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UK's initiative targets tourists from China

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The British government has announced an 8-million-pound ($12.5 million) marketing campaign to attract more Chinese tourists.

Currently, around 150,000 Chinese tourists visit the UK every year, but the government would like to increase that number to 500,000 by 2015.

"Nobody should underestimate the opportunity China and its cities represent," said Britain's Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who announced the initiative on Tuesday.

"By 2030, China should have around 1.4 billion middle class consumers — creating a potential market four times bigger than America," he added after lamenting that the UK is falling behind France and Germany in attracting Chinese visitors.

According to Hunt, France attracts 25 to 50 percent more Chinese tourists each year than the UK.

If the campaign achieves its desired effect, the additional Chinese tourists will generate an estimated 500 million pounds extra in tourism spending a year and create 14,000 new jobs.

The funding will be used to enhance the British government's GREAT campaign in China, a four-year global project to promote Britain's image.

It is a joint project involving several groups including the government's tourism promotion agency VisitBritain and its business promotion agency UK Trade & Investment.

The British government will also explore ways to improve its visa processing system for Chinese tourists and work with airlines to increase the number of flights from the UK to Chinese cities, Hunt said.

The number of tourists booking trips to the UK has increased significantly this year, despite the UK tour slumping unexpectedly in China during the Olympics, according to two Chinese travel agencies, U-tour Travel and China Comfort Travel.

The number of planned tour groups in September and October in U-tour Travel has increased to eight, compared to three or four last year.

Both agencies said they have not heard much about the British government's new marketing campaign. "As the number of Chinese traveling abroad increases, it's normal for other countries to take measures to attract Chinese tourists. But they haven't released any specific preferential policies for Chinese," said Cui Jia, a marketing manager from China Comfort Travel.

Sandie Dawe, chief executive of VisitBritain, said her team will use the additional funding to increase "travel trade work" in China, which includes asking Chinese travel agents to introduce Britain as an option to their customers. "Whilst there might continue to be some image work, it's actually much more focused on business to business work," she said.

She stressed that the additional budget for China does not mean taking funding away from other markets. France, Germany and the US remain the core markets of Britain's tourism industry, Dawe said. "It's just that we know we are behind our competitors in Europe in relation to China, and we want to change that."

But Mary Rance, chief executive of UKinbound, a tourism industry trade association representing 250 businesses, said the government's ambition of tripling the number of Chinese visitors to the UK will be hard to achieve unless "grassroots issues about visa and air passenger duty" are addressed.

The complexity and speed of processing a UK tourist visa is deterring Chinese who are able to

access most of mainland Europe far more easily through a single Schengen visa.

"Hunt wasn't clear how he's going to attract three times the number of Chinese tourists. It's an ambition, and not a target — which in business if you don't deliver you have to account for it. If it's an ambition, it's not very much at all," Rance said.

Meanwhile, many tour operators have struggled to increase sales during the Olympics. Omega Travel Group, Britain's most popular travel agency among Chinese customers, experienced a drop in the number of tour bookings during the Olympics.

"During the Olympics, our tour bookings have dropped, especially for tours outside London," said a representative for Omega.

From January to August, Omega experienced a roughly 40 percent drop in the number of Chinese customers compared to 2011.

"A large portion of our customers are international students and their parents. Therefore we tend to be quite busy during summer holidays, but they may have stayed away this year believing the UK will be crowded during the Olympics," she said.

Li Shuang contributed to this story.

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