

Chinese make a record 6.15m trips overseas during holiday



A record 6.15 million trips were made by Chinese mainland tourists to overseas destinations during the seven-day Spring Festival holiday.
[Photo/China.org.cn]

A record 6.15 million trips were made by Chinese mainland tourists to overseas destinations during the seven-day Spring Festival holiday, which ended on Thursday, according to the China National Tourism Administration.

That is an increase of 7 percent compared with last year's Spring Festival. About 374,000 trips were organized by travel agencies, a 2.5 percent increase.

The administration also reported growth from individual and high-end travelers and said that in addition to first-tier and coastal cities, inland cities—such as those in the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region—became important source markets for China’s out-bound tourism industry.

With many Chinese now traveling abroad for Spring Festival, their choice of destinations has expanded along with their growing interest in exotic cultures and services.

Those traveling to Japan, for example, where “shopping spree” became a catchword in 2015, now prefer a physical checkup or experiencing Japanese culture.

Meng Fanhai, owner of a tourism agency in Tokyo, said his agency arranged more than 200 physical checkups and medical treatments in 2016, up 50 percent from the year before and accounting for about one-third of his agency’s business from Chinese tourists.

Li Xuejing, the agency’s marketing manager, said Chinese tourists are increasingly willing to experience local culture and characteristic services, including staying in private homes, appreciating bonsai and watching monkeys in hot springs.

Yang Min, a partner of a tourism agency specializing in receiving Chinese tourists in Kenya, said the country was unfamiliar to most Chinese in 2005. However, since 2010, more Chinese tourists have chosen the African country as a destination to experience its biodiversity.

A Chinese tourist surnamed Guo, who was vacationing on an island in the Philippines, said she now pays more attention to relaxation and enjoyment during the holidays instead of shopping or choosing gifts for relatives.

“When I book a hotel, I will take into consideration the massage, the spa and other special services ... to enjoy myself,” she said.

Another choice is Britain. Though the devaluation of the pound is a factor, Britain’s rich history and famous education tradition have caught the eye of Chinese.

[Rising demand for face masks transforms Shandong village](#)

Every cloud has a silver lining – even clouds of smog, as factory owners in an eastern Chinese village have discovered.

Dadian, just north of Jiaozhou, Shandong province, is home to 300 factories

churning out those thin, ubiquitous face masks that can be seen on anyone from nurses to shop assistants to subway commuters.

Concern over air pollution has helped fuel a multibillion-yuan industry for manufacturers and suppliers of raw materials, with orders for face masks skyrocketing when the National Meteorological Center issues red or orange alerts for smog.

"We can make 20,000 face masks a day, but our orders are often double our capacity," said Gao Jian, a factory boss in Dadian.

The demand has seen this once remote, impoverished village become a busy manufacturing base in just over a decade. Its factories produce over 1 billion masks a year, generating annual revenue of 1.1 billion yuan (\$160 million).

The village supplies 80 percent of China's standard face masks and also ships its products to the United States and Japan.

"We have a complete industry chain from raw materials to textile processing to distribution," said Jiang Xiubin, head of the Dadian Face Mask Manufacturers Association.

Business was tough in the 1990s, he said, with traders having to travel 36 hours by train to promote their masks in Lanzhou, Gansu province. However, in 2000, Beijing was hit by a sandstorm, leading to surge in demand for the village's products.

Sales soared again in 2003 when the nation was hit by SARS. Dadian had just 23 workshops at the time, and laborers had to work around the clock to meet orders. That year, the local industry made 20 million yuan.

Since then, business has continued to flourish, with the peak season being August, when some parts of the country are regularly affected by sandstorms and smog.

However, the village's face masks have come under scrutiny after false claims by advertisers that they can protect against air pollution.

Dadian's factories have never claimed their masks are effective against hazardous PM2.5 particles, and even state as much on their packaging, Jiang said. Yet he added that it was hard to prevent retailers from spreading misinformation to boost sales.

Although Jiang was unwilling to link the village's rapid development with environmental issues, he conceded that the face mask industry has "benefited a lot" from pollution.

"Before I opened my factory, my family's annual income was about 40,000 yuan. In 2013, I made 90,000 yuan from making 300,000 masks," he said. "But if it came down to it, I'd prefer to live in a better natural environment than make more money in smog."

