

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## From mass market to high-end, Switzerland courts wealthier Chinese tourists post-COVID

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*High-end tourism, smaller groups, themed travel and sustainable travel are recovering faster in the post-pandemic world. Image credit: Shutterstock*

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Switzerland Tourism is eyeing a different type of Chinese visitor from pre-COVID times, one with a focus on high-quality tourism and sustainability, according to Simon Bosshart, chief markets officer East for Switzerland Tourism.

While China was a mass market for Switzerland before the pandemic, with large groups traveling to various destinations in Europe, Mr. Bosshart sees high-end tourism, smaller groups, themed travel and sustainable travel recovering faster in the post-pandemic world.

According to Switzerland Tourism, Chinese tourists were the ones who spent the most before the pandemic, shelling out, on average, 380 Swiss francs (\$420) per person per day. In 2019, Chinese guests made 1.8 million overnight stays in Switzerland, making them the fourth-largest market for the country.

While the past three years have seen volumes drop by up to 98 percent, Mr. Bosshart says he believes China will become an important market once again.

"There is a clear sign of recovery, as visa demand is back to 30 percent of 2019," Mr. Bosshart said.

"Despite the current small size of the market, the potential is big as China is a huge market with ambitious people looking for authentic experiences, pure nature, and relaxing environments, which Switzerland can offer," he said.

**Younger, more aspirational: The changing profiles and priorities of Chinese tourists**

Experts in the travel industry echo the view, saying the Chinese outbound travel market is evolving towards more diversified and sustainable tourism experiences.

Gary Bowerman, Asia travel and consumer trends analyst and director of the consultancy Check-in Asia, said younger and more aspirational Chinese tourists are increasingly comfortable creating their own itineraries while

also being more eco-aware and keen on low-impact experiences.

"There is a tendency to view the pandemic as a major inflection point that will herald a new era of travel," Mr. Bowerman said. "To some degree that is true, because Chinese travelers had three years to rethink what traveling means to them and how they want to spend their vacation time in future.

"At the same time, young and aspirational Chinese tourists were already thinking like this in 2019, so we may see an acceleration of an emerging trend rather than the start of a whole new era," he said.

Mr. Bowerman highlights boutique experiences and semi-customized travel will be important for European destinations as Chinese tourists will want the freedom to choose their destinations, modes of transportation and hotels.

Oliver Sedlinger, CEO of Sedlinger & Associates, a tourism consultancy that specializes in the Greater China outbound travel market, said, "Seen from inside the market, it is obvious that an evolution is taking place and that demand for high-quality products and richer travel experiences is growing, be that for destinations, accommodations or activities."

Chinese tourists represent an untapped market for Europe

Mr. Sedlinger also points out that only a small number of Chinese citizens have traveled abroad yet, and there is still "a gigantic untapped potential" for future growth.

"This will, of course, also include first-time visitors, who may wish to maximize their limited time and budget, and get a taste of many different European destinations, which is only natural and understandable," Mr. Sedlinger said.

"However, from experience we also know that repeat visitors on their second trip to Europe already look for slower, longer and deeper experiences," he said.

"Additionally, already today, there is a large number of very experienced Chinese travelers who look for something more specific and special, more experiential and authentic something off the beaten track," he said. "There is clearly a strong and increasing demand for quality travel products."

Sustainable, low-impact experiences on the rise

Mr. Bosshart, of Switzerland Tourism, emphasizes that sustainable travel is also a major focus for Switzerland's tourism board.

With European governments promoting sustainable travel and requiring tourism boards to promote it as well, Switzerland is putting a lot of effort into this area.

While the wholesale business may be challenged, individual travel, especially "deep traveling," is what people want, especially as the younger generation is concerned about sustainability, he said.

Mr. Bowerman pointed out that sustainable travel is not only about the tourists themselves.

"It is about how destinations design and promote a range of low-impact experiences that actively support environmental protection and reduce negative community impact," he said.

Optimism for China's outbound tourism recovery

Before the pandemic, China was the world's largest outbound tourism market, with 166 million overseas trips being made and \$255 billion being spent abroad by Chinese travelers, according to the World Tourism Organization.

Travel experts are confident that China will become a key market for international tourism again once many bottlenecks, especially on the supply side, are solved.

Mr. Sedlinger notes the Chinese travel industry is now showing energy and optimism after a three-year long hibernation.

"I feel it is on a good track and will recover as quickly as supply allows," Mr. Sedlinger said.

"China is a very dynamic and flexible market, and one of its strengths is that it can adapt quickly," he said. "The pandemic has caused a sudden interruption, but I see no reason why China should not become a major source market again very soon."

2023 will be a recovery year for Chinese outbound tourism, per Mr. Bowerman.

"In 2024, we could see an increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Europe, but changing patterns of travel

mean they may spread their time across more destinations than before," he said.

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