

## **Saipan: The Island Where Chinese Mothers Deliver American Babies** **Women looking to give birth to U.S. citizens have found a loophole in the Pacific on the island of Saipan**

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SAIPAN, Northern Mariana Islands—This U.S. territory in the western Pacific is known for its epic World War II battle, white-sand beaches and the enduring culture of its indigenous Chamorro people.

But for a certain class of Chinese parents, Saipan has become known as the latest hot spot for birth tourism, a place where women can give birth to babies who will automatically acquire U.S. citizenship.

The Northern Marianas, an island chain that includes Saipan, is the only U.S. soil that Chinese can visit without a visa, after a change in immigration policy in 2009 allowed Chinese and Russian tourists visa-free entry for up to 45 days.

“It’s just like if God opened a window for you,” said a Chinese father who works as a translator here after coming a few years ago to ensure his child would be born American.

The Northern Marianas pressed for the visa waiver to support an economy reliant on tourism, notably to Saipan’s casinos and gambling parlors. The number of Chinese visitors has risen substantially since 2009 and now represents 36% of tourists to the island, which is four to five hours’ flight from Shanghai and Guangzhou. Tourism accounts for 72% of Saipan’s economy.

The number of American babies born here to Chinese women who entered as tourists also climbed—to 472 last year from eight in 2009—according to the Northern Marianas government. Last year, for the first time, more Chinese tourists gave birth here than Americans.

“As long as you have birthright citizenship, it’s true this is something that can be exploited,” said Doris Meissner, former commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute. “This is the first I’ve heard of Saipan,” she said. “That’s actually quite clever.”

U.S. authorities don’t have a tally of how many people come to the U.S. each year to gain birthright citizenship. An association of Chinese birth-tour operators estimated that 10,000 Chinese birth tourists came to the U.S. in 2012.

Chinese travel businesses offer competing packages to help Chinese mothers reach U.S. soil and provide them with lodging, hospital care and domestic help.

There is nothing illegal about birth tourism, provided the visitor has the funds to pay for required medical procedures and doesn’t intend to overstay, said Jaime Ruiz, a spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

In 2015, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided nearly 40 locations tied to birth-tourism operations in Southern California, the search warrants cited suspected visa fraud, tax evasion and harboring illegal immigrants, among other charges. The related cases are ongoing, ICE said.

The translator in Saipan said immigration enforcement on the U.S. mainland had led more Chinese parents to consider Saipan. While birth-tourism packages to Los Angeles included guidance on how to qualify for a tourist visa, Chinese travelers to Saipan needn't clear that hurdle.

American obstetrician Claire Grove said that when she came to work at a clinic on Saipan last year, she was surprised at how many Chinese women had come to the island to give birth. She soon had a unique perspective on birth tourism.

Dr. Grove learned that Sen Sun, a translator, was running a business to help Chinese mothers deliver on Saipan. Concerned about what she believed to be Mr. Sun's exploitation of illegal Chinese workers, Dr. Grove went to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

As a result of an FBI probe, the U.S. Attorney's office in the Northern Marianas prosecuted Mr. Sun, leading to his Dec. 8 guilty plea of harboring illegal aliens in relation to his hiring of Chinese maids to care for birth tourists.

"They feel trapped without U.S. citizenship," Dr. Grove said of the maids. "They have no means to complain about not being paid or anything."

In his plea deal, Mr. Sun said he operated "an unregistered and therefore illegal business operation arranging travel, medical, and other services to pregnant foreign citizens," in which he charged women more than \$15,000 each, before hospital bills. Sentencing is set for March.

The U.S. Attorney's Office declined to comment on the case against Mr. Sun, whose lawyer declined to comment on the case and on Dr. Grove's accusation that Mr. Sun exploited his staff. In China, websites advertising birth-tourism packages abound, with names such as GlobalBaby8.com, promising luxurious birth vacations to Saipan. The Chinese translator whose wife gave birth on Saipan said total costs can exceed \$50,000.

"Everyone is feeling unsafe in China," the father said, citing among other things the political crackdown under President Xi Jinping. "We will do anything for our kids." The father still lives on Saipan with his wife and children, and fears they will be deported.

Recently in the obstetrics unit at Saipan's main hospital, a pregnant Chinese woman walked down a hall in a hospital gown and pink slippers, trailed by her translator, past a painting of Chamorro warriors dueling in loincloths.

Doctors and administrators said the surge in the number of Chinese mothers is overwhelming health facilities. “It’s a strain for the community,” said Esther Muna, CEO of government health provider Commonwealth Healthcare Corporation, which runs the hospital.

Ms. Muna said Chinese women in late stages of pregnancy presented difficulties when doctors didn’t know their medical history. In October, a Chinese mother died in childbirth on the island. Saipan is leaving it to federal authorities to chase down immigration violators. The Justice Department in April said it was cracking down on immigration violations in the Northern Marianas, after the conviction of a Taiwan national for harboring a Chinese birth tourist who had overstayed.

“Federal and local authorities should know where birth tourists are being housed and should be able to identify overstayers,” said Gregorio Sablan, the Northern Marianas’ congressional representative. “Cutting off visa-free travel to the Marianas for hundreds of thousands of visitors from China in order to prevent a few hundred birth tourists makes no sense from a business point of view.”