

# Inbound tourism shows strong rebound, with more bugs being addressed

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These days, one of the favorite topics among my colleagues and friends is the rising number of foreign faces we see on the streets.

A journalist in Beijing mentioned this to me last month when I was there attending a training session.

A couple of days ago, during another training session in Shanghai, I mentioned the same phenomenon to a colleague from Hangzhou, who confirmed that the same could be said of Hangzhou, a city known throughout the world for its breathtaking scenic beauty.

Apparently, we do not need statistics to support our observations, though statistics are equally persuasive.

According to the National Immigration Administration, during the first quarter of 2024, Chinese immigration management agencies processed over 141 million traveler trips. Among them, trips by foreign nationals reached 13.1 million, a year-on-year increase of 305.2 percent.

There are a number of explanations for this dramatic growth.

Earlier this year, China adopted a visa-free policy that spares many European passport holders a time-consuming and costly process.

This measure undoubtedly encourages travelers from nearly a dozen European countries to explore China, which beckons with its well-endowed tourist resources, rugged terrain and tantalizing food.

In a further move, Chinese President Xi Jinping, during his recent European tour, announced that China has decided to extend visa exemption entry for citizens from 12



Foreign tourists line up to enter the Forbidden City in Beijing on Tuesday.

countries, 11 of them in Europe, on short-term visits to China until the end of 2025.

An insider from a travel agency said this extension enables travel agencies to plan travel products for the spring and summer of 2025.

In an interview with Xinhua News Agency, Ralph Ossa, chief economist of the World Trade Organization, said China's visa-free policy for European countries and the recovery of Chinese outbound tourism are conducive to global service trade.

One of the first beneficiaries is the international aviation sector that is still recovering from the doldrums during the pandemic. Air China, for instance, handled a total of 6,364 passengers traveled between Geneva and Beijing during this March, up 374.9 percent from a year earlier.

There are other explanations for these easily observed uplifting signs of change.

The ravages of COVID-19 had significantly dampened enthusiasm for travel to China, but scrutiny will show that the post-pandemic recovery had also been compounded by three other factors, mobile payment, flights and hotels.

In March this year, Sun Yeli, minister of culture and tourism in China, mentioned the payment difficulties encountered by inbound tourists in a fast digitalized country where cashless smartphone payment has become the norm, and cash payment a rarity.

Since then, relevant authorities have come up with a host of measures to address the issue, which include detailed measures intended to enable foreign travelers to use bank cards or cash in such venues as

hotels, airports, tourist attractions and other commercial outlets.

For those who opt for mobile payment, domestic payment platforms and enterprises have collaborated on a streamlined process whereby foreign tourists could easily register for payment applications. All commercial venues are also required to accept cash.

These simplified procedures ensure that foreign tourists in China enjoy the same level of convenience in accommodation, transportation and shopping as Chinese tourists.

Although mobile payment is not something new, some Westerners are more accustomed to Apple Pay or Google Pay, which are not so popular in China.

In spite of marked progress in payment, work is still needed in this direction. For instance,

re-installing and upgrading point-of-sale devices in hotels and shopping malls would infinitely facilitate substantial payment at these venues, but it would involve more work to persuade small retailers to install point-of-sale devices, or return to cash.

Another obstacle impacting inbound travel is the number of international flights that, in spite of their recovery, seem to have been restored to only a fraction of the pre-pandemic highs, largely blamed on the demand. This means flight fares are at a level many travelers find intimidating.

Yet another difficulty seemed to be with smaller hotels in China. While domestic travelers could check in by simply having their ID cards scanned, foreign passport holders would be met with a lengthy verification process that makes some small hoteliers reluctant to receive foreign visitors. The de facto ruling out of these small hotels, understandably, adds significantly to the costs of ordinary and younger passport-holding travelers in China.

But these problems are being addressed.

In a recent interview with China Tourism News, Shi Qingjun, president of Beijing New World Tours, said that "the market rebound has been so robust, that it beat our previous estimation ... Given our limitation in personnel and guides, our ability to handle inbound travelers has already been overstretched."

Some destinations are more favorable to some visitors. One favorite destination for South Korean visitors, for example, is Zhangjiajie in Hunan Province, which accounted for nearly 43 percent of all inbound visitors during the first two months of the year.