

# Planners help come up with trips and tips

By OUYANG SHIJIA

Travel companies such as Zhinanmao.com are sprouting up to cater for a new breed of tourist.

Gone are traditional holidays to predictable destinations, swept away by a wave of adventure and curiosity.

Zhang Yaping is 46 years old and a teacher in Guangzhou. She also has no time for cookie-cutter holiday packages.

Instead, she is willing to pay 1,500 yuan (\$219) to get a tailor-made, 15-day travel itinerary to Europe from a senior freelance planner at Zhinanmao.com online.

"I love the new type of customized travel model," Zhang said. "It just takes a few minutes to tell the travel planner what you want."

"I got the full package, including electronic itinerary, booked accommodation and transport as well as urgent assistance during the trip ... it's really convenient," she added.

Zhinanmao.com was launched in Shanghai back in 2013 and focuses exclusively on custom-designed trips. The app also allows

designers to share their experiences with handy tips on where to go and what to see.

"It is a huge market," said Ren Jing, founder and chief executive officer of Zhinanmao.com. "So, it is not surprising that customized traveling is picking up quickly in China."

"With trips fueled by an open visa policy and emerging budget airlines, this is an industry that is changing fast, and presenting opportunities and challenges," she added.

Since Zhinanmao.com is privately-owned, Ren has yet to release detailed financial figures.

But the company did announce that its latest A round of financing raised tens of millions of yuan, taking investor funding to nearly 100 million yuan during the past four years.

Behind the app is a 15,000-strong army of freelance destination planners. They work on mapping out schedules and itineraries, and are paid a fee for their efforts.

Again, financial figure is sketchy.

Still, they provided destination plans for more than 80,000 clients. They were also involved in travel arrangements worth 1 billion yuan last year, the company reported.

"Back in 2013, I noticed that travelers seeking independent outbound trips were often troubled by planning the itinerary," Ren said. "Having traveled to more than 200 cities around the world, I realized there was a market out there."

Just five years ago, personalized trips and destination planning were considered a privilege of the wealthy. But that has changed dramatically as a new wave of tourists, especially among the older and more influential middle class, crave for something different.

"Outbound trips can even cost less than inbound ones," Ren said. "A trip to Guangxi or Yunnan province usually costs more than 5,000 yuan, while traveling to the Southeast Asia can cost only 3,000 yuan."

The majority of customers come from first- and second-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Remarkably, the majority are middle-aged clients working in IT and finance industries or Millennials born in the 1990s searching for a travel experience.

Even so, there are challenges ahead for this niche market. Dang Jianwei, a teacher at the International Business and Economics in Beijing, felt travel companies such as Zhinanmao.com needed to look at the prices they charge.

"It is still a little bit costly to design individual trips," he said. "This is due to the fact that it is easier for people to search for travel information online and everyone's budget varies."

"I just wonder whether there will be room for trip designers to develop their business," Dang added.

A report released in February by China's online travel giant Ctrip.com revealed that customized trips increased by 400 percent year-on-year during this year's Spring Festival.

More than 50 domestic, and overseas countries and regions were included in the report from destinations such as Thailand, Japan, Australia and the United States.

With business booming, more players are likely to enter the sector in the next six months as the industry grows rapidly in 2018.

"After all, it is painful for travelers to plan overseas trips," Ren said. "But it will take time to develop the market."



Tourism site and app is the darling of investors as it targets Millennials and their love of new experiences

# Mafengwo dominates online travel picture

Chinese tourists make selfies in a lavender field in Valensole, southern France, on June 18, 2017. AFP

By OUYANG SHIJIA in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

To make it big, you need big dreams. When it comes to vision, Chen Gang plans to turn his company Mafengwo into the "Alibaba of the tourism industry".

Rarely, do you get anything bigger here than the online behemoth, but then Chen is not just a dreamer.

The co-founder and chief executive officer of Mafengwo has decided to add a glitzy app platform to his major website to cash in on the booming travel industry of Millennials.

"The Chinese tourism market is so huge that it is estimated to hit 1 trillion yuan (\$146.2 billion) in the foreseeable future," Chen said. "Just like Alibaba (Group Holding Ltd), we are now offering an e-commerce platform for potential tourists."

Since it started commercial operations in 2010, the Beijing-based company's online website of travel guides, advice and booking options has proved to be a runaway success.

Today, Mafengwo has launched an app to go with its website business and now has more than 100 million users. They go through the latest travel information, glance at Q&As and reviews, as well as book hotels, travel destinations and local tours.

"Chinese tourists now have better jobs and know how to share information, especially those born in the 1980s and the 1990s (Millennials)," Chen said.

"Driven by life quality decisions, more people will choose independent travel instead of traditional package tours," he added.

This is where the app comes in. According to online data



An exhibit booth shows the billboard of Mafengwo at an international tourism fair in Beijing. WU CHANGQING / FOR CHINA DAILY

company Analysys Qianfan, Mafengwo's app had more than 3 million active monthly users in April, a jump of 18 percent compared to March.

With figures like that, Chen's company was able to generate 4 billion yuan in gross merchandising value last year.

The vast majority of it came from independent travel products, advertising and commission collected from hotels as well as local agencies. But he declined to give detailed financial figures for the privately-owned company.

