International Travel - 1 Billion Opportunities a Year! But the U.S. Is Missing the Boat!

By Dr. Richard Kelley

While staying at the Outrigger Laguna Phuket Beach Resort recently, I had a chance to talk to many of our guests. They were a very diverse group, coming from all over the world – Japan, China, Korea, U.K., Sweden, Russia, Germany and so on.

"Amazing Thailand" is booming, taking advantage of the rising tide of international travel, which, in 2012, hit the 1 billion-passengers-per-year mark, worldwide, for the first time. (That's even more impressive when you compare it with the planet's population of 7 billion!)

By contrast, the United States is doing a lousy job of promoting the growth of in-bound international travel. And now, I worry that reaction to the overseas connections in the recent Boston Marathon bombings will make it even more difficult for our country to get its share of those 1 billion international travelers, let alone the vast potential for future growth.

Let me illustrate my point by sharing some personal experiences from my recent travels. On arrival in Thailand, I waited in the immigration line maybe three minutes before I could present my passport and a simple post-card-size form to an official. She brushed my passport past an ID scanner, stamped it and smiled, saying "Welcome to Thailand!"

No visa. No fee. No waiting. Pleasant surroundings.

After the activities in Phuket, my next stop was Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where I attended a Global Summit on Travel & Tourism issues. My experience on arrival was even easier than in Thailand. All I needed to show was my passport.


By contrast, even getting permission to travel to the United States is often a challenge unless you live in one of the 37 countries (30 European nations plus Australia, Brunei, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) with visa waiver agreements with the U.S. State Department.

For most travelers, including those who are citizens of Thailand and the UAE, the visa process is very difficult, time-consuming, expensive – and demeaning. It takes weeks, if not months, to apply for and get permission to travel to the U.S. Applicants pay a non-refundable fee of $160 per person for this “opportunity.” They must have a personal interview at a U.S. consulate or embassy, which often also means travel to another country.
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With “welcoming” hurdles like that, all I can say is, “Good luck to Brand USA!” – the public-private partnership (sponsored, in part, by the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority) whose mission is to promote international travel to the United States.

Travel & Tourism is vital to the American economy. Consider this data from research by the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) – Travel & Tourism in the U.S.:

- Produces 8.7% of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), more than automobile manufacturing and chemical manufacturing.
- Sustains 14.3 million jobs direct, indirect and induced – 10.3% of total employment.
- Supports 18 jobs with each $1 million of tourist spending.

If the U.S. wants to “up its game” so as to effectively share in the rapidly growing 1 billion-passenger international tourism market, it needs to make major improvements in the process for issuing visas and greeting visitors. Let’s hope that reaction to the Boston Marathon bombings does not take things in the opposite direction.