

Rush is on to welcome Mandarin speakers

B.C. has seen substantial growth in the number of tourists from China

By Kevin Griffin, Vancouver Sun May 24, 2013



Robin Kort, owner of Swallow Tail Tours, is offering wine tours in Mandarin for tourists from China beginning this month. The company specializes in food tours and unique culinary experiences.

Photograph by: Jason Payne , VANCOUVER SUN

Mandarin-speaking tourists looking for a unique western experience in B.C. will be able to take gourmet wine tasting tours of the Fraser Valley and the Okanagan in their own language starting this month.

Robin Kort, owner of Swallow Tail Tours, has organized the tours in direct response to the meteoric rise in the number of Mandarin-speaking tourists to B.C.

According to Tourism B.C., the number of overnight tourists coming from China to B.C. during the past four years has grown from 99,686 in 2009 to 161,047 last year. The figures for Chinese visitors to Canada has increased from 166,200 to 288,279 during the same period.

The U.S. remains the biggest source of overnight visitors. A total of 2.8 million Americans spent a night in B.C. followed by 193,673 from the United Kingdom and 167,121 from Australia.

One of the main reasons for the growth is the signing in 2010 of the Approved Destination Status between Canada and China. That agreement allows Canada to be officially promoted and marketed as a tourist destination in China.

Canada remains a popular international destination for tourists from China. According to a survey by the Asia Pacific Foundation in 2010, Canada ranked third behind Australia and Singapore as a favoured destination for Chinese tourists.

One of the big differences about the new tourists from China is that they speak Mandarin, China's main dialect. Traditionally, visitors to B.C. from China have spoken Cantonese, the dialect of the area around Hong Kong called Guangzhou that has provided the bulk of immigrants to Canada, the U.S. and Australia.

Kenny Zhang, senior research analyst at the Asia Pacific Foundation, said many tourist-related businesses in Canada may not be 100 per cent ready for the new wave of visitors. Gestures as simple as having menus and signs in Chinese or in easily understood pictograms are important to making tourists feel comfortable during their visit.

It comes down to providing what Zhang called China-specific services. Attention to detail is important. That includes knowing that tourists from China don't start their day with coffee. In hotels in China, teapots are provided so guests can make their own tea.

"Those are the things that industry operators need to pay attention to if they're really serious about Chinese tourists," he said. "It is the total mindset. We need to realize that this is a growing market. We need to do something that is friendly to our growing visitors. It's not necessary to treat visitors differently than others. Just to be market friendly."

One thing that tends to set tourists from China apart is their interest in shopping for luxury goods, Zhang said. On an organized tour to Canada, Chinese tourists often have a day set aside for shopping.

One reason is a cultural expectation that gifts will be brought back for relatives. Another incentive is price: because of high taxes on luxury goods in China, the same items are cheaper in Canada.

"There is a huge price difference between inside and outside China," he said. "There is a strong economic incentive for tourists to buy luxury goods."

Another local travel company that has seen a growth in tourists from China is Five Star Travel, which organizes charter bus tours.

Manager Tony Yin said that four years ago, almost 90 per cent of tourists from China spoke Cantonese. Now the split is closer to 50/50 as all the growth is in Mandarin-speaking Chinese tourists.

He said that, until recently, Canada lagged behind Australia and the U.S. when it came to targeting tourists from China.

"Canada, for them, is new — it just opened for tourists," he said.

One place where Canadians could do a better job, he said, is to hire more Mandarin-speaking immigration officials at the airport. Too often, Yin said, there aren't enough staff to process the direct flights from China that land in YVR during peak season. His tour guides can be held up for hours as the Canada Border Services Agency processes as many as 500 tourists arriving in a few hours from China.

The introductory, basic Mandarin-language tour from Swallow Tail Tours is \$99. Designed for between six and 15 people, the tour visits three wineries in the Fraser Valley and provides a gourmet lunch. In each winery, the vintner's talk to the group will be translated into Mandarin.

Education is a big part of the tour. At the tastings, Chinese tourists will be told about the culture of wine, including how to taste, how to swirl the wine around in the glass and how to assess the wine's quality.

Kort said tourists from China want a western experience but with a twist. The difference Chinese tourists are looking for is embedded in the introductory tour's title which sounds a bit awkward in English: Wine Education & Business Intelligence Tour.

"A lot of Asian tourists we have love an educational component," said Kort, a chef and sommelier. "Chinese clients want to do something useful. They don't just want to just relax like a North American on a tour — they definitely want to do that,

too, but they want to get something out of it as well.”

Swallow Tail is a five-year-old company that specializes in food tours and unique culinary experiences that includes guerrilla dining in secret locations with star chefs and unique wines and drinks.

In her marketing to the Mandarin-speaking community, Kort is partnering with Export Ventures Group, a Vancouver-based wine export company that represents Canadian producers in Asia, said Alice Chen, Export Ventures’s chief executive officer.

“We interact with Chinese people who want to get into export, Chinese tourists or Chinese people who want to understand the wine industry,” Chen said.

In addition to the one-day tours, Swallow Tail will also be offering two others, including a three-day deluxe tour to wineries in the Fraser Valley and the Okanagan that starts at \$4,999 for up to four people. It’s designed as a Chinese investor tour, she said.

“It’s an ultra VIP, fine-dining experience,” Chen said. “Chef Robin will go along and prepare meals with wine pairings.”

Swallow Tail’s move into offering Mandarin-speaking wine tours is a sign of the way the tourism industry is changing gears to accommodate the continued growth of tourists from China.

kevingriffin@vancouver.sun.com

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun