

Friday, October 23, 2009  
China/U.S. summit opens up local travel potential  
Orlando Business Journal - by Richard Bilbao Staff Writer

Thirty Chinese provincial tourism directors and officials were in Orlando Oct. 23 to sign an agreement to open up the world's largest populated country to travel to the U.S. and Orlando, in particular.

The 2009 Third Sino-U.S. Tourism Directors Summit, which included Chinese Cabinet-level officials, was designed to build stronger overseas relationships and encourage travel between the two countries.

Nationally, Chinese travel accounts for 2.5 percent, or about 630,000 visitors, of the total 25.3 million overseas travelers to the U.S. in 2008, said the U.S. Office of Travel & Tourism Industries.

Of those visitors from China, Orlando gets 5 percent-10 percent, or 31,000-63,000 Chinese visitors, annually.

The summit gave Orlando a chance to sow the seeds for China to become one of the area's top markets in the future, said Gary Sain, president of the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau, which markets metro Orlando as a travel destination.

He said marketing efforts with six provinces in China have been under way for years, but this agreement would further open up China's provinces to tourism marketing and bolster more international tour operator support to China's 31 provinces. The agreement doesn't involve any financial transactions, he added.

The bureau also took Chinese officials this week to visit Orlando theme parks and local venues to further promote Orlando as a premier destination for China, which is estimated to have 1.33 billion residents — nearly 20 percent of the world's 6.79 billion population.

The summit also could open the doors for hotels struggling to fill rooms in this recession to market to Chinese visitors, said Rich Maladecki, president of the Central Florida Hotel & Lodging Association, which represents Central Florida's hotel industry. "To have the population base of China as a region that would consider Orlando as a destination site would be great for our entire tourism industry. And the first visitors to come to Orlando from this program would be welcomed with open arms."

Due to the Chinese market's size, the potential impact on a hotel is tremendous, said Dan Giordano, general manager at the 1,501-room Rosen Shingle Creek Resort in Orlando. Although international travel accounts for 5 percent of his resort's business, "once the floodgates for Chinese travelers open through this agreement, Orlando, along with the U.S., will really enter the game as a major destination for that market."

Orlando's top international markets include Canada, the United Kingdom and Brazil.

Visitors from China coming to the U.S. stay an average of 23 nights and spend on average \$7,200 per person, per trip — the highest of any international traveler, said the U.S. Travel Association, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit organization representing the national travel industry.

“The Chinese traveler has money, travels significantly and when they do travel, they go in big numbers, so having them come to Orlando is huge,” said Abe Pizam, dean of the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at the University of Central Florida.

In addition, having the participation of Chinese officials in Orlando for this event shows the support from the Chinese government for further tourism growth with the U.S., he said. “These officials are the gatekeepers for travel, and we have to get their support before anyone else can come.”

If the agreement works as well as local officials hope, said Sain, “it can position Orlando exceptionally well to provide great opportunities in the future.”

By the numbers

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