

# Nurturing cultural exchange

By **SANDIE DAWE MBE**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, VISITBRITAIN



**SANDIE DAWE** joined VisitBritain in 1991, becoming Director of Strategy in 1996 and Chief Executive in May 2009. Before joining VisitBritain she worked in media, book publishing and tourism, including the BBC World Service, Book Marketing Council, the English Tourist Board and the London Tourist Board. Ms Dawe sits on the Government's Tourism Regulation Taskforce and is a member of the leadership council for Women 1st and the World Travel Market Council. She was awarded an MBE for her services to the tourist industry in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2008.

Scafell Pike and  
Wastwater in  
Wasdale Valley,  
Lake District,  
Cumbria, England

It is a great pleasure to write for FIRST to mark the Prime Minister's official visit to China. Britain and China are natural partners in the global race of the twenty-first century. The relationship between our two countries is more than economic. It is also cultural, social and personal. It is the exchange of goods, but also the exchange of ideas, art, artefacts and people.

Tourism is at the heart of that exchange. At heart, tourism and travel are about allowing people to see and experience, for themselves, the lives of others.

We are immensely lucky that travel is no longer confined to the wealthy few. The Grand Tour gave way to Cook's Tours – indeed Thomas Cook himself travelled to China as part of his famous world tour in 1872.

If we are fortunate to live in an age of mass travel, then we have the genuine privilege of witnessing mass travel become a reality for the people of China.

The scale of China's transformation is a commonplace. Shanghai is forecast to have the third highest GDP of any city in the world by 2025, while Beijing will have the fifth. Shanghai and Beijing also make it on to a list of top five cities with average annual household incomes of over US\$20,000 by 2025. By

2030, China is forecast to have over 1.4 billion middle class consumers, compared to 365 million in the US and 414 million in Western Europe.

China's rise has the potential to remake the world. And Britain, rightly, wants to be a part of that change.

Tourism is part of Britain's offer to China, and another source of trade between our nations.

In our globalised world, our brand, the experiences we have to offer and the welcome we afford are part of our currency as we seek to attract an ever-larger population of students, investors, traders and tourists – travellers all.

Tourism is a key component of our soft power.

It is also a deliverer of hard cash.

Tourism is a major part of the UK economy, responsible for nine per cent of UK GDP, and almost ten per cent of UK employment. During the recession the tourism industry has been responsible for one third of all net new jobs created in the UK.

And over the next ten years, it is forecast to grow at 3.8 per cent a year, faster than manufacturing, construction and wholesale/retail trade.

China will be a major contributor to that growth. It will be an increasingly important export market – for tourism.



Photo: VisitBritain/ Joe Cornish

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VisitBritain's GREAT campaign in action in Beijing



The Chinese tourism market is growing at nineteen per cent a year. In the last twelve months China has become the largest tourism source market in the world, worth US\$102 billion.

Our challenge is to ensure that we share fully in that growth. In 2012 we welcomed only 179,000 Chinese visitors. Yes, this was a 21 per cent increase on the previous year, and looking towards the end of this decade, we forecast that the Chinese market will grow over 150 per cent in value. But despite that, it will still be worth less as a source of tourism exports for the UK than many of our European competitors, Australia and Canada – so we have some catching up to do.

At present Britain has a four per cent share of visits from China to Western Europe. This compares with nine per cent of visits from other countries in the region, such as Japan. Increasing our share to six per cent would be worth a billion to the UK economy by the end of this decade.

We face stiff competition for Chinese visitors.

International travel by Chinese visitors is still focussed on the Asia-Pacific region. The USA is the only English-speaking country that has consistently stayed in the top ten list of outbound destinations from China. In addition to the USA, more visitors from China go to Australia and Canada than Britain.

We are outspent by competitors. In 2013/14 Tourism Australia is spending £20.5 million in China. That's about £3 million less than VisitBritain's entire global budget.

We have fewer direct air routes from China (excluding Hong Kong), and a smaller number of these

air services are operated by Chinese airlines.

Our visa process has improved considerably in recent years and is at least as good as its competitors. The challenge is to ensure that the improvements are continuous, well communicated, and understood by potential travellers, and by the travel trade in China.

We do, however, have some strong factors working in our favour.

VisitBritain is a partner in the GREAT Britain campaign, which is led by the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and the Department for Business. This campaign is a real advantage because of its cross-cutting nature. It is a campaign which encourages people to visit, study, invest in or trade with Britain. It promotes all that Britain has to offer, not an individual component of that offering. Thanks to increased investment through GREAT we have been able to make more impact in China, and sign up more partners to the promotion and sale of travel to Britain.

In turn, it gives VisitBritain a better basis to co-opt FCO, UKTI and British Council staff and resources in support of our aims. Working with those bodies, we are broadening the scope of our activity out to so-called Tier 2 cities – Chengdu, Chongqing, and Shenzhen for example.

Our greatest ally in all these efforts, however, is Britain herself. The events of 2012 were the ideal showcase for all that this great country has to offer.

- The Jubilee river pageant.
- A torch relay which ran, quite literally, from Land's End to John O'Groats.
- Sailing off our Jurassic coast.
- Cycling through the Surrey Hills.
- Football being played in the UK's great regional cities.
- London full of smiling people – visitors, Gamesmaker volunteers and Londoners.
- Her Majesty the Queen, and James Bond parachuting into the Olympic Stadium.

None of these things were traditional 'sightseeing'. They are all experiences; people feeling that they were part of history, part of our way of life, and in the case of Her Majesty the Queen, and Commander Bond, part of the joke.

In short, there were the sorts of experiences and cultural exchange which lies at the heart of tourism, and at the heart of the role tourism plays in the relationship between the UK and China.

These are still very early days. There is so much more to come. VisitBritain, and our colleagues across the UK government, and in China have a role to play in nurturing this exchange. We look forward to welcoming increasing numbers of Chinese visitors to Britain, where they will be assured of a warm welcome.