

What do Christmas celebrations mean for the Chinese travel sector?

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By Wei Wang, Media Relations & Corporate Affairs—APAC

Everybody knows about how important a festival the Lunar New Year is for all Chinese people. But what happens at Christmas and the western New Year's Eve period? And what do travel industry professionals need to know about it?

The good news for Christmas aficionados is that even though the country does not celebrate Christmas officially, you will hear carols in the streets and shops throughout the month!

Whilst almost everyone in China has heard of Christmas, or Sheng Dan Jie (圣诞节) as we call it in Chinese, most people in China don't celebrate it in quite the same way as people do in the western countries.

Christmas is not an official holiday in mainland China and Taiwan. But Hong Kong and Macau celebrate it in a more European fashion, with each having two days off work.

In a family or home setting, few people will celebrate Christmas and only a limited number will have their house decorated. Nonetheless, more and more young people are celebrating the commercialized aspect of Christmas in the main cities by making the most of the joyous holiday spirit.

For example, many department stores, hotels, and theme parks (especially Disneyland in Shanghai and Hong Kong) are decorated with Christmas displays, trees, and lights. People enjoy the typical light displays, artificial snow, and Christmas music.

Hoteliers too really capitalize on the season to celebrate Christmas as one of the top events of the year. It's not uncommon to see a Santa Claus, who is known locally as Sheng Dan Lao Ren (圣诞老人), at a hotel.

Hotels here usually hold the Christmas tree lighting ceremony on the first week of December to promote their seasonal specials, festive hotel packages, including cocktail receptions, meals and entertainment. All the guests watch Santa Claus light the Christmas tree and kids write down their wishes on cards, then hang them on the Christmas tree. Chinese children don't prepare milk and cookies for Santa like in America, but an apple is a popular gift here because 'apple' sounds like 'Christmas Eve' in Mandarin.

Many of those in Hong Kong and Macau, and those in mainland China who work in western companies that close their offices for a few days, do take advantage to go on short breaks either within China or to nearby Asia-Pacific destinations such as Bangkok, Tokyo, Singapore, Seoul and Phuket.

And with more and more Chinese people having relatives in western countries, not least the United States, some are taking advantage to visit their relatives during this period to sample an authentic western Christmas.

Of course, overall December is the low travel season in most places in mainland China and western hoteliers and destinations shouldn't be expecting a Christmas boost in Chinese tourists just yet.

But Santa has a great way of working his magic on consumers, so who knows maybe in five or ten years the most desirable Christmas gift amongst Chinese consumers will be a New Year's holiday in Europe or America? Now could be a great time to attract the early trend-setters and lay the foundations for future success.

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