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A record nine billion domestic passenger trips are expected during the 40-day period, running alongside a rebound in international travel.



Ice and snow are bringing both merriment and misery to domestic travellers in China as the world's second most populous country heads towards record-breaking numbers during the Spring Festival travel rush.

The "ice and snow" tourism trend, or "bing xue lu you" in Mandarin, has heated up this year, leading to a festive travel boom to winter destinations in the frozen north such as Harbin and Xinjiang.

At the same time, freezing rain and blizzards are wreaking havoc in the central and east regions, disrupting already stretched transport services and stranding homebound travellers.

Known as the world's largest annual migration, the Spring Festival travel rush is keenly watched as the travel patterns and numbers provide indications on the health of the Chinese economy.

Also in focus - whether the recent visa-free arrangements China has either enacted unilaterally or mutually with around 10 countries in recent months are paying off in terms of boosting tourism.

The 40-day travel rush revolves around Chinese New Year (Feb 10), which typically sees hundreds of millions of people travelling back to their hometowns to reunite with their loved ones and celebrate.

China's Transport Ministry estimates a record nine billion domestic passenger trips to be made during this festive period, with self-driving road trips making up 80 per cent.

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The overall number is nearly double the 4.7 billion logged last year, when the zero-COVID policy had only recently been lifted.

Day one of the travel rush on Jan 26 already saw 189 million passenger trips being made, according to a report by state news outlet China Daily.



Travellers wait for their trains at Shanghai Hongqiao railway station, during the Spring Festival travel rush ahead of Chinese New Year, in Shanghai, China, Feb 5, 2024. (Photo: Reuters/Nicoco Chan)

FREEZING RAIN AND BLIZZARDS

But extreme weather is casting a dark cloud over the peak travel season.

Heavy snowfall and freezing rain across parts of the country have grounded flights and halted trains, disrupting people's plans.

Weather officials earlier warned that overall conditions were shaping up to be the "most complex" since 2008.

China's National Meteorological Center issued four extreme weather warnings over the weekend, including warnings for strong wind, blizzards and dense fog.

Local media reported travellers were stranded due to flight cancellations and delays in several airports, including Wuhan, Hefei and Zhengzhou.

On Sunday (Feb 4), China Southern Airlines said it cancelled a total of 105 flights at Wuhan Tianhe International Airport due to heavy snowfall.

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In a post on its official Weibo page, the airline apologised for the inconvenience caused to travellers, after several delayed flights were cancelled due to ice on the runway.

China's national railway regulator said on Monday that it would increase transport capacity at areas and railway lines where weather conditions have improved.

The weather situation is forecast to improve from the middle of the week, according to local media reports.



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WARMING UP TO "ICE AND SNOW" TOURISM

Even as much of China contends with ice and snow, a tourism trend of the same name has been proving especially popular this festive season.

Bookings for snow- and ice-related activities have jumped by more than 10 times, according to China travel portal Ctrip in its annual Spring Festival travel forecast as reported by Sohu.

Cities in Northern China, such as Harbin, Changchun, Beijing and Urumqi, are among popular domestic destinations for local travellers.

According to booking platform Trip.com Group, there has been a sevenfold year-on-year increase in Chinese domestic bookings, with major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Harbin among the most popular destinations.

Ms Ru Yi, Assistant Vice President (Asia Pacific) of International Markets in Trip.com Group said domestic tourism was given a big boost during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the strict curbs during that period.

"These restrictions gave Chinese travellers the opportunity to explore their own country, helping them to realise that there are many wondrous sights and experiences they can have without needing to leave the country," said Ms Ru.

"Ice and snow" travel first gained national traction at the turn of last year, and analysts point out momentum for the trend remains entering the Chinese New Year holidays.

A case in point is Harbin in the northeast, dubbed China's "ice city" where sub-zero temperatures are a way of life. It attracted a record number of visitors over the New Year holiday - many drawn by the ice sculptures of the city's annual Ice and Snow Festival.



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State news agency Xinhua reported that 3.05 million tourists visited Harbin during the three-day holiday, generating 5.91 billion yuan (US\$832 million) in tourism revenue. These surpassed pre-pandemic levels, according to Xinhua.

For the Chinese New Year holidays, Harbin is the most popular tourist destination, according to a report by online travel platform Tongcheng Travel.

Social media has been a key driver in the winter tourism boom, according to Chinese media, with short videos of Harbin winter's scenery and the local hospitality going viral.

Mr Oliver Sedlinger, CEO of tourism consultancy company Sedlinger & Associates, told CNA one trend that is currently "very visible" is a growing number of winter sport fans who use this holiday period as a chance to go on ski trips at ski resorts in China.

Founder and CEO of marketing firm China Trading Desk Subramania Bhatt agreed. Winter activities such as skating and skiing, as well as various ice and snow sightseeing projects have attracted more attention from tourists.

Chinese officials have also acknowledged the boom in winter tourism. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mr Wang Wenbin said it shows China's growing tourism market demand and people's spending power.

