

As It Is

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Hello, and welcome to "As It Is" -- our daily show for people learning American English. I'm Christopher Cruise in Washington.

Today on the program, we go to an automobile show in China, a country where car sales have risen 13 percent from a year ago...

"We are increasing our local content here in this country. And next month we are opening the first engine plant with the capacity of 250 thousand units outside of Germany for Mercedes engines."

But first...the number of people visiting South Africa is increasing. As Chinese investment in the country grows, so does the number of Chinese traveling there...

The number of people visiting South Africa grew by almost 10 percent last year. One country helping that number grow is China. Recently, a large crowd of Chinese visited the top of Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa. As Mario Ritter tells us, they were looking around, taking pictures and speaking in Mandarin.

Chinese investment has been growing in South Africa. So has the number of Chinese visiting the country.

China sends the fourth-largest number of tourists to South Africa. More than 130,000 Chinese tourists went there last year. Europeans remain the biggest tourism group. But the percentage of Chinese tourists grew by 56 percent from 2011 to 2012.

Beverly Schafer is a member of Cape Town's city government. She represents an area that is home to the waterfront promenade and a famous soccer stadium. She says the sport helped increase the number of visitors.

"The fact that Cape Town was so showcased around the natural beauty of it where our games were being held, that it opened up the door to tourism such as our Chinese and Asian tourists."

South Africa's travel industry has been noting the growing number of Chinese tourists. Mariette Du Toit-Helmbold has been head of Cape Town Tourism. She says the industry is looking for Mandarin-speaking guides and has started providing information in Mandarin.

But she adds that local businesses need to make big changes if they plan to market to this group.

“So I think the message, really out to, you know, the industry, has been, for us, really understand what are you getting yourself into first. Make sure you are geared up to cater for, specifically for the needs of the Chinese market.”

There are several reasons for the increase of Chinese tourists. Ms. Du Toit-Helmbold notes South Africa’s inclusion in the economic group BRICS, of which China is a member. In addition, South Africa recently added visa processing centers in Beijing and Shanghai. And South African Airways last year added direct flights between Beijing and Johannesburg.

Shuting Lunn is a Mandarin-speaking tour guide in Cape Town. She says demand for her services has increased since she started in the business 10 years ago. She says she once was lucky to get a group of travelers once a month. Now, she has to refuse some groups.

Cape Town’s tourism industry has been directed toward Europeans and Americans, who often travel in smaller groups or as couples. However, the Chinese market is aimed at larger groups.

I’m Mario Ritter.

China is strengthening its image as the most important market for the automobile industry. Chinese auto sales are up 13 percent from one year ago. Industry observers are predicting total sales of over 20 million vehicles this year. By comparison, a little more than 15 million vehicles are expected to be sold in the United States.

The importance of the Chinese market could be seen at the Shanghai auto show. Industry representatives there were showing products designed to meet China's growing demand for luxury cars and larger vehicles.

Dave Schoch is with the Ford Motor Company. He welcomed the chance to meet with thousands of possible car buyers.

"So you've got 30 million customers out there, all with different tastes and different affordability levels. And what Ford wants to do is bring our global, the power and leverage of our global lineup, you know from small to medium to large, into China."

However, competition can be fierce. Dieter Zetsche is the chairman of the German auto manufacturer Daimler AG.

"We are increasing our local content here in this country. And next month we are opening the first engine plant with the capacity of 250 thousand units outside of Germany for Mercedes engines."

Many Chinese see cars as a sign of success. Yale Zhang is with Automotive Foresight, an industry group. He says the rising demand for top quality automobiles is a sign of China's rise as an economic superpower.

"This market (is) becoming more like a European or American style."

Demand has been especially high for larger sport utility vehicles -- SUVs. Karsten Engel is head of the BMW group in China. He says the spacious insides of SUVs appeal to the newly-rich, although some will probably never drive them.

"The ultimate driving machine: You probably experience a lot from the, from the rear seat with your driver, so you, you need more space. You want more space. You want to have the possibility to work in the car."

That is something Stefan Brungs understands. He is the marketing director for the automaker Bugatti.

"And this is what Chinese have learned and perceived as luxury -- to sit in the back and be chauffeured."

The demand for larger cars is strong. Yet environmental issues and fuel concerns are leading to increased interest in vehicles with better fuel economy. Nissan's Asia Vice President Andy Palmer.

"Four years ago, when we introduced the, the concept of an electric car, most of, most of our colleagues in the industry thought we'd lost our minds. Now it doesn't look so stupid, you know?"

For now, observers say new hybrid and electric technology is not a major force in the Chinese market. New information shows sales of SUVs are up nearly 50 percent from a year ago. And experts say SUV sales are likely to double by 2015.

And that's "As It Is." We hope you enjoyed our program today.

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I'm Christopher Cruise, and that's "As It Is" on the Voice of America.