

Ningbo's Tourism Industry Welcomes First Foreign-Owned Travel Agency

Striving towards a modern coastal metropolis
建设现代化滨海大都市

NINGBO — In a milestone for Ningbo's local tourism sector in east China's Zhejiang Province, a Travel Agency Business License has been granted to Zhong Xi Energy Development (Ningbo) Co., Ltd., a business owned and operated by a Sri Lankan. Announced by the Ningbo Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism on December 26, this marks the city's first foreign-owned travel agency, underscoring Ningbo's growing global connectivity.

The establishment of this agency prompts questions about its impact on Ningbo's tourism landscape and its unique role alongside local Chinese players.



International travelers in China.



International travelers in Ningbo.



Abeysekara, founder of the agency.

2 Preparing for a festive debut

A visit to the travel agency's Jiangbei office reveals a distinctly Sri Lankan-inspired interior, designed to evoke an exotic sense of cultural exchange. The thoughtfully curated space sets the stage for the agency's mission: crafting unforgettable experiences for international tourists.

"We are still in the early stages," Abeysekara noted, gesturing toward his team of three multilingual guides. "They were all hired locally in Ningbo and are well-equipped to serve the diverse needs of our clients."

The agency's first major project is a group tour scheduled to arrive during the upcoming Spring Festival, one of China's most iconic holidays recently added to UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list. Abeysekara revealed that negotiations are under-

way with a 20-person tour group from Qatar, while a Sri Lankan group has also expressed interest. "We're busy designing tour packages for Ningbo and its surrounding areas. This is just the beginning," he remarked.

As the agency gears up for its inaugural tours, the far-reaching implications are evident: Ningbo is not only opening its doors to international tourists, but also establishing itself as a global hub for cultural and economic exchange. Looking ahead, the agency also aims to position Ningbo as a gateway for inbound tourism. Plans include forging partnerships in cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Kunming to offer travelers diverse and customized experiences across China.

3 Ripple effects to boost tourism industry

The launch of Ningbo's first foreign-owned travel agency marks a significant milestone, poised to revitalize the tourism market not only for the city but also for Zhejiang Province, which currently hosts only four such agencies.

"This development holds great symbolic importance," commented a local tourism expert. "It highlights Ningbo's growing appeal as a destination and reflects its openness to international collaboration."

To facilitate this progress, the local tourism office has streamlined the approval process for new travel agencies. "The licensing procedure is now fully integrated into the provincial

service network," the expert explained. "This allows for online applications, with additional support through on-site consultations, video verifications, and personalized guidance."

The streamlined system has created a more efficient framework that encourages foreign investment in Ningbo's tourism industry.

"Today's travelers are seeking personalized and unique experiences," noted the expert. "The entry of international operators will drive local agencies to innovate and improve their services, ultimately boosting the overall competitiveness of the inbound tourism sector."

1 From trade to tourism: an insider's vision

At the helm of Zhong Xi Energy Development is Abeysekara, fondly known as "Dr. Bai" in local circles. For this Sri Lankan-born entrepreneur, receiving the business license on December 25 means a deeply emotional moment.

"I was thrilled to learn that we are the first foreign-owned travel agency in Ningbo," Abeysekara shared in an interview. With a doctorate in Shanghai and over 30 years of experience in Ningbo's vibrant foreign trade sector, he has developed a deep affection for the city. "The people of Ningbo are incredibly warm and welcoming. Everyone calls me 'Dr. Bai,' and I've always felt at home here," he added.

His travel agency, headquartered in Ningbo's Jiangbei District, will primarily focus on inbound tourism, catering to international visitors drawn to Ningbo's natural, cultural and economic appeal. What sets it apart from traditional agencies is its global perspective, shaped by its founders' diverse backgrounds and extensive experience in international trade.

Abeysekara's decision to transit

from trade to tourism stemmed from a mix of strategic planning and opportunity timing. In recent years, China's increasingly relaxed visa policies and streamlined entry procedures have enhanced the country's accessibility for international travelers. A notable milestone came on December 17, when China implemented a significant relaxation of its visa-free transit policy, extending the permitted stay for eligible foreign travelers from the original 72 and 144 hours to 240 hours (or 10 days).

"In my foreign trade business, I've worked extensively with clients from regions like the Middle East, India, and Sri Lanka," Abeysekara explained. "Over time, many of them expressed a desire to explore Ningbo—not just for business but for its rich culture and attractions. Recognizing the city's untapped potential in the tourism market, we decided to take the leap."

For Abeysekara, this venture aligns perfectly with the growing global interest in Ningbo, a coastal city that blends traditional Chinese culture with modern industrial dynamism.

Translated and rewritten by Pan Wenjie
Adapted from an article by Xie Shuyi from *Ningbo Evening News*
Proofreaders: Huang Dawang, Li Jinyu, Jason Mowbray