

USA MAKES STRIDES TO INCREASE INBOUND TOURISM



A White House report published this week offers a rare piece of good news for the beleaguered US economy, in the form of a sharp rise in the number of international tourists visiting the States.

The figures show that the first quarter of 2012 saw a 10% increase in visitor numbers over the same period in 2011, spelling cause for celebration for the 7.5 million Americans employed in the tourism sector.

The rise has been attributed to a directive made by President Obama to the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security, ordering the agencies to streamline the application process for tourist visas both at home and in US embassies and consulates overseas.

Geoff Freeman, COO of US Travel Association, a body that represents the tourist industry of the United States, said that strict security regulations introduced in the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks stifled the industry, preventing many potential visitors from obtaining the visas they'd need to vacation in the States.

A rethink of these regulations has made it much simpler for legitimate tourists to navigate the previously complex and time consuming tourist visa application, leading to a rise in visitors and a prediction that applications will increase by 19% this year from 2011.

"Tourism is a bright spot in our economy," stated the Deputy Director for the National Economic Council Danielle Gray. She went on to say that much progress had been made, but if the US hopes to meet its target of 100 million annual international visitors by 2021 more must be done.

Key to this increase in visitors is an improvement in consular services in emerging economies such as China and Brazil. Demand for US visas from Brazil grew by 38% in the first half of 2012 (compared to the same period in 2011), while demand from China grew by an astounding 48%.

In order to satisfy that demand the consulates and embassies operating in these countries have worked to reduce the time taken to process applications. In the past it took up to 140 days to schedule a consular interview for Brazilian citizens, a time frame that has been reduced to just 2 days. The US embassy in Beijing has reduced wait times to just 5 days, and even peripheral nations such as Mongolia have reduced their processing times to a matter of weeks rather than months.

President Obama hopes that this boost to the tourist industry will help reduce the high unemployment rate in advance of the upcoming elections, helping secure him a second term in the Oval Office.

While Mexico and Canada still provide the bulk of tourist revenue to the US, the coming years will see that balance shift to developing economies as the middle class grows globally, creating a vast supply of newly wealthy people able to travel internationally.

However, while the focus remains on attracting visitors from emerging economies, improvements

have also been made to facilitate visitors from neighboring countries. New infrastructure is being developed along land borders to speed customs processing times for visitors from the north and south, while new baggage check technology will allow visitors arriving by air to pass through customs more quickly.

These developments can only be seen as positive for the US economy, and especially for those millions employed in the tourist and hospitality industry.

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