Tourism Leaders Focus on Major Global Travel Issues
By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week I represented Outrigger Enterprises Group as about a thousand leaders of the global Travel & Tourism industry gathered in Las Vegas to discuss, debate, and attempt to resolve the major issues our industry faces in today’s complicated world. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) organized this 11th Global Travel & Tourism Summit around the theme of “Powering Growth.”

Industry leaders representing every sector of the Global Travel & Tourism industry from many nations participated in speaker sessions, panel debates, problem solving groups, and interviews. Attendees included U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, President Felipe Calderon of Mexico, CNN founder Ted Turner, JTB Corp. President and CEO Hiromi Tagawa, and Toshiba Chairman Atsutoshi Nishida.

Attendees from the hospitality industry included the heads of the Starwood, Marriott, Wyndham, InterContinental, Mandarin Oriental, Taj, Jumeirah, Sol Malia, MGM, Bharat, and Carlson hotel chains.

There was a major focus on the need for overhaul of the process and procedures for issuing visas, particularly for travel to the United States, a topic I have often discussed in this space.

Over the past decade, the world travel market has grown by more than 60 million annual travelers. Yet, in 2010, our country welcomed only about the same number of overseas travelers as it did in 2000. Speakers characterized that as “The Lost Decade” for the U.S. Travel & Tourism Industry and the U.S. economy.

Failure to keep pace with the growth in international travel between 2000 and 2010 cost the U.S. an opportunity to welcome an estimated 78 million additional visitors who would have generated over $600 billion in direct and indirect spending – enough to support more than 467,000 U.S. jobs annually over these years, according to a report by the U.S. Travel Association (USTA).

Many potential visitors to the U.S. live in visa-waiver countries where, by inter-governmental agreement, obtaining visas in advance is not required. However, for citizens of most countries, including fast-growing Brazil, China, and India, a visa for travel to the U.S. must be obtained in advance, and that can be a real challenge. For example, even though in-person interviews are mandatory before a visa can be issued, the U.S. has only five visa-issuing consulates in all of China.

That means that those who live in any one of China’s ten other cities with a population of more than two million (or any of its smaller cities) must pack up and travel a long way just to apply for a visa to visit the U.S. In contrast to our country, the United Kingdom (UK) has 12 consulates in China.

In addition, the visa application process is uncertain, expensive, time consuming, and often demeaning. The average total time for a Chinese citizen to get a U.S. visa is 120 days, according to USTA. Compare that to only 11 days to get a visa to the UK.

Earlier this year, when I was visiting the UK, I spotted a Chinese family group of 10 individuals enjoying the sights and shops in a small Welsh village one cold, rainy day. It made me think about the time and effort it would have required for that family to get U.S. visas. Then I understood why they were braving the bad weather in Wales rather than enjoying the sunshine and warm sands of Waikiki.
Tourism Leaders
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Continued from page 1

Multiply that family’s decision by the hundreds of thousands of similar families there must be among China’s population of 1.3 billion, and it is easy to understand why experts predict that if the U.S. can get its act together and drastically improve visa processing, America could recapture its historic share of the global overseas travel market and add up to 1.3 million U.S. jobs and an $859 billion in cumulative economic output by the year 2020.

Delegates at the Global Travel & Tourism Summit agreed that the U.S. visa application process can be significantly improved by, among other things:

- Making the achievement of rapid, efficient and convenient visa processing a priority for the U.S. government.
- Using technology to process applications remotely and video conferencing for “in-person” interviews.
- Opening additional visa offices and posting additional U.S. consular officers to countries with the greatest potential demand, such as Brazil, China, and India.
- Getting more countries on the Visa Waiver Program. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Poland, and Taiwan all potentially qualify, but negotiations over details have yet to start.
- Extending the visa validity period for citizens of China and other countries from the current one year to at least five years.
- Staffing U.S. visa-issuing offices for longer hours – at least six days a week, or even seven, to prevent peak-season backlog buildup. (Hotels, restaurants, airlines, etc. all operate on a 24/7/365 basis. Surely our consulates can do a little better.)

Hopefully, the excellent media coverage of the Travel & Tourism Summit meetings and the participation of high-ranking government and corporate leaders will set the stage for all this and more to have been achieved by 2020. That’s a great vision! (Pun intended.)

Let’s also hope that what just happened at the Global Travel & Tourism Summit in Vegas … does not stay in Vegas! 🎉