

# Off-Season Marketing Strategies of Tourist Attractions: A Case Study of Sichuan Province

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**Abstract:** With the accelerated development of China's economy, tourism has emerged as a crucial component of household consumption and a key driver of regional growth. Nevertheless, the tourism industry in Sichuan Province demonstrates pronounced seasonal imbalances: attractions are overcrowded during peak periods yet underutilized in the off-season. The insufficient development of off-season tourism products and limited marketing efforts have resulted in significant resource idleness and revenue fluctuations. Drawing upon a review of relevant literature and an examination of the current circumstances of Sichuan's tourism sector, this study identifies the primary challenges of off-season operation and proposes targeted strategies, including cost control, policy intervention, relationship marketing, and product diversification. The findings aim to contribute to the optimization of off-season tourism management and the sustainable development of the sector.

**Keywords:** Sichuan Tourism; Seasonality; Off-season Marketing; Strategic Management.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism has become a vital pillar of the global economy since the twentieth century, characterized by its high growth rate and significant socio-economic contributions. In China, the pace of tourism development has surpassed global averages, yet the sector continues to be constrained by seasonal fluctuations. Sichuan Province, renowned for its rich natural and cultural endowments, illustrates this tension acutely: while it enjoys strong visitor inflows in peak seasons, off-season periods are marked by sharp declines in tourist numbers, unstable revenues, employment instability, and underutilization of resources.

This paper investigates the operational challenges associated with off-season tourism in Sichuan and, informed by marketing theories, seeks to propose effective countermeasures that support the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the provincial tourism industry.

## 2. Literature Review

International scholarship on tourism seasonality has a relatively long history. Since the 1970s, researchers have examined its conceptual underpinnings, causal factors, and potential interventions, such as holiday extension policies and product diversification [1]. In contrast, Chinese research in this field emerged comparatively late and initially concentrated on theoretical exploration. Only in recent years has it shifted toward empirical analyses, though comprehensive studies on off-season marketing strategies remain limited.

Marketing theory provides a robust analytical framework for addressing these issues. The STP paradigm (segmentation, targeting, positioning) highlights the necessity of differentiated strategies to satisfy diverse consumer demands and is particularly relevant in the context of seasonality [2]. Effective off-season marketing entails the integration of product innovation, pricing strategies, and promotional techniques to mitigate seasonal fluctuations and achieve the objective of "off-season vitality." [3]

## 3. Current Situation of Off-Season Tourism in Sichuan

### 3.1. Abundant Resources and Seasonal Contradictions

Sichuan Province possesses one of the most diversified and resource-rich tourism portfolios in China. Its scenic assets encompass globally recognized UNESCO World Heritage sites such as Jiuzhaigou Valley, Mount Emei, and the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, in addition to iconic attractions including the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding and the Sanxingdui archaeological site. Collectively, these destinations combine natural splendor with profound cultural heritage, reinforcing Sichuan's reputation as a premier tourism hub both domestically and internationally.

Nevertheless, the very abundance of resources masks an underlying structural challenge—high vulnerability to seasonal fluctuations. Many natural attractions in Sichuan depend heavily on climatic and ecological conditions. For instance, Jiuzhaigou's renowned autumn foliage creates peak visitation periods, while winter, despite offering serene landscapes and frozen waterfalls, attracts far fewer visitors. Similarly, alpine destinations such as Mount Gongga and Xiling Snow Mountain exhibit strong potential for winter sports and snow-related tourism, but inadequate infrastructure and limited promotional efforts reduce their competitiveness compared with established winter resorts elsewhere in China.

Statistical data released by the Sichuan Provincial Tourism Administration illustrate the magnitude of this disparity: in peak summer months, tourist arrivals may reach more than double those recorded in the winter off-season. Revenue follows an even sharper trajectory, with peak-season earnings often exceeding off-season figures by nearly 200 percent. This imbalance results not only in financial volatility for tourism operators but also in underutilization of resources, labor, and infrastructure during large portions of the year.

### 3.2. Key Challenges in Off-Season Operations

**Closure of scenic areas and idle capacity:** One of the most visible manifestations of seasonality is the partial or

complete closure of scenic areas during low-demand months. To minimize operational expenses, many attractions suspend services, leaving hotels, restaurants, and transport networks underutilized. Such closures undermine the long-term investment returns on infrastructure projects, erode visitor trust, and perpetuate a negative perception that certain destinations are “unavailable” outside the high season. This practice exacerbates cyclical demand patterns and prevents the industry from capitalizing on emerging niche markets.

