

# CHINA



From left: Two police officers (left and right) from a border station in Pumaqangtang in the Xizang autonomous region help a Tibetan herder change a tire during a rescue in August. LI HONGYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY. Wu Hui gives gifts to children at a village kindergarten in July. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY. Officers harvest vegetables in the border station's greenhouse in August. LI HONGYAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

## Patrolling Xizang's punishing peaks

First female police officers survive, thrive at China's highest border station

By YANG ZEKUN  
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In Pumaqangtang, water boils at 60 C, oxygen is a luxury and the landscape is an almost permanent white sheet of ice. At 5,373 meters above sea level in the Xizang autonomous region on the border with Bhutan, it is home to the highest police border station in China.

The brutal, unforgiving conditions in Pumaqangtang have given it the ominous moniker of being a "forbidden zone for life".

But for Wu Hui, 27, as she graduated from a police training academy, it was the only place she wanted to be.

"Don't you want to push your limits?" she asked her fellow graduates. "Don't you think it would be cool to work at the roof of the world?"

Her resolve was infectious. In February 2024, Wu convinced two other recent graduates — Li Tianjiao, 29, and Li Hongyan, 25 — to volunteer for the remote outpost. In doing so, they made history as the first female police officers to serve at the station since its founding in 2012.

### Brutal welcome

The reality of their decision hit before they even unpacked. As Li Hongyan stepped out of the patrol car on her arrival at the border station in Pumaqangtang, her chest tightened in the thin air.

She looked up to see the station instructor, Nyima Gyaltzen, waiting to greet them. He was gaunt, recovering from a recent illness, his hands shaking with exhaustion as he poured them hot tea.

"My initial thoughts were 'This place is truly brutal,'" Li said.

The statistics back her up: average temperatures stay below -7 C, and oxygen levels are less than 40 percent of those at sea level. For the 20 officers and 6 auxiliary staff sta-



Police officers from the border station together pull a car out of a bog on the grassland during a rescue on Aug 31. LI TIANJIAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

tioned there, the price of service is physical. Insomnia is constant. Hair falls out in clumps. Memory becomes "fuzzy" as the brain starves for oxygen.

"We joke about going scatter-brained," said Li Tianjiao.

"Whenever we take photos, we have to ask the photographer to air-brush a bit more hair onto our heads. It's a quiet reminder of what we leave behind here."

The station oversees 1,500 square kilometers of treacherous borderland, including the "internet-famous" Gangbu Glacier. In March 2024, the trio faced their first real test: a midnight rescue mission for tourists trapped in glacial swamp-land.

Under the guidance of their mentor, Gao Hui, they learned that the glacier hides deadly traps. In winter, the ground is solid; in spring, it

becomes a frozen quagmire where one wrong step could be fatal.

"I was terrified," Wu said of the mission. "Our headlights were the only sliver of light in the endless darkness. When we found them, they were shivering uncontrollably. One girl just threw her arms around me and cried. I realized then — this isn't just a job. It's a race against death."

The mission brought back the

haunting memory of 2018, when a tourist went missing in -40 C weather. Despite a four-day search led by the then-director Sonam Daje, the individual was found frozen to death in a riverbed. It was a tragedy that ensures the officers never take a rescue call lightly.

### Second home

Beyond the high-stakes rescues, the women have woven themselves

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I want to serve until my body can no longer keep up. ... Now, I want to be a beacon for someone else."

Li Hongyan, officer at the border station in Pumaqangtang

into the fabric of the local community, serving six villages and a permanent population of 1,156 residents. To them, Pumaqangtang isn't just a workplace; it's a second home.

Despite the "swollen face and purple lips" that Wu has to hide from her mother during calls to spare her worry, the women have found a rhythm in the cold.

They don't just patrol; they belong. Wu Hui delivers ID cards to remote nomadic camps where she is greeted with steaming butter tea. Li Hongyan spends her free time teaching art at the local school, painting "the summer of her imagination" for children who live in a land where trees cannot grow.

To maintain their mental health, they utilize the station's small luxuries: a pool table, a movie room and a karaoke lounge.

They tend to a vegetable greenhouse and forage for mushrooms during the fleeting, beautiful summer months.

For Li Hongyan, the motivation is simple. Growing up in a border town in Yunnan province, she watched soldiers guard her home. Now, she is the one standing watch.

"I want to serve until my body can no longer keep up," she said. "Others were beacons for me. Now, I want to be a beacon for someone else."

## Yunnan's popularity as place for those seeking winter warmth heats up

By LI YINGQING  
and YAN YUJIE in Kunming

Kunming, capital of Yunnan province, is attracting a growing number of long-stay visitors, many of whom travel to the warmer climes of Southwest China to escape the frigid winter in the north, according to the city's culture and tourism bureau.

Summer sojourners span all age groups nowadays, but before, winter visitors were previously dominated by older travelers, said Tao Ning, assistant general manager of Kunming Jingxiu Travel Agency Co.