"I expect gross merchandise value on our platform will grow by 200 percent this year compared to 2016," he said. "We have grown up in the new era of data and that means it will be a strategically key resource."

Investors have bought into Chen's dream. So far, they have poured over \$100 million into it, including tens of millions of

... more people will choose independent travel instead of traditional package tours."

Chen Gang, co-founder and chief executive officer of Mafengwo

1 trillion yuan estimated value of the Chinese tourism market in the foreseeable future

dollars in the latest C round of funding in 2015. A great deal of that investment will go into "artificial intelligence technologies" to help expand the app and website operations, as the company continues to upgrade its services for users and customers.

In a constantly changing business environment, the travel sector is going through a dramatic new stage.

Last year, Chinese tourists made more than 4 billion inbound trips and 122 million outbound journeys, according to a report released by China Tourism Academy and online giant Ctrip.com International Ltd.

The report also showed that 60 percent of outbound trips in 2016 were down to independent travelers and not groups.

Millennials have played a key role in the change as they love different and often off-

beat destinations. They also tend to share their experiences online.

For social travel platforms, such as Mafengwo, that has proved to be a golden business opportunity.

"Our platform will generate a huge amount of travel information coming from millions of tourists globally every day," Chen said. "This will include pictures, travel guides, Q&As and views."

"But using big data and AI technologies, we will help transform that into gripping travel information," he added.

The company already operates a data center to process information from registered users. Now, it will be shifted to produce personalized travel products and services.

Jiang Xinwei, senior analyst from internet consultancy Analysys in Beijing, singled out innovation as Mafengwo's crucial draw card.

"By having a large number of users, Mafengwo is able to produce big data analysis to cater for specific needs," she said. "This will transform travel products, but it will also be challenging for companies."

In order to tap into this trend, online travel titans, such as Expedia-like Ctrip and Tuniu Corp, are building online "communities" to boost more user-generated content online.

"Content generation and the purchase of travel products will help during the course of the platform's development," Chen said. "With the improved technologies and changing travel habits, companies need to provide more personalized products and better user experiences."

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# Wesafari moves into unknown cyberspace

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We have all watched the videos. Now, here comes the business plan.

Wesafari, a home-grown tourism short film-sharing platform, has attracted more than three million users since being launched last year.

"Short videos are a future trend," said Chen Chao, chief executive officer of Wesafari.

Chen could well be right. Already major brands such as Holidand, Vanke and Alitrip are keen to work with his company to develop user bases and increase sales channels.

So far, Wesafari has agreed to produce and roll out short videos for Holidand, one of the largest bakery chains in China, and Vanke, the country's biggest property developer.

Alitrip is another potential client. The tourism division of e-commerce giant Alibaba

Group Holding Ltd is looking to do a tie-up involving short travel videos of up to five minutes from 150 destinations.

Part of Wesafari's appeal is that it enables followers of the site to record their journeys and even insert background music. People can then post and share their videos on the platform, and interact and leave comments on the site.

"According to the data from Google, more than half the people who go on trips search for short videos of their destinations before traveling," said Chen, who is in his mid-30s.

"And more than 70 percent of them share short videos about their journey. That is why these sorts of videos are becoming a trend."

With those numbers, it is hardly surprising Wesafari now has 100,000 daily active users, and up to 500,000 monthly ones.

Already the website has completed angel-round fund-

ing of nearly 10 million yuan (\$1.47 million) from Zhengkun Group, a major Chinese conglomerate, and is now undergoing its Pre-A round investment.

Although the exact figures are closely guarded, Wesafari's revenue is mainly from advertising. But being a private company, it does not have to disclose detailed financial data.

"We plan to launch peripheral products," Chen said. "In addition, we may charge users for viewing some of the content on the platform, such as travel information and recommended routes."

That makes sense for the company as data released from the China Tourism Academy showed that outbound trips from the country last year totaled 122 million.

Growth was up 4.3 percent compared to 2015, while total overseas tourism revenue increased by 5.1 percent during the same

period to \$109.8 billion.

"China's outbound tourism has witnessed constant growth in recent years," said Jason Song, founder and chief executive officer of Pkfare, an innovative global travel B2B marketplace targeting air tickets, hotels and destination products.

"It is now the top tourist source country for outbound tourism," he added. "Versatile flights, convenient visa policies and advanced technology are making travel easier, and this is helping to fuel the growth in companies and websites specializing in the sector."

"Wesafari will fill in the blanks of tourism short video platforms," said Vikram Channa, vice-president of production at Discovery Networks Asia-Pacific.

"It will set up a global video database, creating an international social network. The product will be popular



Chinese tourists take pictures during their visit to the Amman Citadel, an ancient Roman landmark in Amman, Jordan, in 2016. MUHAMMAD HAMED / REUTERS

among travelers around the globe," Channa added.

While traditional ways of traveling are changing, the tourism industry is undergoing a transformation. Part of this includes content

for short videos. The combination of still pictures and travel tips no longer satisfy customer demand when it comes to global destinations.

Wesafari helps its users

share daily life at destinations as well as cultural features. It is one of the reasons why Lin Wei is such a big fan of the site.

"It is convenient for me to share my videos with others," Lin said. "It works very well."