

From September 7th to 11th, 2026, the city of Guilin will host the World Canals Conference, inviting a global audience to explore the profound heritage and future potential of inland waterways. Renowned for its breathtaking karst landscapes and the ethereal beauty of the Lijiang River, Guilin offers a unique setting where historical culture and water systems are inextricably linked. For the first time, the 2026 conference will be structured around two mainlines: the ancient wisdom of the Lingqu Canal, a thousand-year-old engineering treasure, and the modern technology of the Pinglu Canal. This dual approach aims to showcase “Oriental Wisdom” and the Chinese perspective on how canal civilizations evolve from their historic roots toward a high-tech future.

The conference serves as a vital global crossroads for inland waterway experts, professionals, scholars, and enthusiasts. As many ancient canals and heritage sites worldwide face critical choices regarding transformation, the event will address fundamental questions: What should be preserved, and what must change? How can we adapt natural and cultural heritage to the needs of modern society without losing its soul? By bringing together diverse voices, the conference seeks to share innovative practices and find inspiration for the sustainable development of canals in the 21st century.

Throughout the week, participants will engage in a rich program of seminars, exhibitions, and keynote speeches focused on best practices for protecting, revitalizing, and utilizing inland waterways for tourism and urban renewal. Beyond the technical sessions, social events and on-site showcases will highlight the unique charm of Chinese canal culture integrated with its world-famous natural scenery.

To bridge the gap between historic legacy and future innovation, the 2026 conference will delve into three core thematic areas that address the most pressing challenges of modern canal management:

Let the Ancient Canal Become a Part of Modern Community Life

Ancient canals have historically served as vital hubs for cultural exchange, and today, many of their functional systems—such as irrigation and flood discharge—remain operational. The challenge lies in preserving these tangible relics and traditional lifestyles, like those of local residents whose daily routines are still tied to the water, while integrating them into a

modern urban context. To revive these original communities, we must find a sustainable path that honors heritage without stifling contemporary development. This involves identifying which social and cultural factors are essential for maintaining the canal’s identity, ensuring that the transition to a modern lifestyle enhances, rather than erases, the profound connection between the people and their historic waterway.

Living in Harmony with Nature

In the face of global climate change, communities living along canals are uniquely vulnerable and increasingly sensitive to environmental shifts. It is essential to amplify their voices and understand their specific challenges to build effective resilience. Planning and construction of waterway systems must now move beyond traditional engineering to incorporate biodiversity conservation and microenvironmental impacts. By utilizing innovative policy tools and green infrastructure, we can strengthen the ability of canal systems to resist extreme weather events. The goal is to ensure a sustainable future where the management of the waterway prioritizes both the protection of natural ecosystems and the safety of the human populations that depend on them.

The Balance between Tourism and Conservation

Many historic canal cities are world-renowned tourist destinations facing the complex pressure of economic development. While tourism offers significant opportunities to showcase the unique charm of canal culture through modern media, it also threatens the delicate balance of these heritage sites. To prevent canal resources from being overwhelmed, proactive planning is required to ensure that development remains renewable and sustainable. This involves creating management strategies that capture economic value without degrading the original state of the environment. By focusing on high-quality, low-impact tourism, cities can protect their canal heritage while providing authentic experiences that respect both the historical integrity and the long-term viability of the resource.

The 2026 conference offers participants an unforgettable exploration of Guilin’s water systems, where history, nature, and cutting-edge engineering converge through three flagship excursions:

The Lingqu Canal

Step back in time with a visit to a “living fossil” of water conservancy. Built in 214 BC to

connect the Yangtze and Pearl River systems, the Lingqu Canal is a TICCIH-recognized masterpiece and a World Irrigation Project Heritage site. Experts will have the chance to investigate its diversion works firsthand, understanding how this ancient “Pearl of Water Conservancy” has remained in continuous use for over two millennia.

The Lijiang River

A 60-kilometer cruise through the heart of a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, to Experience the “Eastern aesthetic”. Known as the crown jewel of global karst landforms, the Lijiang River Basin resembles a living ink painting. This excursion offers a unique perspective on how Guilin’s world-renowned “blue jade” mountains and “green belt” waters have shaped the region’s cultural identity and sustainable tourism excellence.

The Pinglu Canal

A world-class backbone project of the New Western Land-Sea Corridor, to look into the future of inland waterways at the Pinglu Canal. the High-tech innovation of the Madao ship lock, is a marvel of efficiency capable of accommodating six 5,000-ton ships in just one hour. The groundbreaking water-saving technologies that reduce consumption by 63%, forming a strategic link between China and ASEAN markets.

The 2026 World Canals Conference offers a collaborative platform to ensure that the world’s canals continue to serve as vibrant arteries of culture, economy, and community for generations to come.

More Information

<https://wcc2026guilin.com>

