U.S. hotels are making Chinese feelathome

NEW YORK — NEW YORK Major hotel brands are bending over backward to cater to the needs of the world's most sought-after traveler: the Chinese tourist.

Chinese visitors to U.S.

Those numbers have increased in recent years.

2004: 203,000.
2005: 270,000.
2006: 320,000.
2007: 397,000.
2008: 493,000.
2009: 525,000.
2010: 802,000.
2011: 1.09 million.

Source: Associated Press

Now arriving on American shores in unprecedented numbers thanks to a streamlined visa process and a rising Chinese middle class, Chinese tourists are being treated to the comforts of home when they check in at the front desk. That means their disposal.

Chinese "welcome programs" at such reputable chains as Marriott and Hilton even address delicate cultural differences: No Chinese tour group should be placed on a floor containing the number four, which sounds like the word for death in Mandarin.

"They're very relieved, like finally somebody's doing these things that make sense," said Robert Armstrong, a sales manager who handles all bookings for incoming Chinese travelers at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York. "Finally somebody's catering to them."

More than a million Chinese visited the U.S. in 2011, contributing more than $5.7 billion to the U.S. economy. That's up 36 percent from 2010, according to the Department of Commerce. By 2016, that figure is expected to reach 2.6 million Chinese.

In a striking departure from the traditional Chinese business traveler, a growing number are simply coming to America for

Advertisement

A bright idea in online advertising.

Print Powered By FormatDynamics

Chinese visitor spends more than $6,000 per trip.

And so hotels are openly competing to win the hearts of the Chinese, who generally travel in large groups and stick to a tight itinerary, often packing multiple cities into a two-week American tour. What they're looking for is a hotel that makes them feel at ease with their surroundings, said Roy Graff, a travel consultant who educates hotels in proper Chinese hospitality.

That may take the form of slippers and a tea kettle in the hotel room or a Mandarin-speaking employee at the front desk -- or all of the above.

"They drink tea. Eastern style, everything cold," explained Charlie Shao, president of Galaxy Tours, a New York City-based Chinese tour agency, who used to frequently request special amenities for his clients. "They don't walk inside the room with bare feet."

It's rare that Shao has to ask hotels for anything anymore. Marriott International, for example, now offers not one but several Chinese breakfasts, depending upon which region of China the traveler hails from: there are salted duck eggs and pickled vegetables for eastern Chinese, for example, and dim sum and sliced pig's liver for the southerners.

Major chains are also training employees to avoid cultural missteps that would offend a Chinese visitor. Superstition is a big one: Red is considered a lucky color, along with the number eight, which signifies wealth. The color white, meanwhile, is frowned upon.

Failing to respect the pecking order in a Chinese group is another common blunder by hotels that have limited knowledge of Chinese culture.

"We try to make sure nobody's on a higher floor than their boss," Armstrong said. "Even if the boss is on a beautiful suite on the eighth floor, if the assistant is in a standard room on the 38th floor, it doesn't translate."

As hotels fine-tune Chinese outreach stateside, the race is on to build loyalty within China's borders.

Last year, Starwood Hotels -- which has a Chinese "specialist" at each American hotel -- relocated its senior leadership team to China for a month. The Ritz-Carlton rotates general managers and other staff into its Chinese hotels for three-year stints at a time. And both chains are banking on the success of their customer-rewards programs, which have been a big hit in China.

"It's important for our leaders to understand the culture outside of America and what makes a hotel appealing to them," Armstrong said. "In China, business is about relationships and making friends, not just making a transaction."

For more information or to send comments to the editor, please visit: http://www.usatoday.com/entertainment/travel/2012-06-24-24768524mc-x.htm
level than just the statistics," said Clayton Ruebensaal, vice president of marketing for the Ritz. "Everybody's going after this market because of the sheer volume of luxury customers. At the same time, it's a very crowded landscape."

In response to the surge in Chinese visitors, the State Department decided earlier this year to spend $22 million on new facilities in several Chinese cities and add about 50 officers to process visa applications. And in February, the U.S. government announced that Chinese visitors who had obtained an American visa within the past four years did not have to reapply in person but could apply via courier instead.

As a result, visa-interview wait times in China are just under a week, compared with last year's average of more than a month.

But some experts say the U.S. still lags far behind other countries, especially in Europe, when it comes to attracting Chinese tourists. Despite President Barack Obama's recent push to promote tourism, America is woefully ill-prepared to welcome China at an industrywide level, especially at restaurants and major attractions, said Rich Harrill, director of the Sloan Foundation Travel & Tourism Industry Center at the University of South Carolina.

"We're not as ready as we should be," Harrill said. "We don't have the language skills. We have an opportunity to be on the ground floor of something that could be very, very

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.