

SPOTLIGHT

Rising Inbound Travel Puts Focus on Turning Stopovers into Stays in Ningbo

By Zhao Yu

Data from the Ningbo Airport Immigration shows that last year, 40,300 foreign nationals entered through the airport, a year-on-year increase of 53.94%. The number of foreign nationals entering visa-free exceeded 17,000, growing at nearly three times the national average.

Unilateral visa exemptions, the 240-hour visa-free transit policies, and tax refunds for shopping have fueled rapid growth in China's inbound tourism market. The challenge now for cities like Ningbo is turning this influx of visitors into lasting economic impact.

Visa-Free Policy Boosts Inbound Travel

"It was so convenient—I completed the arrival card in just a few minutes, and now I can enter China without a visa," said Michelle, an American traveler, after arriving at Ningbo Airport on March 17 from Budapest.

Michelle was among the growing number of visitors benefiting from China's 240-hour transit visa-free policy. Under the policy, citizens from 55 countries with valid travel documents and confirmed onward tickets to a third destination can enter China without a visa. They are allowed to stay for up to 10 days, during which they may travel, conduct business, or visit family and friends within designated areas around the country.

Data show that inbound travelers to Ningbo last year came from 141 countries and regions. Visitors from the top five source countries—including Japan, India, and the United States—accounted for nearly half of the total. More than 40% of foreign arrivals entered under visa-free policies.

Expanded international flight capacity has also supported the growth. Ningbo



Visa-free transit policies and expanded international flight capacity support the inbound travel growth. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

Airport has opened routes to Budapest, Jeju Island, and Tokyo, while Indonesia's Batik Air recently launched a direct service to Manado.

"Average passenger load factors on international routes are now above 70%," a representative from the Ningbo Airport Market Department said.

Tourism Lags Behind Transit Traffic

Despite rising inbound passenger numbers, Ningbo retains only a limited share of visitors as tourists.

Data on traveler purpose show that just 27.3% of foreign arrivals listed tourism on their arrival cards. By comparison, 34.3% came for business, 13.1% for family visits, and 16.2% for other purposes. The profile differs from cities such as Shanghai, where tourism dominates, and Hangzhou, which attracts a higher share of both leisure and business travelers.

"Stopovers accounted for a significant portion of the increase last year," said Chu Wei, deputy director of the border inspection department at Ningbo Airport Immigration.

Due to factors such as ticket pricing and flight schedules, many international travelers use Ningbo as a stopover en route to other destinations, including Budapest, Vietnam, Shanghai, and Zhangjiajie.

Industry observers say limited international visibility is a key factor. "Compared with nearby tourism hotspots, Ningbo has a relatively low profile overseas," said Chen Minxian, a senior cultural tourism expert. "Many foreign visitors are unfamiliar with its attractions, such as Tianyi Pavilion, the Old Bund, and Xiangshan's coastal scenery, as well as local foods like *tangyuan* and *niangao*." As a result, even short-stay visitors often lack the incentive to explore the city.

Service gaps also remain a constraint. While travel platforms list one- to three-day tours in Ningbo priced between 200 and 1,000 yuan, operators said they typically cater to pre-arranged group tours and are not equipped to serve individual foreign travelers. Services such as multilingual guides are generally unavailable, limiting options for transit passengers.

Turning Stopovers into Stays

With China's inbound tourism market expanding, Ningbo faces a key challenge: how to move beyond its role as a transit hub, converting brief stopovers into meaningful visits that drive spending and engagement.

"Inbound visitors travelling through Ningbo represent untapped consumption potential," said Chen. "Providing positive stopover experiences can boost word-of-mouth, raise the city's international profile, and create

long-term opportunities for local commerce, culture, and tourism, while supporting the broader open-economy strategy."

Meeting this goal means presenting Ningbo's distinctive charm in a way that cater to the preferences of foreign travelers while taking into account their time restraints.

Sun Mengyang, professor at Beijing Union University's Tourism College, said the city's travel agencies should develop more appealing inbound travel routes and services tailored to the varied profiles and preferences of transit visa-free tourists, maximizing the impact of policy incentives.

Chen suggested showcasing Ningbo's distinctive culture and cuisine by offering interactive experiences for visitors. These could include hands-on culinary activities, such as making *tangyuan*, *qingtuan*, *niangao*, and other rice-based treats, as well as opportunities to create personalized souvenirs—turning each visit into a lasting, tangible memory.

Ningbo Sees Surge in Electric Vehicle Exports in Jan - Feb

By Lu Xinyan

On March 18, at a dedicated container yard for electric vehicles operated by CITIC Gangtong International Logistics Co., Ltd., workers were busy loading vehicles into a shipping container for export under the direction of site manager Zhang Jiandong.

"This shipment includes more than 40 electric vehicles. After customs clearance, they will be shipped to Cambodia," Zhang said. Such activity has become routine at Ningbo port.

Data from Ningbo Customs show that the city's exports of electric vehicles surged in the first two months of the year. Export value reached 7.33 billion yuan, while shipment volume totaled 62,000 units, up 144.5% and 131.5% year-on-year, respectively.

Total automobile exports through Ningbo reached 9.43 billion yuan during the same period, with electric cars accounting for 77.7% of the total. The segment has become the main driver of growth in the city's auto exports.

Ningbo's electric cars are reaching more countries around the world, with exports to high-value markets surging. The United Arab Emirates, the European Union, and Brazil ranked as the top three destinations, with export values of 2.14 billion yuan, 1.89 billion yuan, and 1.51 billion yuan, respectively.

Among them, exports to the European Union surged 947% year-on-year, while shipments to Brazil rose 153.5% and those to the United Arab Emirates increased 91.1%.

Chen Xue, deputy general manager of Ningbo Sovel Supply Chain Management Co., Ltd., said the company handled customs declaration for more than 18,000 vehicles in the first two months of 2026.

Despite ongoing uncertainties in global markets, the company is expanding its presence in emerging markets and strengthening its automotive logistics services.

240-Hour Visa-Free Transit Policy Boosts Ningbo's International Connectivity

By Jin Lu

Ningbo saw a sharp rise in inbound international travel in 2025, driven by its policies of openness and streamlined visa procedures. Last year, the number of inbound passengers at Ningbo Airport Port reached 1.13 million, up 20.5% year on year. Its total passenger traffic ranked 20th among China's international airports, climbing two spots from the previous year and surpassing Changsha and Tianjin.

The number of foreign arrivals reached 40,285, a 53.94% increase year on year, representing visitors from 141

countries and regions. Japan, India, and the United States remained the top sources of inbound travelers. Business trips accounted for 34.3% of visits, tourism 27.3%, family visits 13.1%, and other purposes—including transit and crew members—16.2%.

The growth reflects China's ongoing visa facilitation measures. The country maintains mutual visa exemptions with 29 nations, unilateral exemptions for 48, and the 240-hour visa-free transit policy for citizens of 55 countries—nationals from the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Russia, Brazil, and major

Southeast Asian nations can enter China via designated ports in 24 provinces. Most of these cities now offer dedicated support to ensure a smooth transit experience.

Compared with the previous 72- or 144-hour options, the 240-hour visa allows longer stays and greater flexibility. Visitors can travel freely within designated regions, explore multiple cities, and experience their cultural and scenic highlights, enjoying a richer view of China.

The results are visible: in 2025, the number of visa-free arrivals at Ningbo exceeded 17,000, a 146.7% increase year on



International travelers in Ningbo. [Photo provided to Ningbo Times]

year—nearly three times the national average growth rate. The policy has become a key driver

of transit traffic, converting international visitors into economic opportunities for local businesses.

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