

Tourism suffers as a result of travel restrictions

by Dean Calbreath

I don't know about you, but I don't feel a heck of a lot safer when I go to an airport and put my shoes through the X-ray machine or get my shampoo confiscated because it's more than three ounces or isn't packed in the right kind of plastic bag.

For some reason that I can't fathom, a Ziploc bag is considered much safer than a mere plastic bag, a tool of international terrorism that could get confiscated by Homeland Security, depending on which airport you go to.

The fact is that as far as any international terrorists are concerned, they've already tried the shoe-bomb thing. They've already tried the liquid explosives. And experience shows that terrorists have a "been there, done that" attitude when it comes to explosives, rarely, if ever, playing the game the same way twice.

Which makes the ban on 3.5-ounce, un-Ziplocked shampoo bottles seem like a pretty silly inconvenience.

But whatever inconveniences I've endured when getting on a plane pale in comparison to the inconveniences that foreign business executives, students, workers and tourists encounter when coming to this country.

Since 9/11, foreign travel to the United States has decreased 17 percent as the security procedures for entering the country have tightened. That means fewer tourist dollars coming into places like San Diego and more hardships for U.S. companies that have foreign customers, partners or employees.

"Our new travel restrictions have made it much more costly, time-consuming, complex and unpredictable for business visitors to obtain visas to come to the U.S.," says Bella Heule, who heads San Diego's World Trade Center.

Heule says that most of the members of the center's board, which include such internationally focused companies as Qualcomm, Quantum Design and WD-40, are experiencing problems in arranging training sessions or meetings with foreign employees or potential business partners.

"And this is having a huge impact on trade shows," she says. "Some trade show organizers and producers are considering moving their shows abroad, because it has become such a chore for people to obtain visas to attend or exhibit in U.S. trade shows. And that means less opportunities for U.S. companies to show their products and services."

Part of the decline in travel comes from a post-9/11 requirement that all visa applicants have an in-depth, personal interview with a U.S. consular official.

In such regions as Eastern Europe, South America, Africa and most of Asia, travelers have to wait for weeks or months to obtain visas when it previously took as little as two or three days. The visa process can take up to two months in Venezuela or the Dominican Republic, three months in Brazil and six months in India, according to State Department figures.

Roger Snow, head of the Tourist Industry Association, says the visa requirements have created a noticeable shift in travel patterns. Last year, he notes, travel to the United States from Brazil declined by 400,000, while Brazilian travel to Europe increased by 1 million.

In regions that don't require visas, such as Western Europe or Australia, travelers are skittish about other new U.S. entry requirements, such as the recently introduced requirement for biometric passports. And they are put off by the brusque treatment they get from travel officials.

Foreign travelers rank the United States as having the world's worst entry procedures, by a two to one margin over the next worst region, the Middle East, according to a poll taken last fall by RT Strategies, an independent polling organization.

The United States ranks below the Middle East and only slightly above Africa and Latin America when it comes to traveler-unfriendly paperwork and officials, the poll found. Two-thirds of travelers feared they might be detained by U.S. immigration officials for making a simple mistake while entering the country.

"The foreign press is filled with horror stories about people being treated like criminals when they come to the United States. And whether that's reality or not, the fact is that the perception of entry experiences is having an effect on travel," said Geoff Freeman, executive director of the Discover America Partnership, a travel industry-backed group that is pushing for fewer travel restrictions.

In San Diego, the number of overseas visitors - not including those from Canada and Mexico - plummeted from 701,000 in 2000 to 499,000 in 2005, a 29 percent drop, according to the latest data from CIC Research, which monitors the local tourism industry.

Skip Hull, who heads CIC, notes that the impact of that decline has been softened by an increase in domestic

tourism. "We aren't feeling the effects as much as places like Los Angeles or San Francisco, which depend a lot more on overseas tourists," Hull says.

On the other hand, visitors from overseas tend to spend a lot of money in the United States, averaging about \$4,000 per visit, according to some studies. Day-trippers from Los Angeles are much less lucrative.

No less a voice than Tom Ridge, the founding secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, thinks things have gone too far on travel restrictions.

"In a 21st-century world, it's in America's long-term interests to be more connected with other countries," he says. "If we think we have to interview everyone that comes into this country - an idea that came from Congress, not my department - let's at least do it in a way that will signal to the rest of the world that they're still welcome here."

Ridge recommends a number of alternatives to the cumbersome visa procedures. Use teleconferencing to interview potential travelers. Use mobile field offices for visa services. Allow groups such as the American Chamber of Commerce, which operates in most foreign countries, to screen business travelers.

"Some of the people who are having problems getting into the country are people who have been known to American businessmen for years, if not decades," he says. "Why not allow trusted Americans to vet them?"

Recommendations from the Discover America Partnership would put a 30-day cap on the visa process and a 30-minute deadline for getting international travelers through the airport passport control checkpoints. And it would add some longtime U.S. allies, such as South Korea, to the list of nations that do not require short-term visas.

The push to make the United States more accessible to foreigners is gaining traction in Capitol Hill. In the past several months, a number of legislative initiatives have been introduced in the Senate that echo some of the proposals that the travel industry is pushing for.

It seems that the mood for streamlining the travel process is growing. And if it does, I have one recommendation for foreign travelers: Bring some Ziploc.

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