**Tour guide misconduct and reputation risks:** Tour guides serve as frontline representatives of the tourism industry, shaping visitors’ experiences and perceptions. However, off-season conditions place significant financial pressure on guides, many of whom rely on commissions derived from shopping or ancillary services. During the off-season, diminished opportunities may incentivize unethical practices such as forced shopping or verbal harassment of tourists. Multiple media reports concerning misconduct in Sichuan have tarnished the province’s image as a hospitable destination. The reputational damage extends beyond individual cases, influencing potential travelers’ risk assessments and diminishing demand during subsequent seasons.

**Conservative business mindsets and inadequate marketing:** A recurring challenge lies in the entrenched perception among operators that the off-season is inherently unprofitable and therefore unworthy of proactive investment. This attitude manifests in reduced advertising budgets, limited promotional events, and minimal customer engagement initiatives during low-demand periods. As a consequence, destinations fail to stimulate residual demand that could otherwise be mobilized through targeted marketing. The lack of dynamic strategies creates a self-fulfilling cycle: diminished promotion reduces tourist awareness, which further suppresses visitation, reinforcing the belief that the off-season cannot be effectively utilized.

**Narrow product offerings and absence of experience-driven activities:** Despite the abundance of resources, the majority of Sichuan’s attractions remain overly reliant on sightseeing-oriented tourism. Passive observation of landscapes, while appealing during peak seasons, does not sufficiently differentiate destinations in the off-season. Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong, for example, exhibit unique winter scenery, yet without complementary products such as “snow-and-hot-spring packages,” “winter photography tours,” or “cultural immersion experiences,” their attractiveness remains constrained. Likewise, many ancient towns within Sichuan feature homogenous souvenir shops and standardized performances, offering limited novelty to repeat visitors. This lack of diversification discourages tourists from considering off-season travel as a viable alternative to peak-season visits.

**Insufficient services and infrastructural limitations:** A final challenge pertains to the reduction of services and infrastructure during low-demand periods. Hotels and restaurants often shorten operating hours or close entirely, while transportation providers reduce schedules, making accessibility more difficult. For example, certain alpine destinations with latent demand for skiing and hot spring tourism fail to achieve high visitor satisfaction due to inadequate accommodation capacity and limited public transport connectivity in the off-season. The resulting decline in service quality not only deters potential tourists but also diminishes the competitiveness of Sichuan in the broader

domestic tourism market.

### 3.3. Structural Implications and Synthesis

The challenges outlined above reveal that Sichuan’s off-season tourism is characterized by supply-side inefficiencies, demand-side weaknesses, and management-level deficiencies. On the supply side, closures, service reductions, and homogeneous products lead to resource underutilization. On the demand side, tourists lack awareness of off-season advantages—such as reduced congestion, lower prices, and unique seasonal landscapes—resulting in limited willingness to travel. From a managerial perspective, insufficient innovation and weak governmental coordination perpetuate instability.

These issues collectively generate a negative feedback loop: underdeveloped products and services discourage visitation; reduced visitation leads to further closures and cost-cutting; and repeated cycles erode both tourist loyalty and the long-term brand value of destinations. If left unaddressed, such dynamics threaten not only the profitability of individual scenic areas but also the sustainable development of Sichuan’s tourism industry as a whole.

## 4. Strategies for Off-Season Marketing

In response to the multifaceted challenges faced by Sichuan’s tourism industry during the off-season, a series of strategic measures must be undertaken to mitigate demand fluctuations and enhance the sustainable operation of scenic areas. These strategies are not isolated interventions; rather, they represent an integrated framework designed to address supply-side inefficiencies, stimulate latent demand, and stabilize the industry’s revenue base. The following subsections elaborate four major strategies that hold particular relevance for the case of Sichuan: cost control, policy support with celebrity effect, emotional connection with tourists, and product diversification.

### 4.1. Cost Control and Efficiency Enhancement

During the off-season, the decline in tourist arrivals directly translates into significant revenue contraction, while many fixed costs—such as staff salaries, maintenance, and basic infrastructure operation—remain constant. This imbalance often results in excessive financial strain on tourism enterprises. Consequently, implementing a refined cost-control system becomes a prerequisite for maintaining sustainability.

