

First-time Chinese travelers reshape travel retail landscape



With 40% of Chinese international travelers embarking on their maiden overseas trips, the global travel retail sector faces unprecedented opportunities in 2025

The resurgence of Chinese outbound travel is transforming the global travel retail landscape, with a remarkable 40% of travelers venturing internationally for the first time. This new wave of travelers, primarily young urban professionals from China's Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities, presents distinct shopping behaviors and preferences that are reshaping retail strategies across major travel hubs.

Digital natives drive new retail demands

These first-time travelers represent a digitally connected demographic with significant purchasing potential. Most are between 18-29 years old, with monthly household incomes ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 RMB (US\$1,366 to US\$2,732). Their shopping decisions are heavily influenced by social media platforms, with 77.8% researching shopping activities before departure.

Shopping remains central to the Chinese travel experience, with 23% prioritizing shopping as a key purpose of their journey. The motivation extends beyond personal consumption – over 25% of Chinese travelers identify buying gifts for family and friends as their primary reason for luxury purchases. Despite their spending power, these travelers maintain a strong value focus, with 46% citing affordability as a top consideration in their purchase decisions.

“The influx of first-time Chinese travelers in 2024 marks a pivotal moment for global travel retailers. These shoppers bring not only enthusiasm but also specific needs and expectations that require retailers to adapt quickly,” says Subramania Bhatt, founder of China Trading Desk.

Evolving destinations and demands

While Singapore leads with 16% of traveler preference, followed by Japan at 14% and Thailand at 12%, emerging destinations like the UAE and Australia, each capturing 8% of traveler interest, are attracting visitors through exclusive experiences and tailored retail offerings.

First-time travelers show a strong preference for familiar payment methods, with 43.6% using platforms like Alipay and WeChat Pay while shopping abroad. This digital dependence extends to pre-trip planning, with Ctrip/Qunar (20%), Xiaohongshu (18%) and Douyin (12%) serving as primary channels for travel preparation.

Language support and customer service emerge as critical factors, with 17% of travelers ranking these as their most valued services while shopping overseas. Travel and shopping packages follow at 14%, while after-sales service ranks third at 13%. Cultural events and pop-up experiences also play a significant role, driving engagement for 12% of travelers.

“By combining cultural sensitivity, digital engagement and value-driven promotions, travel retailers can build lasting relationships with this growing demographic, securing their place in the evolving landscape of global tourism. As 2025 starts, the focus on first-time travelers is not just an opportunity but a necessity for travel retailers looking to thrive in this rapidly changing market,” Bhatt explains.