1 rescued, 5 dead in Wenzhou homes collapse



A worker carries fireworks to put on display at a temporary sales outlet in Beijing's Chaoyang district on Monday.[China Daily]

One survivor was rescued and five were found dead after a residential building collapsed in Wenzhou, east China's Zhejiang Province, local authorities said Thursday night.

Part of a five-storey residential building in Dahui village of Wencheng County collapsed at about 8 a.m. Thursday, burying nine people from two families.

A 63-year-old woman was pulled out from the debris at about 10:40 p.m. and rushed to hospital for emergency treatment.

Rescuers located the woman after she made a phone call to her family under the rubble at 7 p.m..

Three were still buried under the rubble but rescuers found no signs of life.

With the help of eight cranes and excavators, more than 400 paramilitary officers, fire fighters, township officials and medical workers were carrying out rescue operation.

"The scene is quite chaotic, as if the place was leveled by an earthquake," a rescuer told Xinhua by telephone. "We have to work very carefully because the wreckages of the ruined building are joined to homes still standing."

One of the adjacent homes, he said, was already damaged with a big hole in its outer wall.

A total of 58 people living nearby were evacuated to safe places.

Local authorities have launched an investigation into the cause of the building collapse.

Couriers being driven to despair



Workers sort parcels at a warehouse in Tianjin, North China.[Photo/China Daily]

Despite making a massive contribution to China's economy, delivery workers still endure long hours, low wages and poor job security. Hou Liqiang reports.

Wrapped warmly in leather leg chaps, gloves and a Russian hat with ear flaps, Yang Lei appeared well-equipped to survive the winter as a delivery courier in Beijing.

He works seven days a week, but his monthly salary of about 5,000 yuan (\$723) – the average for delivery drivers – is chickenfeed given the hours he works for his employer, Tiantian Express, and the contribution couriers make to the national economy.

His pregnant wife lives in an outlying suburb of Beijing, but Yang is usually too tired to travel for more than two hours by subway and bus to return home, so he often sleeps in a house in the downtown that a local agent has rented to use as an office.

When Beijing issued a red alert for air pollution, the highest-level warning, like most of his peers the 30-year-old didn't bother to wear a mask, even though he had to ride his electric tricycle for more than 10 hours a day, exposed to fine particulate matter that can be harmful to human health.

Yang's situation illustrates the difficult conditions endured by delivery workers in China. About 2 million couriers are employed solely by delivery companies, but the number rises if those directly employed by e-commerce platforms are also included, according to a report published by Beijing Jiaotong University, AliResearch, the research arm of the e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, and Cainiao Network, Alibaba's logistics division.

Resignations rise

The poor wages, low social status and long hours have resulted in many couriers quitting the sector. According to the report, 80 percent of workers in the company branches surveyed had worked for their employers for between six months and three years, while 50 percent had been in their jobs for less than a year, which indicates a high rate of resignations.

Zhang Jian worked for Quansu Express for about six months, but quit after he was ordered to pay compensation of 200 yuan after a parcel he delivered was accepted and signed for by a colleague of the addressee but was subsequently lost. Zhang now works for White Steed Express, a company that only delivers documents for insurance companies.

"I usually eat shaobing, a type of layered flatbread, for all three meals during the day. They are very dry and I have to drink water to swallow them. The man who sells them at the entrance of my village is from my hometown, so he gives me good price," he said.

In Beijing, the bread costs about 2 yuan per piece. Zhang said he spends about 8 yuan on his supper, 4 yuan more than on his breakfast and lunch. Even though his salary is about the same as he earned working for other delivery companies and also at a restaurant, Zhang is happy in his current job because he is allowed one day off per week. "Comparatively speaking, this is the best job I have ever had in this sector," he said.

Having worked for Shanghai YTO Express and SF Express in Beijing, Sun Bun (not his real name) has plenty of experience of the problems delivery workers face. "We have low social status and are often insulted," he said.

In July, during a torrential rainstorm, a registered letter Sun delivered to an address in Beijing was accepted by the addressee's wife, but a short time later Sun was phoned by the intended recipient who said he hadn't received the letter and began verbally abusing him. "He began swearing at me as soon as I picked up the phone. He shouted that he hadn't received the letter and demanded to know why he had received a message saying that it had been delivered," Sun said.