First, operators must differentiate between fixed and variable expenditures. Fixed costs such as equipment depreciation or basic utilities are unavoidable, but variable expenses—especially those related to large-scale promotions, redundant staffing, and unnecessary facility operation—can be substantially reduced. For instance, scenic areas may adopt a “flexible staffing” system, where part-time or seasonal employees are deployed according to demand fluctuations.

Second, the advancement of digital media provides cost-effective alternatives to traditional promotional campaigns. Rather than investing heavily in television or print advertising, scenic areas can leverage official websites, WeChat, Weibo, and emerging short-video platforms to disseminate information. Visual materials—such as seasonal landscape photography, virtual reality experiences, and live-streaming tours—can be distributed at minimal cost yet generate significant exposure.

Finally, cost consciousness should be institutionalized

among employees. This can be achieved by establishing internal incentive structures that reward staff members for identifying cost-saving opportunities. By embedding efficiency into the organizational culture, tourism enterprises not only reduce financial pressure but also create a sustainable foundation for long-term growth.

## **4.2. Policy Support and the Role of Celebrity Effect**

The government plays an indispensable role in regulating and stabilizing the tourism sector. In the off-season, one critical problem is the instability of tour guides' income. Since many guides rely heavily on commission-based earnings from peak-season shopping arrangements, they are vulnerable during demand downturns. This has, in several cases, contributed to unethical practices such as coercive shopping, thereby damaging the reputation of destinations.

To resolve this, policy intervention should prioritize standardizing remuneration systems. Governments at the provincial and municipal levels could implement minimum wage standards for licensed guides, provide seasonal subsidies, or create public employment programs that allow guides to engage in community tourism projects during low-demand months. By stabilizing the livelihood of frontline workers, the overall quality of service delivery can be safeguarded.

In addition, publicity strategies leveraging celebrity influence have proven effective in reshaping destination images. When a location is featured in films, television series, or popular reality shows, it often experiences an influx of visitors who are motivated by the so-called "celebrity effect." For Sichuan, inviting film crews, endorsing cultural festivals, or associating scenic areas with well-known public figures can rapidly elevate visibility. For example, if a national television drama highlights traditional Sichuan architecture or local ethnic festivals, the scenic area may experience renewed popularity even during months of otherwise low visitation.

Importantly, such strategies require careful alignment with brand identity. Overreliance on transient celebrity exposure risks superficial gains. Instead, integrating celebrity-driven campaigns into long-term branding—such as positioning Sichuan as both a cultural and ecological tourism hub—ensures that the benefits extend beyond temporary surges in popularity.

## **4.3. Building Emotional Connections with Tourists**

A sustainable off-season marketing strategy requires not only attracting first-time visitors but also cultivating repeat customers. Emotional connection serves as a decisive factor in transforming tourists into loyal patrons.

To achieve this, operators must move beyond transactional interactions toward relationship-based marketing. Establishing visitor databases enables scenic areas to maintain contact with past tourists, providing them with seasonal discounts, personalized recommendations, and exclusive invitations to cultural or community events. For example, visitors who previously explored Mount Emei could be targeted with winter pilgrimage packages that highlight spiritual and meditative experiences unique to the season.

Furthermore, feedback mechanisms are essential. Online surveys, social media polls, and official feedback platforms allow visitors to express their preferences and concerns. Not only do such systems improve service quality, but they also

signal to tourists that their voices matter. The psychological effect of being heard strengthens the emotional attachment to the destination.

Emotional marketing is also closely linked to the creation of shared memories and narratives. By encouraging tourists to share experiences through photography competitions, storytelling initiatives, or social media challenges, scenic areas foster a sense of community belonging. When visitors perceive themselves as part of a broader cultural narrative, they are more inclined to return, thereby reducing the volatility of demand in off-peak seasons.

## **4.4. Product Diversification and Innovation**

Perhaps the most critical component of off-season marketing is the diversification of tourism products. A narrow focus on sightseeing constrains the ability of destinations to attract tourists when natural scenery alone lacks appeal. Hence, scenic areas must reimagine their offerings to accommodate different demographics and evolving preferences.

One avenue is developing elderly-oriented tourism. Retirees often possess both leisure time and financial stability, making them an ideal demographic for off-season travel. Health-oriented tours, such as hot spring retreats, traditional Chinese medicine experiences, and light hiking programs, can be tailored to this group.

