

SPOTLIGHT

Push for 'soft power' connectivity

Promoting seamless travel between Greater Bay Area cities and identifying their unique strengths will bring benefits for all

By YANG HAN in Macao
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Soft power" connection is crucial to the tourism industry as cooperation among cities in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area steps up to the next level.

Bao Jigang, an expert from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), said measures like juxtaposed border controls, speeding up visa approvals and improving flight punctuality will all be beneficial for soft-power connectivity.

"We need to think from a national strategic level, while promoting coordinated and synergized cooperation within the region," said Bao, director of the Monitoring Center for UNWTO Sustainable Tourism Observatories, explaining that past cooperation has unleashed great market potential for the bay area, making it China's gateway for inbound and outbound tourism.

He was speaking in Macao on Oct 17 at a China Daily Asia Leadership Roundtable event themed Regional Collaboration — China Perspective: The Greater Bay Area — Visionary Collaboration in the Making. It was held on the sidelines of the Global Tourism Economy Forum.

First detailed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in March, the Greater Bay Area is formed by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Macao Special Administrative Region and nine cities in South China's Guangdong province — Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Dongguan, Huizhou, Zhongshan, Foshan, Zhaoqing and Jiangmen. It aims to develop a city cluster around southern China's Pearl River Delta.

"The cooperation of the Greater Bay Area is a very important milestone to promote the regional tourism industry," said Bao.

Wen Zongduo, deputy editor-in-chief of China Daily Asia Pacific, said this is the area in southern China where three waterways — the Pearl River, Xiangjiang River and Haojiang River — converge, "and they are creating a miracle".

Bao noted that the bay area had made good progress in terms of "hardware" development in aviation, road and maritime transportation.

He said the Greater Bay Area has one of the most advanced transportation networks in the world, and will be further developed with projects such as the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge and Shenzhen-Zhongshan Bridge.

Bao added that the cities should be prepared for benign competition



Posing for a group photo at the China Daily Roundtable Forum on The Greater Bay Area — Visionary Collaboration in the Making — held in conjunction with the Global Tourism Economy Forum in Macao on Oct 17 — are (from left) moderator and Deputy Editor-in-Chief of China Daily Asia Pacific Wen Zongduo; Director of Monitoring Center for UNWTO Sustainable Tourism Observatories Bao Jigang; Commissioner for Tourism at the Hong Kong Tourism Commission Cathy Chu; Deputy Director of Planning and Finance Department at China National Tourism Administration Jia Yucheng; Director-General of Tourism Administration of Guangdong Province Zeng Yingru; Director of Macao Government Tourism Office Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes; Associate Dean and Chair Professor of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at Hong Kong Polytechnic University Song Haiyan; and President of Macao Development Strategy Research Centre Sio Chi-wai. PHOTOS BY PARKER ZHENG / CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



The China Daily Asia Leadership Roundtable was held on the sidelines of the Global Tourism Economy Forum.

and so develop the area as a whole. "At present, the Greater Bay Area has made the region more diverse, and this diversity will be more attractive to travelers around the world."

Jia Yucheng, deputy director of the planning and finance department of the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), said the Greater Bay Area, as the most developed region in terms of the China economy, plays an important role in the nation's economic growth.

"Since China's opening up and the

return of Hong Kong and Macao to China, there is an increasing tendency of integration in this region with better cooperation in tourism," Jia said.

He suggested the area can gain from the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a connection point along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. He said the CNTA will further facilitate the tourism industry within the region, such as introducing a 144-hour easy visa policy.

Proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative aims

to revive the ancient Silk Road routes. "In the new age of tourism, what tourists want from travel is not just eating and shopping but also a local experience," said Chu, adding that the Greater Bay Area can take advantage of its plentiful cultural and green resources.

Chu also hopes the 11 cities can build a better information exchange platform, identifying what kind of tourism products the market wants most.

Besides cooperation among the governments within the Greater Bay Area, more support from the central government is also needed to build the area into a non-barrier tourism zone and world-class destination, according to Zeng Yingru, director-general of the Tourism Administration of Guangdong Province.

Zeng said her organization is already conducting research with institutions and city governments about what the transportation systems can bring to the area's tourism market and how it can be a tourism cooperation zone of high quality.

Comparing it with the world's other bay area economic zones, such as in San Francisco, New York and Tokyo, Sio Chi-wai, president of the Macao Development Strategy Research Centre, said the Greater Bay Area has distinct advantages under the policy of one country, two systems.

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Speakers and delegates at the Global Tourism Economy Forum, held in Macao on Oct 16 and 17.

Poised for tourism greatness

Forum hears how Belt and Road Initiative can turn bay area into powerhouse travel destination

By PEARL LIU in Macao
For China Daily Asia Weekly

Atlittle teamwork could go a long way toward turning the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area into a regional tourism powerhouse.

