

Top tourism province Yunnan goes harsh on kickbacks

Southwest China's Yunnan, the top province for tourists, rolled out harsh regulations to tackle tourist scams.

Yunnan is the top tourist province in China, receiving over 431 million domestic and overseas tourists in 2016, about 10 percent of the national total. It boasts rich tourism resources, including unparalleled natural scenery, ethnic culture and world heritage sites such as Lijiang.

However, it has faced increasing public criticism after incidents such as forced shopping excursions, scams, and the humiliation and beating of tourists.

Statistics from the National Tourism Administration and web resources show Yunnan frequently ranks top in the number of complaints filed by tourists.

In February, complaints against Yunnan tour operators accounted for about 34.8 percent of the national total. Most of the complaints were related to cheap tours and forced shopping.

"The new regulation was made to separate tours from shopping, and we aim to restore tourism market order within a year," said Yu Fan, director of the provincial tourism development commission at a press conference on Monday.

Shops at tourist destinations often sell overpriced goods of shoddy quality. According to the new regulation, which comes into effect on April 15, these shops will turn into supermarket-style shops with proper pricing and fall under day-to-day supervision by tourism and commerce authorities.

The regulation bans kickbacks or commissions, which had come under the guise of "parking fees" or "tea fees" for bus or taxi drivers, and "head-count fees" for guides.

"The new regulation removes the source of profit for tour operators," said Mou Xuemei, director of the tourist guide association in Lijiang, Yunnan.

"It means guides can no longer receive commissions, and their earnings will solely depend on whether their clients are happy," Mou said.

In Lijiang, there are about 2,000 tourist guides.

"The new policy will greatly impact them, and I have heard them talking about the policy since word of it came out," she said.

"Kickbacks are a national problem. Everyone will look and see how tourism reform in Yunnan goes," she said.

According to a tourism industry report, some shops sell jade, medicine and

Pu'er tea at ten times the price of purchase. Fifty to 90 percent of the money goes back to travel companies, which then give kickbacks to their guides accordingly.

"Commissions based on shopping tours are dysfunctional and distort the proper enjoyment of the travel experience," said Garry Crockett, global executive chairman of China Ready & Accredited, a tourism consulting firm.

"The new regulation brings China's domestic tourism policy into harmony with international best practice. Most Western travellers expect transparency in tour arrangement and like to be provided with freedom to choose which shop they patronize during their travels," he said.

Yunnan will establish a rating system for tourist guides and increase supervision of guides. It will also establish a blacklist for discredited tour operators.