



Left: People take photos at the Shanghai Pudong International Airport on Monday morning.

Above: A member of the first tour group fills in travel details at the check-in counter at the airport. — Jiang Xiaowei

# Travel frenzy: After a 3-year hiatus, the first overseas tour group flies out of city

Hu Min

**H**uang Yihong, a Shanghai resident who had planned a trip to Phuket Island in Thailand three years ago, was forced to cancel it due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

That wait, albeit a long one, is now over. She has joined a tour group, hoping to make up for the lost time.

Last month, China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism said that outbound group tours for Chinese people, which had been suspended because of the pandemic, would resume again on a trial basis.

Huang jumped at the opportunity and booked herself on the first tour group that left Shanghai on Morning morning.

"It has been a three-year wait," she told Shanghai Daily at Pudong International Airport. "I am excited and filled with anticipation for the trip."

"Group tours take care of many of our concerns. It now takes longer to prepare for a trip because I haven't traveled abroad for a long time."

Travel agencies and online

tour operators can now organize group tours to Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Maldives, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Russia, Switzerland, Hungary, New Zealand, Fiji, Cuba, and Argentina as of Monday.

The first resumed tour group from Shanghai set out on a six-day excursion to Phuket Island at 10:40am. It was organized by Shanghai Spring Tour and had 24 tourists of all ages.

Each member of the group received a Thai cellphone card at a welcoming ceremony for them at the airport.

"I am a travel buff, and travel is part of my life," said Yu Wenjun, another member of the group. "It feels like life has returned to normal now."

"I have mixed feelings ... excited but also a little scared because it is my first outbound trip in three years and COVID has not gone away completely. But I have a positive outlook and will take all precautions during the trip."

"I have taken medicines and antigens with me," she said.

Another traveler, Zhu Chunling, has packed 11 pieces of clothing, four hats, and a good number of silk scarves and cosmetics.

"I plan to take a lot of photos," she said. "I am thrilled and excited because I can travel internationally as before. Travel makes me happy."

Shi Wen, a veteran tour guide who will lead the group, couldn't contain his excitement, despite having visited Phuket several times.

"It's my first outward trip in three years. I nearly cried when I walked into the airport, holding my banner again, waiting for my guests," he told Shanghai Daily.

"I cannot wait for the start of the trip and will serve every group member as if they were my family to ensure they have a memorable experience."

Shi was busy giving his guests travel advice at the airport.

Zhou Weihong, deputy general manager of Shanghai Spring Tour, said it was a memorable day for the tourism industry.

"The tour products were sold out completely on the first day itself as most of them were

locals," Zhou said. "We had received 70 requests."

The agency said that Phuket is one of the most popular outbound tourist destinations among Chinese travelers, particularly in winter, because of its nice weather and beaches.

"I am very glad that the Chinese tourists are coming back," said Nonglux Yooyendee, director of Thailand's Shanghai Office of Tourism Authority. "We have prepared everything."

"When they arrive in Thailand, we will give them a warm welcome."

"We will try to give them a good outing," she added. "It's the first day, and everyone is happy."

According to Nonglux, 5 to 6 million Chinese tourists are expected to visit Thailand this year.

Shanghai Spring Tour has around 1,000 outbound tour packages available online.

"It takes a lot of planning, and we acted swiftly after learning about the restart of the outbound group tours," Zhou explained.

The itinerary of the first tour

group is more flexible than it was before COVID-19, making it more relaxing.

It includes a sunset cruise, fishing activities, and a visit to the local night market. Also, there are different route options for group members.

Despite the ardor, there are still challenges confronting the industry.

"Some very good tour guides have left the tourism industry during the pandemic," said Ye Ping, a travel agency employee. "New challenges include reinvigorating people's interest in travel and meeting the changing needs of tourists."

Online travel operator Trip.com said that the continued rise in international flights after the Spring Festival holiday led to a more than 300 percent hike in sales of outbound group tours and air ticket and hotel packages from a week earlier.

"It reflects the steady recovery of Chinese tourists' confidence in outbound tourism. Tour products are more diverse and meet the growing demands of travelers," said Jiang Wen, CEO of its group tour department.