GO CHINA – SANYA

Tourism holds key to growth

A blueprint for attracting a broader mix of visitors is being urged by the travel sector, writes **Keith Chan**

Tourism is the most important segment of Sanya's economy. Photo: ImagineChina

While the travel industry in Sanya generally performed well last year, with an increase of about 15 per cent in overnight visitors and tourism revenue, the government and the private sector are seeking ways to boost business, as indications are that the low season may have come earlier this year.

QUICK FACTS

Area 1,918 square kilometres
Population 685,000 (2010)
GDP 28.457 billion yuan
Per-capita GDP 56,269 yuan
Climate Tropical marine climate
Temperature Average 26.5 ºC (highest 35.9 ºC, lowest 13.5 ºC)
Annual rainfall 1,640.3mm
Annual daylight 2,181.3 hours
Average humidity 89 per cent
Total overnight visitors 10.2107 million
   Domestic 9.6818 million
   Overseas 528,900
Total tourism revenues 16.071 billion yuan
Foreign-exchange earnings from foreign visitors US$308.51 million

As the southern-most city on the mainland, and with a tropical marine climate, Sanya is a beach destination that is all the rage for domestic travellers, who account for 95 per cent of all visitors to the city, especially during the cooler months from October to March. This has made tourism the most important segment of Sanya's economy, contributing nearly 60 per cent of its gross domestic product of 28.5 billion yuan (HK$35 billion) last year.

However, this year, the low season seems to have started earlier as the city recorded only a modest 7.6 per cent increase in overnight visitors in the first three months, of which visitors from overseas even showed a 3.5 per cent decline.

The uncertainly over the economy caused by the euro-zone crisis is likely to be a factor for the modest growth, coupled with the bad publicity in late January about price gouging among Sanya's seafood restaurants. After initial denials, the tourism bureau acknowledged the problem and has taken remedial steps, but the damage is expected to last much longer.

Last month, Hainan Provincial Tourism Bureau and representatives from hotels, airlines and tourism facilities held a meeting to study ways

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to develop a new model for the sustained growth of tourism in Hainan, particularly in Sanya.

At the meeting, Chen Tiejun, deputy director of the bureau, said that to boost tourism during the low season, it was important to come up with innovative products, to upgrade lower-end products and to step up sales and marketing.

Hotel representatives urged the city government to make further investments in improving transport infrastructure, and building new

facilities and theme parks, helping to broaden the mix of visitors.

It was suggested that, apart from promoting Sanya as a resort destination for families, the city government and the industry should join forces to develop new products such as marine tourism, medical tourism and wedding tours, while hosting major cultural and sporting events throughout the year.

In recent years, Sanya has hosted international cultural and sporting events, such as the Miss World Pageant final, China New Silk Road Model competition, Sanya International Beach Music festival, FIVB Beach Volleyball World Tour, the round-the-island regatta, round-the-island cycling races and golf tournaments. Sanya has also participated in the Volvo Ocean Race.

The city government hopes these international cultural and sporting events will help Sanya develop into a cultural venue, build a stronger image among visitors and attract the attention of the world's media.

The city also seeks to develop its own culture through the setting up of the Cultural Heritage Protection Centre in March. The centre will play an active role in discovering cultural resources and protecting Sanya's intangible heritage.

Saving money creates a picture of happiness

David Powell

As China's only tropical city, Sanya has become a favourite spot for destination weddings and honeymoons. A typical wedding has "somewhere between 50 and 200 guests in the cooler months, from October to March", says Paul Jackson, general manager of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Sanya.

For Hong Kong couples, a wedding in Sanya can actually save money. "If many family members come from China, [Sanya] can be more cost-effective than Hong Kong," says Sonya Yeung, founder of Bliss Creations, a luxury destination wedding planning company.

When Matthew Stinson, a Tianjin-based American educator, photographer, and freelance writer,

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and his wife decided on a tropical honeymoon, they chose Sanya because it was "convenient and cheaper than more distant islands".

While most guests come from the mainland, up to 20 per cent come from Hong Kong and elsewhere. For the Ritz-Carlton, a typical guest

Sanya is proving to be a popular tropical wedding destination. Photo: ImagineChina

"wants to create a special event and express gratitude to his friends and family while showing the world how powerful he is", says Michel Goget, general manager of the Ritz-Carlton and chairman of Sanya's Hotel Association.

Western couples tend to choose

Sanya because "one of them has family from China, they're cost-conscious and want something outdoors", Yeung says. That was true for an American-Chinese couple Cameron and Qian Roth. "We decided it would be fun to visit southern China and we had heard

that Hainan was the 'Hawaii of China'."

At the high-end, "one gentleman flew in 1,000 people, inviting his entire village and the village of the bride's parents", Goget recalls.

Mundane details also stand out. "The young guys decorate mopeds with bright lights and blasting loudspeakers, then drive around at night with a girlfriend on the back," Cameron says.

Service is a calling card for local resorts. When one guest dislocated his kneecap, "the Mandarin Oriental staff were extremely helpful and offered my wife and myself care and assistance".

At the Ritz-Carlton, a staff "romanceologist" helps couples plan the ideal trip to ensure "their own perfectly personalised honeymoon", Goget says.