"Regional collaboration means much more than creating connectivity and inter-connecting systems, it also means changing mindsets, setting clear mutual expectations," said Pansy Ho Chiu-king, speaking during the Global Tourism Economy Forum (GTEF) that was held in Macao on Oct 16 and 17.

Ho is the vice-chair and secretary-general of the GTEF. She is also group executive chairperson and managing director of Shun Tak Holdings.

"With political will, psychological consensus and mutual trust, regional collaboration can create a sustainable ecosystem likened to a spider web," Ho said.

The issue of regional collaboration is particularly significant given China's much-discussed Belt and Road Initiative.

Proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, it refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which aims to boost trade and connections in Asia, Europe and Africa.

"Collaboration is at its best when it is created out of synergies, of existing forces rather than brand new schemes," said Ho.

The annual GTEF brings together hundreds of government officials, private sector executives and industry stakeholders. The focus of this year's forum was regional collaboration and how individual locations can benefit from group efforts.

Macao was an appropriate location for the event. Best known as a gaming destination, this special administrative region (SAR) of China is on the 21st

Century Maritime Silk Road. Macao seeks to leverage its unique geography, language advantages and rich expertise in gaming and tourism to turn itself into a top-tier destination.

Macao's appeal

"It is very inspiring to see how Macao has been turning itself into a world leader in tourism," said Taleb Rifai, secretary-general of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and GTEF honorary chairman.

"This year's forum is a reminder to us that across every country, every destination and every community, economic growth must go hand-in-hand with sustainable development, people's well-being and a better understanding among nations and people of all backgrounds."

Asia and the Pacific is the second most visited region in the world, after Europe, and has seen the fastest growth in recent years, according to the newly released *Asia Tourism Trends* report by the UNWTO and the Global Tourism Economy Research Centre.

The region recorded a 9 percent increase in arrivals in 2016 to reach 308 million international tourists, far above the global average of 4 percent growth and the region's own growth of 5 percent in 2015.

According to the report, 80 percent of travel in Asia and the Pacific is intraregional, with outbound demand led by China.

"Every time I come to Macao, China, I see the power of Asia and China. The country is the future," Rifai said.

The prospects for the tourism economy along the Belt and Road could usher in a golden age for the industry but will require regional collaboration.

"The national policy, the Belt and Road Initiative, makes active efforts

on upholding regional collaboration, seeking synergy and fueling economic growth," said Edmund Ho Hau-wah, vice-chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and GTEF chairman.

A key byproduct of the Belt and Road Initiative is expected to be an increase in tourism.

"To facilitate the connectivity between the countries on the Belt and Road, tourism should be developed first," said Li Shihong, vice-chairman of the China National Tourism Administration.

"Tourism can spur cultural exchanges and communication. As people from different countries travel to another place, they can understand local culture and at the same time bring in their own culture," Li said.

"The essence of world tourism can be found on the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative as it encompasses about 500 world culture and natural heritage sites."

Fan Youshan, vice-chairman of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, echoed the idea that the great potential of the tourism economy will be realized in the region.

Fan expects Macao to play a critical role in this sector. "Along with closer cooperation between the 66 countries participating in the initiative, we will see the new golden era of the tourism economy, and with the diversified culture and world-level hospitalities fostered in Macao, the city will leverage the fueled up tourism industry in the region and become more vigorous."

"Clear policy guidance comes at the heart of enhancing the soft power connectivity," said Bao Jigang, director of the Monitoring Center for UNWTO Sustainable Tourism Observatories.

Greater Bay Area governments should think about measures such as co-located customs, the streamlining of visa processing and relaxing restrictions on self-driving trips, Bao said.

"When I visit the Tokyo and New York bay areas, there is no such problem as a visa issue," he said.

a particular hotel. We want them to transform Macao into a world center for Macao."

Maria Helena de Senna Fernandes, director of the Macao Government Tourism Office, agreed and highlighted the coastal elements as a new feature in the city's tourism blueprint.

"The central government gave us the water management rights by the end of 2015, which we did not have before that. It presents a prime opportunity," she said.

"The development of coastal resorts and marine tourism will be the new highlight of Macao's tourism."

And if Macao is successful, given its pivotal position in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, others could also benefit.

"We will pour unreserved efforts to transform Macao into a world center of tourism and leisure as well as a commercial and trade cooperation service platform between China and Portuguese-speaking countries," said Alexis Tam, Macao's secretary for social affairs and culture, and GTEF executive chairman.

With the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge set to open soon and high-speed rail connecting the neighboring cities, the hardware is in place to build the Greater Bay Area into an international recreation destination. However, the zone still lags in the soft skills required for barrier-free, high-quality tourism.

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