Lessons in Tourism From Karate
By Dr. Richard Kelley

Last weekend, my wife Linda and I attended a karate tournament in Denver, Colorado, and, while it was colorful, fast-moving and enjoyable, I could not take my mind away from the fact that this modest event I was witnessing provided a real-life example of several major benefits of international Travel & Tourism:

• International tourism creates many jobs and provides opportunities for workers at all skill levels.
• International tourism is an important export that brings money back to our country to help pay for all the products and services we import.
• International tourism promotes peace and understanding between people from vastly different cultures located in very different parts of the world.

The tournament also provided an excellent illustration of a key obstacle to our country’s more complete enjoyment of these benefits, namely that:

• Current U.S. government visa policies and procedures restrict international tourism and keep it from achieving its full potential in all the areas listed above.

The event we attended was the 14th World Karate Championships, presented by the Funakoshi Shotokan Karate Association (www.fska.com). Hawai’i-born and raised John Bolosan, an internationally acclaimed karate champion, was Tournament Director and Host. The headquarters hotel was the Hilton Garden Inn Denver Airport, an affiliate property of Outrigger Enterprises Group. Most events were held in the athletic facilities of nearby Montbello High School.

Several hundred participants came from all over the world to compete. We watched the Olympic-style opening parade with participants marching in and proudly waving flags from a total of 17 countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, France, Georgia, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Philippines, Poland, Russia, South Africa and United Kingdom, as well as many American states. A team from Mililani, O’ahu, decked with lei, carried Hawai’i’s state flag. The participants appeared clean-cut and ranged in age from pre-teens to seasoned adults. Family members accompanied many, with siblings or a parent and child participating, coaching or assisting.

Sensei (rough translation: master, teacher) Bolosan told me that they could have had many more international attendees but, for reasons unknown to him, over 25 individuals from countries such as South Africa, Poland, the Czech Republic and Kyrgyzstan had their applications for U.S. visas either delayed or denied by the U.S. State Department. This caused several teams to cancel their participation and decreased total attendance by at least 100 individuals.

None of the international participants or coaches looked like a terrorism threat or a potential illegal immigrant to my eyes.

The challenge of obtaining visas for international travel is a major issue that I have addressed a number of times in this space over the years. Applying for a visa to travel to the United States is time-consuming, difficult, bureaucratic, expensive and, often, demeaning. The number of U.S. consulates authorized to process visa applications is far too few, many are understaffed and, even in the era of the Internet and excellent videoconferencing, applicants must often travel hundreds of miles for personal interviews before

Continued on page 2
Lessons in Tourism From Karate

Continued from page 1

a U.S. visa application is processed. For leisure, educational and business travelers alike, this is very discouraging and I am certain that, as a result, the U.S. loses billions of dollars of potential export revenue and opportunities for the creation of thousands of jobs.

The 14th World Karate Championship is just one small example of thousands of international events that take place or could take place in the U.S. annually and expand in scope and numbers of attendees if these visa issues were addressed. Events like this represent a vast market that is currently being significantly underserved.

Difficulties with visas processing is not just a U.S. issue. As political tensions are rising in many areas of the world, obtaining a leisure travel or business visa to visit other countries has too often become a problem as well. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) recently established a task force to evaluate this issue, measure its impact and suggest a set of “best practice” guidelines. I am serving on that task force.

In the meantime, congratulations to Sensei Bolosan and his dedicated team of volunteers for the completion of a very successful edition of the World Karate Championships. The staff at the Hilton Garden Inn Denver Airport looks forward to your return soon! 🎉