The city's mild climate, rich cultural and tourism resources and relaxed pace of life are proving increasingly appealing to younger people as well, he added.

Kunming welcomed 1.21 million visitors between January and October in 2025, a year-on-year increase of 36.3 percent, according to the Kunming Bureau of Culture and Tourism.

Local senior-living communities are also reporting rising demand. Zhou Wen, a manager at a senior living community in Kunming, said that she has received over 900 guests since the beginning of 2025, a year-on-year increase of 12 percent.



Sojourners practice calligraphy at a senior living community in Kunming, Yunnan province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Among those settling temporarily in the region is 68-year-old Jiang Yongsheng from Huai'an in Jiangsu province, who has been living in the city's Shilin county since September 2023. He said Kunming's climate, scenery, affordable living costs and down-to-earth residents had convinced him that the city suits him.

"I feel healthier since coming here," he said.

Kunming has been expanding its elderly-care infrastructure as demand grows. Over the past five years, the city has invested 600 million yuan (\$84.4 million) to build 140 elderly-care institutions with 33,900 beds, according to the culture and tourism bureau. The expansion has widened coverage of community-based care facilities and strengthened the city's capacity to accommodate long-stay elderly visitors.

Xinglin Grand View Garden, where 81-year-old Meng Xianmei resides, is one of Kunming's pilot locations for elderly sojourners.

Since July 2023, Meng, from Zhengzhou in Henan province, has been residing in Xinglin Grand View Garden, describing it as a "great happiness" to enjoy her later years there.

"After having breakfast, I go out for a walk for over an hour. I return around 9 am and then practice baduanjin (a traditional Chinese exercise) and Chen-style tai chi."

return around 9 am and then practice baduanjin (a traditional Chinese exercise) and Chen-style tai chi. After lunch, I usually read books and practice calligraphy, and my calligraphy has improved a lot," she said.

The diverse ethnic groups, deep cultural foundation and the simplicity of the local people have left a deep impression on Meng.

Kunming is developing sojourn projects focused on culture and arts, as well as on sports, with Tao's travel agency expecting to

launch related products around May this year.

Besides Kunming, there are many other places in Yunnan that attract sojourners, with Jiang being fond of Yingjiang county in Dehong Dai and Jingpo autonomous prefecture, and Ning'er Hani and Yi autonomous county in Pu'er city.

"I am very optimistic about the prospects of the sojourning industry in Yunnan," said Jiang.

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## ROK tourists lured across Yellow Sea to Shandong

QINGDAO — A wave of tourists from the Republic of Korea chose to ring in 2026 in China's eastern coastal province of Shandong, enjoying cultural familiarity and the region's iconic beer culture.

On New Year's Eve, the *New Golden Bridge V* ferry arrived in the coastal city of Qingdao from Incheon, carrying over 230 travelers from the ROK.

On the same day, more than 600 ROK passengers arrived in Yantai by ferry, followed by another group of nearly 600 arriving in Weihai on Jan 2. "Qingdao is very familiar to people from the ROK, and the transportation is convenient," said Hong Wonsil, president of Seoul-based Happy Tour Agency, who arrived aboard the *New Golden Bridge V* ferry.

Hong said that his agency organized trips for over 5,000 ROK tourists to China in 2025, including more than 2,000 visiting Qingdao. He said the popularity of hiking Laoshan Mountain, China's highest coastal mountain, plus enjoying the local Shandong food and Tsingtao beer, were major reasons people wanted to go.

Shandong is among the Chinese provinces closest to the ROK. According to official data, the province handled 772,000 inbound foreign trips last year, among which 576,000 were made by ROK nationals, a 40 percent increase year-on-year.

Culinary experiences have become a key component of this cross-border

tourism. For many ROK visitors, a glass of fresh Tsingtao beer has become a "must-do" experience in China.

"Tsingtao beer is well known in the ROK, and I drink it often at home," said Kim Hye-sook, a tourist from Anyang. "This time I definitely want to visit the Tsingtao Beer Museum," she said, adding that many people around her have similar plans.

To accommodate this influx, local businesses have tailored their services.

The Tsingtao Beer Museum has introduced Korean-language online ticketing and currency payment channels. It also offers bilingual signage, Korean-speaking staff, and artificial-intelligence-powered audio guides to offer an even better experience.

According to the Tsingtao Brewery Group, the museum received over 220,000 foreign visitors in 2025, a year-on-year increase of approximately 70 percent, with ROK tourists accounting for more than 80 percent of the total.

The travel surge is not limited to Qingdao. In the neighboring city of Weihai, the tourists also visited cultural sites such as Huaxia City Scenic Area and Huancilou.

"One can touch deep history while seeing vibrant contemporary scenes here," said Byeon Seong-jae regarding his visit to Weihai. "This experience is very special."