



photo: courtesy of Sheraton

# NATURAL ATTRIBUTES

Guilin's appeal to poets, painters and romantic has spread to the travel set

BY PRUDENCE LUI



Guangxi, also known as "wide west" in Chinese, is an autonomous region with a sizable populace of native Zhuang people who make up China's largest minority. Geographically, the province is a distant second when compared to the developed eastern coastline of China, but the gorgeous city of Guilin continues to be ranked as one of the top spots for both domestic and international visitors.

Last year, out of the 22.46 million visits, 1.49 million foreign tourists visited Guilin, up 15.2%. The upward trend continued this year as the first eight months of 2011 saw 18.8 million visitors, thanks to its spectacular, water-scarred mountains, limestone caves and the River Li Jiang.

Guilin, with its dramatic setting, has served as a muse for poets and painters. Today, it is visitors and travel professionals who revel in the city's natural poetry.

There are now more than 150 star-graded hotels in Guilin, but only four of them are five-star hotels. One is the 408-room Sheraton Guilin Hotel, which debuted in 1988 and was fully renovated in 2008. Director

of Sales & Marketing Portia Zhou discussed the city's historic pull on visitors: "Guilin boasts renowned natural and cultural landscapes. But the government has also developed new scenic spots in the countryside which are close to the city, such as village tours that also include stops at the Gongcheng peach blossom fields and the Longsheng Hot Spring. All these sites are very attractive for any tour group in the business or leisure market."

At the moment, the hotel's main source markets are China, North America, Europe and Southeast Asia, she said, adding, "We would like to develop the meetings and incentives market and the business traveler markets. For the MICE market, we have the ability to utilise Guilin's unique natural venues to host events and provide an outside catering service."

The city's newest five-star, the 449-room Shangri-la Guilin, opened in March 2010. General Manager Sigi Bierbaumer assessed the competition and talked about his hotel's unique selling points: "Competition is healthy, though competitors prefer to compete

on price. We stand out from our rivals as most of the hotels in the city are local and we are the newest international five-star luxury hotel providing the largest guestrooms, from 42 square metres, along with our legendary Shangri-La hospitality and service. We also have the largest conference and meeting facilities with a professional team of meeting and events staff which enables us to target the MICE business that the competition cannot."

To attract more international and business travelers, he said, "There is a need to increase more direct regional and international air accessibility."

With five airports in the province all run by the Guangxi Airport Group, there are signs of increased connectivity, as Eva Air is entering the market later this year. Beginning in September, Kunming Air resumed the Kunming-Nanning-Hefei with two weekly flights whereas China Southern started up its Beihai-Changsha-Zhengzhou route again with three weekly flights.

Recently, Sichuan Airlines started a Changzhou-Nanning-Haikou with four weekly departures while visitors

**(Opposite page)** Illuminated pagodas beside the river. **(Above)** Guilin is one of Asia Pacific's most picturesque cities.



photo: courtesy of Sheraton

known and well spoken of in Nanning. To keep in trend, we are currently undergoing renovations for the multi-purpose floors (dining, meetings, and conventions) up on the 25th and the 27th floors."

For MICE, Mark Cochrane, the Managing Director of the Hong Kong-based Business Strategy Group, explained that Guangxi already has decent infrastructure in place for exhibitions. "Nanning has the Nanning International Convention & Exhibition Centre which features more than 48,000 square metres of gross indoor space. In 2001, the Guilin International Conference & Exhibition Centre opened – consisting of nearly 29,000 square metres across six halls. Compared to other provinces in China, Guangxi has an underdeveloped manufacturing base. There is some automobile manufacturing and assembly and supporting industries such as steel plants."

According to Cochrane, the

**(Left)** Traditional fisherman on the river. **(Below)**  
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from Chinese Taipei now have a direct connection to Nanning from Kaohsiung. Operated by Trans Asia Airway, this schedule service leaves every Saturday and it's the second route after Taipei.

Bierbaumer pointed out that infrastructure has improved as the roads to the airport were widened to facilitate faster trips. Still, much more needs to be done.

Though Guangxi's tourism pace trudges along behind other first-tier cities, the provincial government has mapped out plans in its 12th Five-Year Plan that expedites infrastructure development. According to Guilin Daily, the government plans to focus its attention on improving the transport infrastructure by developing highway links to bustling Guangzhou, expanding railway lines to Hunan province and renovating the Guilin Liangjiang International Airport.

In another encouraging sign of

the times, the *China Daily* reported that the province plans to increase its efforts to build a high-speed railway network over the next five years to provide another link with the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is the region's biggest trading partner and export market.

**SECOND CITY**

Traditionally, the provincial city of Nanning has been the political, economic and cultural centre, but lags behind touristy Guilin in terms of tourism resources and international appeal. Opened in 2009, the 334-room Nanning Marriott Hotel is the only global brand flying its flag here.

Director of Marketing Paula Li said: "We lead the industry, with only five local five-star hotels as our competitors. Our strongest competitor is Red Forest, which has been open for the last five years and is well



**INTERNATIONAL LINKS**

In giving Guangxi more of an international makeover there are some positive signs of change. Nanning recently hosted the China-ASEAN Expo and the China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit for the eighth consecutive year.

And in order to foster even more tourism development, China Guangxi Tourism Administration (GXTA) signed a MoU with PATA to strengthen cooperation in the sharing of research, intelligence, marketing activities and training, as well as supporting the UNWTO/PATA Forum on Tourism Trends and Outlook in Guilin.

Chen Jianjun, Director-General of GXTA, said: "By signing this MoU with PATA, we are pleased to bring our exchange and cooperation to the next level. The two institutions will enhance our partnership in market development, destination promotion, events management, research and training, so as to foster tourism growth in the Asia Pacific region."

The province's new kid on the travel block is the coastal city Beihai. Last year, the city welcomed 9.38 million domestic visitors, up 15% year-on-year. The Beihai Tourism Bureau will soon position it as a leisure travel centre with versatile products such as resorts, island adventures, wellness, and fine dining. Developing the business travel and MICE sectors are also on the cards.

In the meantime, the newly built Beihai Cruise Terminal will tap some of the cruise traffic.

As a result of all these developments, the bureau says that by next year a half dozen five-star hotels will be up and running in the city

big opportunity for Guangxi, in terms of exhibitions, is to leverage its strengths: the agriculture and mining sectors.

This province that boasts a population of 46 million people shares a coastline and border with Vietnam. So the opportunity for trade and to develop more business-minded exhibitions is significant, but relatively untapped at this stage.

One reason for that is, Cochrane said, "The neighbouring province, Guangdong, is a manufacturing hub and features a well-developed exhibition industry. Guangdong's economy is the largest in China, something like US\$690 billion and it is one of the key manufacturing bases in China – serving both the export market and domestic economy. To a certain extent, these factors will likely hinder the growth of local exhibitions in Guangxi.

Cochrane voiced a common concern in the travel community about the lack of infrastructure and high-end hotels. "Given the world-famous natural attractions such as the Yuong River and the Li River, Guangxi has good potential for domestic meetings, incentives and conference segments, but the supporting infrastructure, air connectivity and four- and five-star hotels will need investment to compete with more mature offerings elsewhere in China," he said.

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