha Mar. In the case of Baha Mar which opened two years ago, it is the largest newly built resort complex in the region, with the largest casino in the Caribbean," shared Strachan.

China as a source market

The number of visitors from China have been increasing.

"For the past few years, we have seen steady growth in the number of Chinese travellers visiting The Bahamas. Over the past five years our visitor numbers increased by 80.36%," shared Strachan. We had approximately 3,500 Chinese visitors to The Bahamas last year. When compared to previous years, we've seen an average growth of 17%."

"We attribute the increasing popularity in customized tour options to the vast increase in outbound travel from China in general, and also to the concentrated marketing efforts of destinations like The Bahamas and others to promote/ advertise their products to Chinese travellers," explained Strachan. "There are several factors which attract Chinese visitors to The Bahamas. Our beautiful beaches, our world class resorts, our multiple islands; and more importantly, our famous swimming pigs! Big Major Cay which is a small island in the chain of islands in The Bahamas called Exuma, is home to a group of friendly swimming pigs which are very popular all over the world, but especially a hit among Chinese travellers."

Profile and preferences of Chinese travellers

Travel trade specialists from China assert that customized travel is picking up, especially considering the substantial number of middle to high-end customers and increase in spending power. Chinese travellers are open to spending more money for distinctive local experiences and showing penchant for self-coordinated and individualized tours. It is vital for various foreign destinations to understand the emerging trends and prepare accordingly. For instance, in an interview with ITB China, China Kanghui Tourism Group referred to the growing popularity of Seychelles, Madagascar and Coase.

In this context, the Bahamas is also witnessing interesting mix of travellers. Females from China have shown great affiliation for the Bahamas.

"The larger percentage of Chinese travellers to The Bahamas are females between the ages of 25 and 34; who travel for vacation. Business travellers and honeymooners also make up a significant number of our visitors," said Strachan.

Strachan mentioned that different island destinations appeal to different profiles. For instance, newlywed couples, families with children, and solo adventure travellers visit different locations. "Some of the islands in The Bahamas have large, casino hotels, some have family style resorts, and some have smaller, cosy and romance-themed resorts," he said. "The difference is varied, but is primarily centred around the type of hotels/ resorts and amenities available on the island. For instance, a more remote island would have less amenities and things to do, so this type of island would typically appeal to newlyweds or romantic travellers. Conversely, an island with larger resorts, with nightlife and lots of activities would be more appealing to millennial and/or solo travellers."

Strachan doesn't observe any major difference in the expectations of Chinese travellers for island trips or the reason behind undertaking such trips when compared with travellers from other countries. "Chinese travellers seem to want and have the same level of expectations from an island trip as others from around the world – they all want beautiful beaches, nice scenery, activities, cultural experiences and good food." He added, "The most important aspects of a trip for Chinese visitors to The Bahamas are: affordable airfare with convenient connections, luxury brand hotels, casino gambling, golf and shopping."

This observation to an extent is in sync with outbound specialists from China. They also referred to a comprehensive list of amenities and activities that Chinese travellers prefer – excursion, shopping, dining, accommodation, transportation, entertainment, as well as daily service and occasional "wow" surprise (for instance, tourists also hope to have surprises, such as birthday wishes or honeymoon flowers).

Future focus

"We're focusing on promoting our beautiful islands in general, and will specifically focus on excursions to experience our famous swimming pigs (to coincide with the Chinese New Year), golf and casino gambling," shared Strachan.

From a traveller's perspective, he added, "I believe that in order to make trip planning and buying simplified, travel related vendors need to ensure that they provide as much information as possible on their global communications/ marketing channels like WeChat, and provide options for Chinese visitors to pay for their services using popular Chinese payment Apps such as WeChat Pay and Alipay."

A content consumption and e-commerce pattern that foreign companies can't ignore is due to the fact that China is a mobile-first market, and the Chinese consumer is more likely to adapt to technological innovations than any other market. This is exemplified by the fact that the likes of Alibaba and Tencent have catapulted the mobile consumption pattern in such a massive country to a new level. This is done via the astute handling of communication, ID management, shopping, payment and other aspects holistically.

"In our experience, many Chinese visitors are looking for signage and WeChat codes with scan to allow them to secure more information and details on tours, excursions, shopping and other sightseeing options in the Destination," said Strachan. "We're currently inspiring Chinese travellers to visit The Bahamas with imagery and content on our WeChat. We'll soon be moving to promote and inspire with promotions, contests, celebrity endorsements, and other marketing campaigns."

Authorities are currently promoting The Bahamas in China using various marketing tools on WeChat. "We're in the process of finalizing other options and opportunities to promote our destination," shared Strachan.

As for using other mass media options, for instance, relying on reality shows and other popular TV series etc. that are filmed on islands, Strachan shared that for The Bahamas specifically, reality shows and popular films have not yet impacted travel. "We are moving towards working with popular Chinese shows and films with hopes that these would then generate interest and encourage more Chinese travellers to visit The Bahamas."