Global Travel & Tourism Summit  
Washington, D.C.

I spent a good part of this week in Washington, D.C., attending the Sixth Global Travel & Tourism Summit, organized by the World Travel & Tourism Council and co-hosted by the Travel Business Roundtable and Travel Industry Association of America (TIA). The 900 participants included top executives from the many international companies that provide all types of hospitality, transportation, and travel-related services in some 60 countries around the world.

It is impossible to come away from a series of meetings such as this without the feeling that most of the world’s companies, governments, and destinations involved in Travel & Tourism face many of the same issues. These include:

- Transportation
- Infrastructure
- Public health
- Communication
- Fair taxation
- Education
- Safety and security
- Workforce availability and opportunity
- Impact on local residents and cultures
- Free movement of goods and capital
- Environmental stewardship

Yes, as Thomas Friedman has so well documented in his book *The World Is Flat*, the entire globe is interconnected. The challenges of Travel & Tourism may vary by degree from country to country, but they are remarkably similar.

With this annual meeting being held for the first time in the United States, it is not surprising that border security was a recurring topic. Both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff acknowledged that the current procedures to apply for a U.S. visa are less than friendly.

According to TIA, the U.S. market share of international travel is at an all-time low. Since 1992:

- U.S. market share of global travel dropped 35 percent (through 2004).
- This lost share cost the U.S. economy $286 billion in revenue.
- Federal, state, and local governments across the country would have an extra $48 billion in tax revenue if the U.S. had maintained its market share.

J.W. “Bill” Marriott Jr., Chairman and Chief Executive of Marriott International, noted it is particularly difficult for a Chinese citizen to get a U.S. visa. “Last year, 30 million Chinese traveled abroad. They flocked to France, Germany, Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macao. But only 200,000 of that 30 million came to the U.S.,” he said.

Chertoff stated, “We very much want a system that encourages secure, safe, but welcoming travel
and trade all over the world. We are emphatically behind the idea that we must be full partners with the rest of the world in a robust and free-flowing pattern of travel and trade. Americans lose when we put up rules, when we keep people out who are good people who want to come to work, study, and play in the United States. We damage ourselves if we don’t distinguish between the vast number of people in the world who are our friends and that small number who are enemies,” according to eTurbo News.

Chertoff and Rice described the efforts of the U.S. government to produce a unified, driver’s-license-style, western hemisphere travel document known as a Personal Access Security System (PASS), with biometric data such as iris and retinal patterns, hand geometry, or fingerprints recorded on a computer chip, which can be used to quickly verify that the cardholder is who he or she says they are. Chertoff said he hoped the card would be available in 2007 and that it would be the first step in a “Trusted Traveler” program that would speed processing at U.S. ports of entry.

With the National Mall and other public areas across the nation filled with demonstrators on both sides of the immigration issue, this too became a topic for discussion. Bill Marriott Jr. called for “good, comprehensive immigration reform.” He pointed out that the hotel industry is one of many that rely on immigrants to fill entry-level jobs and that those who take them often work their way up to better positions. “We must pursue policies that allow people to seek the chance to build better lives for themselves and their families,” said Marriott, according to USA Today.

I spoke at a session that focused on destination branding, during which time I shared the stage with Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann. I described how Waikiki is repositioning and redefining itself with projects such as the Waikiki Beach Walk.

Mayor Hannemann, a strong supporter of our industry, spoke of the many roles that government can and should play in assisting the development of a viable tourism industry in any country, state, or city.

In addition to Secretaries Rice and Chertoff, Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez also spoke at the conference. The attention of four cabinet members tells me that the federal government may finally be awakening to the fact that Travel & Tourism is our nation’s biggest producer of jobs.

TIA president Roger Dow noted, “We are just about the only country that doesn’t have a national tourism office. Travel and tourism is one of the U.S.’s biggest industries but (federal) spending (in this area) falls far behind the $60 million budget of Canada. Even Fiji spends $10 million.”

Let’s hope that changes soon.