"China's consumption spree during holidays, festivals as well as the current winter travel boom have strongly boosted the global tourism market, and showed the country's great economic vitality," Mr Wang was reported saying by local media.

SETTING SIGHTS ABROAD

Booking platforms are also seeing a surge in international searches from Chinese travellers for the upcoming holidays.

Travel platform Booking.com said it has seen a four and a half times increase for international searches compared to the previous years, with France, Japan and Thailand among the top destinations searched by Mainland Chinese travellers.

Meanwhile, Trip.com has seen outbound bookings for Chinese travellers jump by 10 times year-on-year, with Japan, Thailand and Singapore among the top destinations.

As the momentum in domestic travel continues, Ms Ru anticipates that recent strategic initiatives will contribute to a faster pace in the recovery of international travel.

These include broadening the range of unilateral visa-free countries, reinstating visa-free entry policies for select places, streamlining visa and customs clearance process, as well as increasing more international flights.

Ahead of the holidays, China relaxed visa rules to encourage more tourists and business travellers to visit the country, including the easing of transit rules and extensions of stay for foreign nationals.

China has also been expanding its visa-free policy. Among the latest moves - mutual 30-day visa-free entries with Singapore and Thailand, which come into effect in February and March respectively.

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Acknowledging that improving visa policies is an important step, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said last week that it would continue to "upgrade measures" facilitating cross-border travel.

WHO BENEFITS FROM VISA-FREE TRAVEL?

Visa-free deals typically boost both inbound and outbound travel by making cross-border movements easier and more appealing for tourists, said Mr Subramania from China Trading Desk.

This is a key consideration for many travellers, Mr Sedlinger from tourism consultancy company Sedlinger & Associates told CNA. "Visa policy is not the only factor influencing the choice of destination, but it is an important one - no visa, no trip!"

There are many factors that influence a traveller's decision on where they wish to go, but generally safety, convenience, cost and affordability, and unique experiences are some of the main points.

Singapore Management University's (SMU) Assistant Professor Terence Fan acknowledged that visa-free deals are an important factor for Chinese travellers. But he told CNA another key consideration is the flight time and frequency.

Longer flight times and lower flight frequencies would mean less time on the ground, he said.

China's aviation regulator expects the number of weekly international flights to and from the country to reach 6,000 by the end of the year, or 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

In its report last month, the Civil Aviation Administration of China also said it would work to increase direct flights between China and the US, as well as deepen cooperation with areas in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

Analysts also pointed out that visa-free deals and China's recent visa policies would make it much more convenient for non-Chinese travellers to travel to China, thus also benefiting inbound travel.

Referring to the recent mutual visa-free agreement between China and Singapore, Asst Prof Fan said theoretically, Singapore would benefit more in terms of inbound traveller numbers than China.

"In reality, however, much of China's economy remained subdued, and the actual number of China's outbound travellers would be much smaller than its theoretical maximum, and hence the net benefit would be more difficult to predict," he said.

Given its large population and growing middle class, Mr Subramania said the potential for outbound tourism is "substantial".

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 155 million people travelled out of China while foreign tourist arrivals reached about 32 million, according to statistics from the ASEAN-China Centre.

TRAVEL RECOVERY

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Even as the recovery in China's domestic and international travel gains pace, there is uncertainty on its trajectory.

The country of 1.4 billion people is confronting various economic challenges - such as record-high youth unemployment, a downturn in the property sector and a three-year stock rout which has wiped out trillions of dollars in value.

The International Monetary Fund forecasts China's growth to decline further to 3.5 per cent by 2028. China's economy grew by 5.2 per cent last year, according to official statistics.

China's economy has been much more subdued in the past two years than in the previous decade, said Asst Prof Fan from SMU. This, coupled with "jobs being scarcer", means many people are wary of taking more holidays than what they would traditionally, he added.

"We're in somewhat uncharted territory, and with discretionary travel generally much stronger when the economy is booming, we are likely going to see subdued activity in relation to the pre-pandemic period, but hopefully still significantly above the pandemic era."

Mr Sedlinger pointed out that 2023 was mostly about recovery, especially for outbound travel from China, and that the process is "still ongoing".

"After all, the Chinese outbound travel industry had been in hibernation for nearly three years, so it takes some effort and time to reconnect and restart operations after such a long shutdown."

Still, Mr Sedlinger is optimistic about China's domestic and global outlook for this year. He pointed out that some experiences and learning from the domestic market in China will very likely influence preferences for outbound travel.

Chinese consumers are getting "more and more individual" in their general lifestyle choices, Mr Sedlinger told CNA, adding that such changes will also spill over into international travel.

"The Chinese travel market is maturing, a 'one size fits all' approach seems increasingly outdated.

"Once the market is not so limited by lack of capacities anymore, I expect we will see more and more changes happening and understand better how Chinese travel is evolving."

Source: CNA/lk(ws)