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Australia Gets Set for Chinese Tourist Boom

By **webadmin** on 12:09 pm February 1, 2013.
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Jonathan Pearlman – Straits Times

Melbourne. In hotel rooms across Australia, packets of instant noodles are offered alongside chocolates in the minibar, while teabags are being replaced by fresh tea leaves.

Despite the strong Australian dollar, Chinese tourists are flocking Down Under in a boom that is forcing the industry to quickly adapt to the new mix of visitors.

Hotels are hiring Mandarin-speaking staff and making sure Chinese visitors are not put in rooms whose numbers have the unlucky number 4.

Slippers and toothbrushes are placed in bathrooms, Chinese-language newspapers are delivered in the mornings and breakfast includes servings of congee and noodles.

Gary Crockett, the chairman of China Ready & Accredited, a Chinese-owned business that provides training to tourism operators, said Australians were often ignorant of aspects of Chinese culture.

"Part of the challenge is to see the world through Chinese eyes rather than Western eyes," he told The Straits Times.

"It is a mindset shift. Australians have a very Western, Anglo-Saxon view of the world even though we're a very multicultural society."

The number of Chinese visitors rose 17 percent last year to 635,700, overtaking Britain to become the second-largest source of tourists after New Zealand.

Chinese tourists already spend more than anyone else and contributed A\$3.8 billion (US\$3.9 billion) to the economy last year.

Singaporeans spent A\$1.19 billion and are the sixth-largest source of tourists.

More Chinese carriers are also flying to Australia, with Sichuan Airlines soon to become the fifth.

China Southern, based in Guangzhou, has increased the number of flights to Australia from 14 a week in 2010 to 35, and this is set to go up to 55 by 2015.

Shanghai-based China Eastern operates 21 flights a week and is looking to add extra services. Several airlines are adding extra charter flights for Chinese New Year.

Australia's government tourism body, Tourism Australia, has been heavily targeting tourists from China and hopes to double the number of Chinese visitors within a decade.




Its latest marketing campaign was launched in Shanghai and it supports a network of 5,000 specialist Australian travel agents across China.

"If we're not fully prepared, the Asian Century will pass us by," managing director Andrew McEvoy told The Straits Times.

"The industry is really starting to embrace this opportunity and adapting their business to meet the needs of the many Chinese visitors flocking to our country."



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Hotel chain Accor has introduced a special training program to teach staff how to serve Chinese customers, while national parks and museums have introduced audio tours in Mandarin as well as maps and exhibits in Chinese.

The recently opened Madame Tussauds in Sydney has included wax figures of Chinese stars such as Jackie Chan.

Crockett said many Australians do not appreciate that Chinese visitors are not a monolithic bloc and come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

"Most Australians have no idea about the rapid economic growth, and the level of sophistication and education in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities," he said.

They may not know that not all Chinese eat rice or that there are 56 different ethnic groups in China, he added.

Still, businesses here have begun to adapt, such as introducing Chinese-language signage, particularly for toilets, and Chinese-language websites.

But some in the tourism industry note that Chinese visitors, often traveling in groups, go only to big cities and the Gold Coast but not to outback destinations such as Ayers Rock.

The industry is also wary of focusing excessively on one source of visitors alone, especially after its experience with Japanese tourists, whose numbers have dropped from 700,000 a year more than a decade ago to about 400,000.

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