First Chinese Leisure Travelers Arrive in USA

For some time, the United States has been missing out on China’s growing outbound leisure travel business because the U.S. was not on the list of countries with an “Approved Destination Status” – a designation required by China’s government before its citizens are permitted to travel there in significant numbers. Last December, the United States and China signed an agreement to rectify that, and this week, on June 17, the first group of Chinese leisure travelers arrived in Washington, D.C. We hope this is the first step toward a significant increase in the number of Chinese leisure travelers coming to the U.S. and, of course, to Hawaii.

The first group of visitors was greeted warmly. William G. Sutton, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, led a welcoming delegation at the airport. There were banners in Chinese saying “Welcome to the U.S. Capital.” On June 19, there was a gala dinner celebration. Invited guests included high-ranking Chinese and U.S. government officials, including Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez; Under Secretary Chris Padilla; Assistant Secretary Sutton; and Shao Qiwei, Chairman of the China National Tourism Administration.

There will be no flood of visitors at first. The Chinese government is opening the doors in a measured, one-step-at-a-time manner. For the next six months, only authorized travel agencies in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Hubei, Hunan, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong will be allowed to organize groups of locally-registered citizens for trips to the U.S., according to Nelson Alcantara of eTurboNews. Later, more cities and provinces will be added.

Christopher Bodeen, writing for Associated Press, says the first tours will be 12-day visits that will take participants to cities on both coasts of the U.S., including Washington, New York, and Los Angeles. The cost will be about $4,000 per person. Participants have been told they will not be allowed to leave the group at any time during the trip.

Some of this month’s initial Chinese leisure travelers include Hawaii in their itineraries and will be staying at the OHANA Waikiki West and OHANA Waikiki Malia hotels.

Our state has been preparing for Chinese leisure travel to begin for some time. Governor Lingle led a trade mission to China in 2005. Following that, the state’s Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, under Director Ted Liu, established an office in Beijing to help provide information and assistance for government officials, businessmen and -women, and potential visitors.

Honolulu Mayor Mufi Hannemann has also recognized China’s importance. In 2006, he traveled to Shanghai, Zhongshan, and Beijing, reciprocating a visit the previous month by China’s Vice Premier, Madame Wu Yi, at which time an agreement was signed between the state and Chinese officials to facilitate travel between Hawaii and China and participation by local companies in China’s tourism industry.

All of this work will start to pay off soon, now that the Chinese government has given the U.S. Approved Destination Status.

However, Hawaii is not the only Pacific destination where Outrigger and OHANA operate with an eye on the growing outbound market from China. The Fiji Visitors Bureau just launched a Chinese travel Web site in cooperation with China Environment International Travel Service. Fiji representatives will also attend the Beijing International Travel Expo this weekend. I am sure that delegations from Guam, Thailand, and Indonesia will also be among the 1,000 exhibitors from 100 countries who will participate.

We have been talking for many years about the opening of the China leisure travel market. I am glad that day has finally arrived. When visitors from China come to our hotels, I know that, whatever the language barrier, everyone will show them our warmest aloha.