

Hong Kong welcomes the world

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Hong Kong's annual Dragon Boat Race is one of the city's most colourful attractions

It's proving a boom year for tourism in Hong Kong, with nearly 20 million visitors to the territory in the first six months of 2011, a 14.7 per cent increase in numbers for the same period last year, and the highest half-yearly figure ever recorded.

If the trend continues, Hong Kong will achieve its goal of 40 million visitors this year, according to Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) Chairman James Tien.

He says that arrivals from Mainland China over the same period increased by more than 20 per cent to more than 12 million as a result of the Individual Visit Scheme policy and the positive economic environment, which have largely boosted consumers' propensity for spending and outbound travel.

Mainland China has become Hong Kong's main source of visitors over the last decade, says Mr Tien, making up 65 per cent of arrivals. "At the present rate, that means we should get around 27 million tourists from the mainland by the end of the year."

"There are now 49 cities in the mainland from where tourists can come under the Individual Visit Scheme. In the old days they had to go as part of a tour," says Mr Tien. Under the Scheme, around 270 million mainland residents are now eligible to visit Hong Kong.

Following China as the largest source markets of visitors to Hong Kong, other markets receiving double digit growth in the first half of 2011 include South Korea, whose arrival numbers rose by 18.6 per cent to nearly half a million, and the Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. "We are also closely monitoring the development of the European and American financial markets, which might impact the global economy and tourism," says Mr Tien. The reality is that long-haul numbers are not growing as much as short-haul regions." Over the six months to June, overall long haul markets rose by 3 per cent to 2.31 million, with the Americas leading growth with a figure of 6 per cent. Significantly, arrivals from the emerging market, Russia, grew by a whopping 50 per cent during that period, reaching nearly 60,000.

"Tourism from Europe and the States has not grown in comparison to the mainland market in the last few years but we continue with our promotion efforts in the long-haul regions in order to maintain a balanced tourism portfolio. Currently we have about half a million or so visitors from the UK every year and we expect the same thing for this year. Our traditional audiences in the UK market are achievers who enjoy the

cultural and heritage side of Hong Kong. We now see a growing number of young travellers who come to Hong Kong to see the cosmopolitan and dynamic offers of Hong Kong."

Hong Kong's vibrancy is also what appeals to mainlanders, says Mr Tien. That and shopping. "They do not spend very much on the accommodation side, but spend a little bit more on eating out. Most of them do not go and eat at an expensive restaurant every meal, they would rather go to the café and enjoy the local delicacies, which are not expensive.



Photo courtesy HKTB

The biggest spending is on buying things, either for themselves or to bring back as gifts," says Mr Tien.

Hong Kong is also working with the Chinese mainland authorities on what Commerce Secretary Greg So calls "one journey, multiple destinations."

"We're building a new cruise terminal on the site of the old Kai Tak airport, designed by Foster+Partners of the UK, that will include berths to allow the largest-size cruise ships to visit Hong Kong." The new terminal will be connected to a high-speed rail system, allowing visitors to visit other parts of the Pearl River Delta. "It's a good example of regional co-operation. We are working with neighbouring cities to enhance the attractiveness of the whole region, as well as Taiwan and other ports along the coast," says Mr So. The first berth is due to be completed by 2013.

Other big tourism-related projects Hong Kong is working on now include the expansion of the Ocean Park aquarium and amusement park, and the addition of a new attraction at Hong Kong Disneyland.

For those looking to experience the more nocturnal side of Hong Kong, two areas to head for are SoHo and Lan Kwai Fong. The latter has undergone a transformation in recent years thanks to entertainment entrepreneurs such as Gilbert Yeung Kei-lung, and is home to a thriving restaurant and bar scene. Elsewhere in Central, serious shoppers can seek retail therapy at The Landmark, IFC and Prince's Building, as well as the historic Pedder Building, whose six storeys boast factory outlets, designer boutiques and specialty shops selling silk, embroidery and cashmere.

Hong Kong is also one of the world's top MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions & Exhibitions) destinations, attracting 1.4 million overnight MICE visitors to Hong Kong in 2010, an increase of 22.8 per cent over 2009.

More than 300 international trade events and conferences are held each year at venues such as the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre and AsiaWorld-Expo, two of the biggest and best convention centres in Asia.

Each year, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council organises around 30 major trade fairs, conventions and exhibitions. Three of them are among the world's biggest. Events such as the Hong Kong Electronics Fair, Hong Kong Fashion Week, or the Hong Kong Toys and Games Fair, attract hundreds of thousands of participants from all over the world.

The city is also home to the Entertainment Expo each March, an event that provides a platform for screenings, business deals, industry awards and showbiz. Aside from the Hong Kong International Film Festival and FILMART, the Expo also includes a film awards event and music fair.

In 2010, Hong Kong overtook London and New

York, and became the largest wine auction market in the world. The third edition of the Wine and Dine Festival takes place this October and has established Hong Kong as the principal place in Asia to enjoy wines from around the world paired with an array of cuisines created by local chefs. On offer city-wide during the Wine and Dine Month in November are various food and drink promotions in popular food districts such as Lan Kwai Fong and the seaside village of Stanley. The city's top hotels and restaurants will also be serving up tempting wine and dine offers.

Mr Tien would like to bring more high profile events to Hong Kong, to enhance the city's appeals and stimulate consumers' desire to visit the destination.

Taking the initiative, the HKTB now holds an annual international dragon boat race at the Victoria Harbour, and next year, Hong Kong will be the host for the World Club Crew Championship, an event that brings in teams from all over the world.

Tourism in Hong Kong has taken a great leap forward, and the HKTB has shown itself more than able to adjust to the new realities of a sector that is increasingly coming to rely on regional visitors. As Mr Tien points out, visitors from Europe and North America used to use Hong Kong as a stopover or starting point for their trips to China or the wider region, but direct flights to China's main cities have seen numbers fall. Time may be a factor, and China's cities may have more exotic appeal than Hong Kong, but the city remains a fascinating destination, ever changing, with many hidden sides that are worth taking the time to explore.

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Photo courtesy HKTB