War, Terror, and Tourism

The world is watching sadly as explosions continue to shatter the peace at so many visitor destinations around our planet. There have been any number of attacks during the past months—London, Bali, Spain, various Egyptian resorts, Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay), and now Israel, and Lebanon. In the latter two areas, multiple, daily, reciprocal attacks have hit civilian areas, damaging or destroying homes, bridges, roads, utilities, airports, railway terminals, and seaports. It began with a raid into Israel by Hezbollah, the terrorist organization that controls southern Lebanon. This triggered an Israeli effort to find two kidnapped soldiers and destroy Hezbollah’s arsenal, most of it hidden in civilian areas. Israeli bombing and shelling, and Hezbollah’s firing nearly a thousand rockets at civilian targets all over northern Israel have all but shut down the normal flow of tourism in both countries.

According to eTurboNews, Pierre Achkar, president of the Lebanese Hotel Association, said recently, “Summer tourism is completely off line. On the day of the attack, the occupancy of Lebanon (hotels) nationwide was over 92 percent. In around 72 hours, we were below 10 percent.” Achkar added that some hotels in the mountains and along the seaside are running full with refugees, but fuel is short and the properties may soon be unable to run their generators or heat water.

Leaders of the tourism industry across the Middle East worry that potential visitors tend to lump the entire area together, according to a report by The Media Line, a nonprofit news organization that covers the Middle East. Regional tourism powerhouses Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Turkey, which saw tourism fall off as a result of terrorist attacks over the past four years and had begun to recover, now fear the current fighting will again cause tourists to avoid the entire region.

By contrast, during the past week, most Outrigger and OHANA hotels across the Pacific were running at or near capacity. In Waikiki, the OHANA hotels as a group averaged 100 percent occupancy last weekend! We are, indeed, fortunate but, at the same time, I want to recognize, thank, and congratulate the many members of our ‘ohana who have worked so hard to make these results possible.

In these troubled times, it is important to remember that Travel & Tourism remain a potent catalyst for peace. They bring people together to share views, appreciate differences, and open windows of understanding.

I have been fortunate enough to travel all over the world and am personally familiar with this phenomenon. My trip in 2004 to Qatar and Dubai in the Middle East opened my mind and my eyes.

During the Vietnam Era, many said, “Make love, not war.” In 2006, maybe that should be updated to “Make travel plans, not war plans.”

In fact, there is an international organization dedicated to this idea. Called the International Institute For Peace Through Tourism (IIPT) (www.iipt.org), the organization, which just held its annual meeting in Sydney, Australia, is “dedicated to international understanding and cooperation, an improved quality of environment, the preservation of heritage, and through these initiatives, helping to bring about a peaceful and sustainable world.” IIPT firmly believes “every traveler is potentially an Ambassador for Peace.”

The United States could be a world leader in promoting peace through tourism but unfortunately, it is not. Congress seems able to find funding for all sorts of pork barrel projects but does not have any money for an effective national tourism organization that could stimulate international inbound travel to the U.S.

Pacific Business News reported this week that Roger Dow, president of the U.S.-based Travel Industry Association, testified before a U.S. Department of State commission that tourism is an untapped means of improving America’s international image. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, including lack of marketing and the difficulty of obtaining U.S. visas, international tourism to America has slipped, and the U.S. market share of global travel has dropped by more than one-third (36 percent) in 15 years.

We have been particularly aware of this in Hawaii, where international visitor arrivals have declined more than 10 percent in the first half of this year alone. Hawaii has direct flights from Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Tahiti, Fiji, Canada, Japan, and other Pacific destinations, but inbound tourism is not currently reaching its potential from any of these areas.

In the meantime, my heart goes out to the people in those unfortunate parts of the world currently suffering from terrorism and war. Let’s hope that changes soon and that people everywhere will begin to “make travel plans instead of war plans.”