Another promising direction is business tourism. Corporate clients frequently seek environments that balance professional activities with recreational opportunities. Packages that combine half-day conferences with half-day sightseeing can meet the needs of modern professionals under time constraints. Such hybrid products also enable scenic areas to access stable institutional clients, mitigating seasonality.

Experiential products further enhance engagement. By offering interactive and participatory activities—such as agricultural experiences, handicraft workshops, or wildlife interactions—scenic areas create memorable and distinctive experiences. Tourists who feed animals, make pottery, or participate in harvest festivals develop stronger personal attachments to the destination compared to passive spectators.

Lastly, cultural innovation represents a crucial growth driver. By reviving traditional festivals, recreating historical settings, or hosting theme-based cultural performances, scenic areas can highlight intangible cultural heritage. For instance, showcasing Sichuan opera, tea ceremonies, or Tibetan folk customs during the off-season enriches the tourism portfolio while simultaneously preserving cultural identity.

## **4.5. Synthesis of Strategies**

The four strategies outlined above—cost control, policy and celebrity-driven publicity, emotional connection, and product diversification—are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, their effectiveness lies in their synergistic implementation. Cost efficiency provides financial resilience, policy support ensures institutional stability, emotional marketing cultivates demand continuity, and product diversification broadens market appeal. Together, they form a comprehensive framework capable of transforming the off-season from a period of vulnerability into a season of opportunity.

## 5. Conclusion and Prospects

### 5.1. Conclusion

This study examined the current state of off-season tourism in Sichuan Province and proposed a framework of strategies designed to address the persistent imbalance between peak and off-peak periods. Drawing upon an analysis of structural challenges—such as the closure of scenic areas, misconduct among tour guides, limited product diversity, and inadequate infrastructure—it is evident that the off-season remains an underutilized segment of Sichuan’s tourism economy. While the province enjoys a wealth of natural and cultural resources, the cyclical nature of demand has generated inefficiencies, reputational risks, and financial instability across the sector.

In response to these challenges, four strategic approaches have been identified and elaborated:

**Cost Control and Efficiency Enhancement:** By distinguishing fixed from variable costs, implementing flexible staffing models, and prioritizing digital promotion channels, scenic areas can reduce financial vulnerability and maintain operational stability during periods of low demand.

**Policy Support and Celebrity Effect:** Government intervention, particularly in standardizing tour guide remuneration and providing seasonal subsidies, is essential to safeguard service quality. Moreover, carefully managed publicity campaigns that leverage celebrity influence can revitalize destination images and stimulate demand.

**Emotional Connection with Tourists:** Moving beyond transactional marketing, scenic areas must cultivate long-term relationships with visitors through feedback mechanisms, personalized engagement, and community-building initiatives. Such practices enhance loyalty and encourage repeat visitation.

**Product Diversification and Innovation:** Developing elderly-oriented tourism, business packages, experiential activities, and cultural innovations ensures that destinations remain attractive year-round. This diversification addresses heterogeneous demand and reduces reliance on seasonal natural phenomena.

Taken together, these strategies form an integrated framework that can transform off-season vulnerabilities into

opportunities. By simultaneously managing costs, strengthening institutional support, fostering visitor loyalty, and expanding product offerings, Sichuan’s tourism sector can achieve greater stability, resilience, and competitiveness.

### 5.2. Prospects

Although this study has provided a conceptual framework for addressing off-season challenges in Sichuan, several limitations remain. First, the analysis is primarily descriptive, lacking empirical validation. Future research should adopt quantitative approaches—such as econometric modeling or big data analytics—to measure the impact of seasonality on revenue, employment, and visitor satisfaction.

Second, more attention should be given to the demand side. Investigating tourists’ motivations, risk perceptions, and attitudes toward off-season travel could reveal untapped opportunities and inform more precise marketing.

Third, regional cooperation offers a promising path forward. By coordinating with neighboring provinces, Sichuan could promote integrated transport systems, joint festivals, and shared branding, thereby mitigating seasonality across the wider Southwest China tourism cluster.

Finally, sustainability must remain central. Off-season strategies should balance revenue goals with ecological preservation, cultural heritage protection, and community well-being, ensuring long-term competitiveness.

In summary, the off-season challenge is not only a limitation but also an opportunity. Through empirical research, demand-driven insights, regional collaboration, and sustainable practices, Sichuan has the potential to transform its off-season into a period of renewed vitality and growth.

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