

# India rolls out welcome mat

TRADITIONAL ARTS HIGHLIGHTED AT EXPO IN BID TO ATTRACT MORE CHINESE TOURISTS TO SUBCONTINENT

By AN BAIJIE and SUN YE in Beijing

Summer in India is in full swing, accompanied by the usual searing heat. But this downtime in visitor numbers has not brought a lull to the tourism sector. Brimming with zeal and optimism, India's tourism ambassadors have come to China to attract visitors and tap the burgeoning market for overseas travel.

At the Beijing International Tourism Expo (BITE) 2015, which closed at the end of June, India had one of the most eye-catching exhibitions among the approximately 1,000 participants from more than 80 nations.

Kathakali, an ancient dance-drama from the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, was presented at the venue. Kalaripayattu, the traditional Indian martial art — now practiced mostly in Kerala and also in the southern state of Tamil Nadu — was performed alongside China's kungfu. Numerous other attractions and historical links between the two countries were showcased at the promotional event.

Moreover, electronic visas or e-visas for tourists — the “seamless, hassle-free” travel convenience promised to Chinese tourists by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his state visit to China in May — will be launched shortly, according to Indian Ambassador Ashok K Kantha, who spoke at BITE.

The fact that 2015 is the Visit India Year, the first part of a two-year tourism promotion program (2016 will be Visit China Year) between the two countries, might explain some of India's enthusiastic focus on China.

But China's growth in outbound travel may also partly explain India's publicity programs that target Chinese tourists.

G Kamala Vardhana Rao, secretary for tourism to the government of Kerala state, tells *China Daily Asia Weekly* that his team had done ample market research before their trip to China.

“Last year, 100 million Chinese tourists traveled overseas. More than 80 percent of the destinations were within Asia. And 70 percent of Chinese travelers go for leisure tourism,” says Rao.

“India presents tourists with diversity. We have forests, deserts and wonderful beaches.”

The country has heavily advertised its range of leisure travel destinations including relaxing beaches, as well as the wide variety of seasonal fruits available.

Indeed, the number of outbound tourists from China has jumped almost eightfold to 100 million



AN BAIJIE / CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

Kathakali, the ancient dance-drama from the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, was performed to entertain Chinese visitors at the recent Beijing International Tourism Expo. As part of Visit India Year, a reciprocal program with China, the country has launched a campaign called Guests are Gods.

between 2001 and 2014, averaging some 300,000 outgoing travelers per day, according to the China National Tourism Administration's statistics. The administration expects the number of outbound tourists to reach 135 million in 2015.

The 2014 statistics also show that 89.5 percent of Chinese mainland tourists chose Asian destinations (including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao). And the top five countries that attracted more than 1 million visitors from China were South Korea, Thailand, Japan, the United States and Vietnam, showing their preference for convenient destinations.

Chinese tourists' spending power has also regularly made the news. During this year's weeklong Spring Festival holiday in February, 450,000 Chinese spent 6 billion yuan (\$965 million) in Japan, due to the country's favorable exchange rate and relaxation of visa requirements for Chinese tourists.

China Confidential, a research service of the *Financial Times*, estimated that Chinese tourists spent a total of 3,100 billion yuan overseas last year.

However, India has seen only a small portion of that incredible growth in outbound travel, as only

170,000 Chinese visited India last year.

In order to correct the imbalance in leisure travel between the two countries, which have a combined population of 2.5 billion, India now welcomes travelers from its neighbor as part of a massive national campaign titled Guests are Gods.

“We are a very religious country. We treat our gods with the utmost respect. For us, guests are also like gods,” explains Neerabh K Prasad, principal secretary of tourism and culture in Andhra Pradesh. Prasad visited Beijing to promote the southeastern Indian state's signature beaches, natural beauty and religious attractions.

He also addressed security-related issues, one of the major concerns raised by Chinese tourists.

“India is a big country like China. What happens in Beijing does not happen in Chengdu, Hong Kong and Shanghai. Unfortunately, a few incidents (in India) have spoiled (the perception),” Prasad notes.

“All of India is not unsafe. India is a very safe country,” he adds.

According to Prasad, the country is setting up a telephone hotline to address tourists' needs in a timely manner.

As part of the initiative, authorities

in India will set up a tourism-related toll-free number, “which tourists can dial in case of any problem,” he says.

“We are taking steps to reduce your fears. But first of all, bear in mind that India is a safe country.”

Thanks to these initiatives, India now has the potential to become a favorite destination for Chinese travelers.

Xi Xi, 32, has traveled across the globe to more than 20 countries over the past decade. She now considers India her favorite country.

“You could argue that I had low expectations as I so often read about the country's poverty and chaos,” she says.

“But I now really love the place,” Xi Xi says, adding that thanks to her assimilation of Indian philosophy she has learned to accept the outcome in any given situation with equanimity.

Earlier this year, she traveled across the country, from south to north, for a month with the help of a *Lonely Planet* guidebook.

“I met none of the things those negative news items reported, which must be exaggerated,” she reasons.

“I'm convinced that India is a paradise for those who care less about punctuality and orderliness, but who love freedom and the peaceful coex-

istence of so many different things,” she says.

“India has a very appealing, self-sufficient order of its own.”

Speaking at an earlier forum on Sino-Indian tourism, Lu Hui, general manager of Beijing Changtong International Travel Service, said: “India is the center of Buddhism, and that's a big draw for China's younger generation.”

According to Lu, with the provision of better tourist facilities in India, and the appropriate government policies to provide a smoother experience for all travelers, the potential for growth in visitor numbers to India is virtually limitless.

Li Jinzao, head of the China National Tourism Administration, says the growth in two-way travel between China and India has the potential to reach 1 million by 2016. This can be achieved as China reaches out for more cooperation in travel products, insurance policies, visas and other items to further facilitate travel between the two neighbors.

For the remaining few months of Visit India Year, there will continue to be various promotional events across different cities in China.

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