

# Small towns a big draw for Chinese tourists in May Day holiday

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During the five-day May Day holiday, there were the usual crowds, super congested highways, and train seats fully booked the moment they were open for reservations, but there was also something new.

According to the latest Trip.com report, county-level destinations were a big hit during the recent holiday, with bookings for small-town tours, county-level hotels and scenic sights registering a growth of 140 percent, 68 percent and 151 percent respectively, all well above the growth in other categories.

In other words, the gravitational pull of major destinations — which remained robust — is being somewhat counterbalanced by a welcome movement, along capillaries, to smaller towns.

I myself had a one-day tour of Qinshan Island about 8km off the shore of Ganyu District of Lianyungang City (formerly a county), in Jiangsu Province, right on the doorstep of my native hometown.

Once a garrison island, a

stopover and a trading post for fishermen, this island is now a highly sought-after tourist destination, attracting both locals and travelers from afar laden with heavy luggage.

The island was such a favorite during the recent holiday that a friend of mine had to book the ferry and admission to the island for me a couple of weeks in advance.

Surprisingly, when the crowd of tourists ferried in dispersed among the well-shaded trails on the island, we were spared the hustle and bustle common to many scenic sights during holidays. You marveled that a tiny island measuring 0.14 square kilometers could absorb so many people so serenely.

An aerial photo of the island shows a longish, tadpole-shape island, with the tail a 3km trail pointing to the continent. The trail, made of pebbles and rocks in many colors, is more visible at a low ebb. Called *shenlu* (the Divine Way), it was attributed to the prowess of the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC),

who sent a team of adventurers in search of the elixir of life.

The rise of small time destinations could be attributed to two primary developments, that is that some smaller towns are becoming more accessible by *gaotie* (the bullet train) or the highway, plus the buzz of a newly discovered destination via social media.

Ganyu, for instance, used to be inaccessible by railway, and a journey by bus to Lianyungang Station used to take about an hour. With the launch of Ganyu Station as a bullet train stop, the journey is now cut to 16 minutes.

When travelers enjoy the experience of a smaller destination, they might share their experience on social media, resulting in a following among their friends.

Given the heavy crowds at more established destinations, this redirection of travelers to smaller destinations is a win-win situation for all, given the abrupt surge in travelers during holidays.

There is one catch, though. Since these destinations are more limited in terms of their infrastructure, they might be ill-equipped to cope with a sudden surge in tourists. The aforementioned island is an exception in that it could easily control the number of visitors allowed in.

According to analysts, there is still room for growth in small-town tours, given tourist predilections for a more leisurely experience and the cost savings in accommodations and food in a small town.

Trip.com statistics show that during the May holiday, county-level hotels cost about only half the average price of those in a first-tier city.

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Tourists linger at the beach of Qinshan Island, 8km off the shore of Ganyu District, Lianyungang, Jiangsu Province. — Photos by Wan Lixin



Qinshan Island is only 0.14 square kilometers in area.