Good News About International Travel

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week, I read several news items that indicate the United States, along with many other parts of the world, can expect to enjoy another record year of Travel & Tourism in 2014. Also this week, in Chicago, the U.S. Travel Association’s International Pow Wow hosted the largest number of travel buyers in more than a decade. The delegation from China set a record with 109 delegates attending, all of them hoping to make deals with U.S. travel suppliers. At the same time, in Washington, D.C., one of Hawai‘i’s U.S. senators, Mazie Hirono, joined three co-sponsors to introduce legislation that would extend the U.S. Visa Waiver Program to Hong Kong and Macau.

Arhlene Honda, Lani Von, John Limper and Mary Loy attended the International Pow Wow on behalf of Outrigger Enterprises Group. Pow Wow is an amazing event that brings together travel sellers and buyers from all over the world for three intense days of talking, comparing and deal making. USTA estimates that more than 95,000 business meetings took place there and that the agreements made will attract to the U.S. 8.8 million additional international visitors who will spend $28 billion for travel services over the next three years and beyond.

That translates into a lot of economic growth and job opportunities, no matter where one lives in the United States, but it is particularly important for states like Hawai‘i, Florida, California and Nevada where Travel & Tourism makes a major contribution to the local economy.

However, international visitors cannot spend those funds and create those job opportunities if they cannot get a visa to travel to the United States. As I pointed out last week in this space, if you live in mainland China – and, for that matter, in any country except the 38 nations covered by the U.S. State Department’s Visa Waiver Program – getting a non-immigrant visa to the U.S. can be an expensive, time-consuming, uncertain and, in some cases, humiliating process. Unlike the U.S., Canada and the European Union have simplified their visa processing procedures to make it much easier for citizens of mainland China to get a visa.

I personally saw the result of easy visa issuance policies last summer in France. While walking across a Seine River bridge not far from the Eiffel Tower in Paris, one of the classic Bateaux Mouches sightseeing boats passed under the bridge just a few feet below where I stood. The decks were jammed from rail to rail with Chinese visitors fill a classic Bateaux Mouches (tourist boat) cruising the Seine River in Paris (Photo date Jul. 25, 2013)
visitors who all appeared to be Chinese. I also saw groups of Chinese in restaurants, near major visitor attractions such as the Louvre Museum, and along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, the tree-lined boulevard that Parisians call “the most beautiful avenue in the world.”

Rather than try to solve the entire issue of U.S. visas for China, a country with a population of 1.3 billion, Senators Mazie Hirono (D-Hawai‘i), Mike Lee (R-Utah), Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) are proposing to extend the Visa Waiver Program only to residents of Hong Kong and Macau. Those two “Special Administrative Regions” of China have a combined population of 7.5 million.

If passed, the senators’ proposed legislation would allow the Visa Waiver Program to apply to “subnational territories” (e.g., Hong Kong and Macau). Residents of these areas could then travel to the United States for trips lasting less than 90 days without prior issuance of a U.S. visa, just like the citizens of 30 European countries plus Australia, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan.

In addition to Hong Kong and Macau, the proposed legislation would also cover the British territories of Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands, which would be considered subnational territories for U.S. visa purposes.

It is not a perfect solution but it is at least a start. Congratulations to Senators Hirono, Lee, Kirk and Klobuchar for taking this initiative! It is an important step in the right direction!

And to Arhlene Honda, Lani Von, John Limper and Mary Loy, welcome home and thanks for your great work at the International Pow Wow!  

Footnotes

1 Bateaux Mouches are sightseeing boats designed to squeeze under the many low bridges that cross the Seine River.