

Welcome, embrace Chinese tourists

July 8 2014

The Chinese are traveling in greater numbers, and countries such as the United States must do more to accommodate them.

By Ron Watanabe
HNN columnist

Recently, it seems Chinese tourists are touted as the new silver bullet for many places including Hawaii, Las Vegas and gateway cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles. In Hawaii, the growing numbers of Chinese visitors and their lavish spending patterns are increasingly making them heroes of sorts. Quietly, however, many think of them as the new "ugly American."

Like the ugly American, the behavior of the Chinese visitor is most likely innocent behavior that is perfectly acceptable at home but disliked by people in countries abroad. While most of the Chinese visitors are first-time overseas travelers, there is a significant segment of the market that is sophisticated and worldly. Unfortunately, it is the unsophisticated that stand out and are responsible for the reputation they are gaining.

With all the discussion about the "ugly" Chinese there seems to be a love-hate relationship. We love their money, but we don't like their behavior. Love them or not, Chinese outbound visitors are increasing at a substantial rate, and we need to embrace them as they will invariably spur the tourism economy of many United States gateway cities and resorts destinations such as Hawaii.

According to the Hawaii Tourism Authority, Chinese visitors to Hawaii was just 54,235 in 2008 but is expected to increase to 182,078 in 2014, an increase of 236% in six years. Albeit the numbers are still relatively small compared to the 8.2 million visitors to Hawaii in 2013, growth of the number of Chinese visitors continues at a rapid pace. The addition this year of six non-stop flights per week from Beijing by Air China and Hawaiian Airlines and five non-stop flights per week from Shanghai by China Eastern are intended to meet the increasing demand of Chinese visiting Hawaii.

To put the visitor numbers in perspective, according to the China Outbound Tourism Research Institute, 560,055 Chinese visited the U.S. in 2013. At the same time, popular destinations such as Japan, Singapore and Thailand welcomed 889,847, 1.6 million and 5 million Chinese visitors, respectively.

According to the China National Tourism Administration, 97 million Chinese traveled abroad in 2013 making China the country with the largest number of outbound travelers. Still, this is a small portion of China's population of 1.4 billion, not including Hong Kong and Macau. More important, Chinese visitors spend two to three times the amount spent by U.S. travelers per visit, according to the Tourist Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. These facts make it absolutely necessary that visitor destinations pay attention to the needs of the Chinese and make them welcome.

How to accommodate

On 1 October 2013, the Chinese government's Tourism Law of the People's Republic of China, a 112-article manifesto laying out the rules for tourism operators and protection for tourists, became effective. This new law was written in response to the growing dissatisfaction and concern that Chinese tourists were not being treated fairly. Among other things, the law outlines what Chinese tour operators and travel agents must do, including educating the outbound tourists about the culture and customs of the countries they will be visiting. All of this is intended to change the image of Chinese tourists and make their travel experience more enjoyable and satisfying.

So, what do we need to do to accommodate the needs of the Chinese visitor? For starters, we need Chinese- (Mandarin- and Cantonese-) speaking guest services personnel in hotels and retail stores. Qualified and trained Chinese-speaking tour guides, and Chinese language signs and brochures are also essential. The U.S. government needs to establish a visa waiver program with China to facilitate the travel process for our Chinese visitors. A visa waiver program can immediately increase the flow of visitors to and from the U.S.

Finally, the U.S. travel industry needs to realize the Chinese are coming, and we should welcome and embrace them because they will be a significant contributor to the economy of the U.S. Ultimately, Chinese visitors to the U.S. can become a huge factor in reducing the U.S. trade deficit with China.

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