

Homestays boost rural tourism

Online rental platforms help smaller cities and villages offer a unique experience to travelers

By FAN FEIFEI

fanfeifei@chinadaily.com.cn

Beijing's Wang Jiahui, a software engineer, recently had what she described as "the most unforgettable accommodation experience", courtesy of Airbnb, a key player in China's home-sharing market.

More than 100 million experience-craving tourists like Wang will share 6 million-plus homes across China by 2020, spawning a market whose annual revenues are expected to reach 50 billion yuan (\$7.2 billion), according to a report from the State Information Center (SIC) in Beijing.

Using the United States-based online short-term home rental platform, Wang booked a one-week vacation at a cottage with a courtyard in Tonglu county, East China's Zhejiang province.

"There were lovely bamboo trees all around amid old intertwining vines in a serene environment. The courtyard is close to the Tonglu Daqi Mountain national forest park, a 10-minute drive from the county center," said Wang, recalling how greatly her husband and son appreciated the quality time they all spent together.

The host-served two-bed house, she said, is complete with smart devices and intelligent systems — laser projector, air purifier, water purifier, high-end stove, tableware, refrigerator and steam oven.

"The host also prepared beverages and instant noodles for us. I was thrilled by my decision to try out the home-share concept and felt very comfortable staying there. I'll recommend homestay holidays to my friends now."

In all, the week-long holiday cost Wang's family only 533 yuan. In Wang's view, that is a small price to pay, considering that Tonglu offers an irresistible mix of natural scenery and historic sites, which explains why more and more tourists have been visiting it in recent years. Karst caves, mineral springs, waterfalls, rivers, lakes, mountains and rocks — these are all here.

In Tonglu, the concept of the sharing economy finds expression mostly in home-share arrangements. Homeowners here offer spare rooms to tourists through online platforms such as Airbnb, Xiaozhu and Tujia.

Hospitality industry experts said home-sharing services are now penetrating third- and fourth-tier cities, and rural areas, such as Tonglu across China. That marks glad tidings for the development of rural tourism, which is now seen as the key to rural economic growth and poverty alleviation.

Xiaozhu data showed homestay bookings related to third- and fourth-tier cities and rural areas increased the most in the first half of this year.

Home-sharing in rural areas has huge growth potential as more and more Chinese tourists are traveling to villages for unique rural experiences, said Zhang Xinhong, director of the Sharing Economy Research Center, which is part of the SIC.



Overseas destinations that saw spikes in home-share bookings by Chinese mainland travelers

%: Y-o-y growth in the first half of 2018

1	Cambodia	3,400%
2	Indonesia	2,500%
3	Taiwan	1,200%
4	Thailand	800%
5	South Korea	800%

Source: Tujia, a Chinese website that offers bookings for shared accommodation

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Breakdown of Chinese users who booked different types of shared accommodation in the first half of this year