The caller insisted that his wife had been with him all the time and hadn't taken delivery of the letter, so Sun headed back to the man's home where he

confirmed that the woman who signed for the delivery was indeed the wife of the addressee, who had been absent at the time of delivery. Sun still doesn't know what happened to the letter.

"Despite the heavy rain, I fulfilled my obligations and delivered the letter, but instead of respect, I received insults. Would that man have insulted me like that if I had higher social status?" he said.

Booming business

In 2015, the value of online retail sales in China reached 3.88 trillion yuan, while GDP stood at more than 67.67 trillion yuan. Approximately 413 million online buyers each received an average of 40 parcels, the report said.

Meanwhile, the couriers' contribution to the economy continues to rise. In an interview with Xinhua News Agency, Ma Junsheng, head of the State Post Bureau, said 31.3 billion parcels were delivered last year as the e-commerce sector generated revenue of 400 billion yuan, compared with about 30 billion yuan in 2006. Ma referred to the sector as the "dark horse" of the economy.

Yang has been working as a courier for two and a half years. "It's common for my two colleagues and I to deliver a total of 300 to 400 parcels a day," he said. Long days spent battling the wind and dirt on the capital's streets have left his skin darkened and pitted, making him appear older than his years.

More than 4,500 branches of express delivery companies nationwide were canvassed for the report, which showed that 80 percent of employees at the branches surveyed work more than eight hours a day, although that can rise to more than 12 hours during busy periods. More than half of the branches said they paid workers from 2,000 to 6,000 yuan a month.

Yang's work is financially risky because couriers sometimes have to compensate addressees for the loss of parcels, even if the loss is not their fault. In one case, Yang handed over a parcel containing valuables to colleagues at another branch, but the parcel later went missing. However, when Yang called the branch and explained the problem, the workers refused to speak to him. The sender asked Yang for compensation of 3,000 yuan, which he was forced to pay out of his own pocket.

Yang has no personal or medical insurance – only his tricycle is insured, in case of accidents – because many express delivery companies outsource business to agents who refuse to fund insurance for couriers to keep costs down. The agents also draft their own draconian regulations to manage the employees, which has led to delivery workers being fined if they asked for leave, according to several people with experience of the sector.

Smog returns as Spring Festival ends

Many cities in northern China will face a smoggy weekend due to the windless weather, while smoke from firecrackers will worsen pollution in some areas, the national environmental authority said.

Air quality will start to decline on Thursday in many northern regions and reach a low on Friday, especially in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the Ministry of Environmental Protection said.

Other regions, including in the south and northeast, will also be blanketed by smog, which is forecast to fall to light and moderate levels on Friday, the ministry added.

After Sunday, affected regions will embrace blue skies, though some cities will see pollution lingering due to firecrackers, the National Environmental Monitoring Center said.

Setting off firecrackers, a traditional way to celebrate the Lunar New Year, can cause air pollution to suddenly worsen.

As of 6 pm on Jan 27, Lunar New Year's Eve, only 19 of the 338 cities with regular air quality monitoring had hazardous levels of pollution. However, at 2 am on Saturday, after firecrackers had been set off that night, 183 cities had hazardous air pollution, among which 62 saw the air quality index reach its upper limit, the ministry said.

Air quality in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and neighboring provinces was more severely affected by fireworks, the ministry said.

For example, Beijing saw the concentration of PM2.5 – fine particulate matter with a diameter less than 2.5 microns that is harmful to health – soar from 97 micrograms per cubic meter at 7 pm on Friday to 647 at 2 am on Saturday, dragging air quality to the most hazardous level within seven hours, said Li Yunting, head of air quality monitoring at the Beijing Environmental Monitoring Center.

Cities that banned fireworks found the move effective in controlling pollution, the ministry said.

For example, the average PM2.5 reading during the same period in Shanghai was 17, the ministry's data showed.

In addition to fireworks, coal consumption for heating and industrial production were still major sources of pollution during the holiday, the ministry said.

Wang Shuxiao, an environmental professor at Peking University, said while small plants suspended production during the holiday, emissions from large plants continued, making them a major source of pollution.