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ROCKET CHASING: FROM RARE SPECTACLE TO LIFESTYLE PASSION

Space tourism blends tech, travel and leisure at Wenchang launch site in Hainan

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It was close to midnight on Tuesday when British travel blogger John Michael Chapman, 48, scanned the Wenchang Yaoguang rocket launch observation deck in Wenchang, Hainan province, scouting for the perfect spot. He took selfies and videos with his phone and sent them to his son back home while waiting for "the moment".

Minutes later, at 12:16 am on Wednesday, a modified Long March 7 carrier rocket, carrying a new com-

munication technology test satellite, blasted off from the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site and tore through the night sky, its tail flame turning darkness into daylight. The ground shook. The crowd erupted in cheers.

For most people, the idea of a perfect tropical getaway conjures up images of sandy beaches and swaying palms. But for Chapman and thousands of others like him, Wenchang's seaside offers a different thrill: watching a rocket take to the sky with an earsplitting roar.

"I am a 48-year-old man, and I feel

like a little boy at the moment," Chapman said after watching the rocket launch. "My son, everyone's sons and daughters, we all dream of space travel. It's this magical thing."

On social media, searches for "rocket" and "aerospace" have surged. In April alone, more than 3 million users engaged with such topics on Chinese lifestyle platform Xiaohongshu, or Red Note.

What was once a rare spectacle is more routine and accessible now, fueling a lifestyle passion.

People drive miles to the site even



Spectators watch a Long March 5B carrier rocket carrying low Earth orbit satellites blast off on Aug 13 from the Wenchang Spacecraft Launch Site in Hainan province. LUO YUNFEI / CHINA NEWS SERVICE

on weekdays, camp on beaches until midnight and aim telephoto lenses at the launch tower.



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Wenchang: Deep science dive offered

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Wenchang, on Hainan's northeast coast, is China's only coastal space launch site and home to the nation's sole commercial space launch base. The site now hosts launches nearly every month.

During the Wednesday launch, a group of 24 people, including travel journalists and social media influencers from Europe, watched from the viewing platform, while nearby Qishui Bay Beach was also packed.

The launch site now boasts over 150 hotels and homestays, and occupancy rates during launches often top 95 percent. More than 5,000 residents have found jobs or extra income tied to space tourism, said Zhu Ying, a homestay operator.

French social media influencer Jean-Bernard Corazzi was awestruck after witnessing a rocket launch for the first time on Wednesday: "I think it's a good idea to link the two — space technology and tourism," he said.

The destination now offers more than just a momentary spectacle. Visitors can tour the Wenchang Aerospace Supercomputing Center to learn how satellites collect data and how that information is transmitted, processed and applied to sectors such as agriculture and transportation. The center and other venues aim to turn "launch watching" into a full-day science immersion experience.

For Celestino Guerra Nig, a freshman at the Academy of Public Security Forces of China's Macao Special Administrative Region, the view of both the operational and new launchpads left a deep impression. "Next time I will choose a daytime launch to enjoy the coconut groves in the foreground," he said, adding that he will share his experience back in Macao.

For British blogger Chapman, the moment was pure wonder. But like many of the new "rocket chasers", he also appreciated what came after the launch: quiet beaches, fresh coconut water and the easy rhythm of tropical Hainan.

The rocket is the adrenaline. The island is the calm. And in Wenchang, travelers no longer have to choose.

Shenzhou crew with HK's Lai may visit city in 2027

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong
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Hong Kong's technology chief, Sun Dong, said on Sunday that the Shenzhou XXIII crew — including Hong Kong's first space traveler, Lai Ka-ying — could visit the city as early as the first half of next year.



Sun Dong

Sun, who is secretary for innovation, technology and industry, also revealed that the Hong Kong SAR government is in talks with Chinese mainland aerospace companies over cooperation on low-earth-orbit satellites — chasing a Starlink counterpart from Elon Musk's rocket firm, SpaceX.

Sun added that the local authorities plan to set up a new space manufacturing research center before the year's end under the InnoHK initiative — a government-backed funding program that incubates laboratories. The center will be tasked with employing 3D printing and artificial intelligence to meet future demands of the space industry, he said.

Lai Ka-ying, a Hong Kong police superintendent who is also the country's first female payload expert, is a member of the three-person crew on the Shenzhou XXIII mission, the country's latest space flight.

The six-month mission, launched at night from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on May 24, docked with the Tianhe core module of the Tiangong space station around 3.5 hours after lift-off.

Speaking to local media, Sun told reporters he is hopeful that the crew, once back on Earth, will make a trip to Hong Kong during the first half of next year.

Asked if Lai would be able to speak from orbit with students in Hong Kong via a live "Tiangong classroom" session, Sun said the SAR government has proposed the idea to the mainland authorities and the response has been positive.

Sun said he is confident that such an event would encourage young people from the city to pursue careers in innovation and technology, and to take an active interest in the nation's space ambitions.

"Lai Ka-ying, a mother of three who speaks fluent Cantonese, serves as an inspiration to many in Hong Kong," he said. "I hope the city can see more Lai Ka-ying-inspired scientists emerge in the years ahead."

On how Lai was selected, Sun said the process looked at "overall performance" and that Lai's "excellent academic ability", "optimal physical and psychological fitness", and professional attitude set her apart among 120 candidates from walks of life as varied as university teaching, research and corporate roles.

Sun said the nation's 2030 moon landing goal is already in planning, with the SAR government ready to support the mission and recruit astronauts from the city to take part.

Hong Kong is on course to reach its space technology goals, said Sun, with growth strategies for the sector included in the city's first local five-year plan, which is scheduled for release later this year.

Hong Kong has "pronounced strengths" in scientific research that can be "directly applied" to national space-exploration efforts, he said. Local universities are now actively marshalling their research resources accordingly, he added.

Hong Kong has been intensifying its efforts to promote aerospace science and technology while throwing its weight behind the space economy.

According to Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu's 2025 Policy Address, a special funding stream named the Innovation and Technology Support Programme Special Call on Aerospace Technology has allocated over HK\$100 million (\$12.76 million) to relevant research at six local universities.