



OPINION

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America's Lost Decade of Tourism

If we provide more travel visas, foreign visitors will come, spend billions of dollars and create hundreds of thousands of jobs.

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Over the past decade, the U.S. economy has missed an unprecedented global travel boom because of visa delays and other bureaucratic policies that discourage visitors to our shores. Our research shows that between 2000 and 2010 America's share as a destination of the long-haul travel market slipped to 12% from 17%. That adds up to a lost decade for American travel with 467,000 lost jobs, \$606 billion in lost spending by visitors, and \$37 billion in lost tax revenue.

During a time of high unemployment and rising deficits, the U.S. cannot afford to continue down this path. International travelers represent the most lucrative segment of the fiercely competitive global travel market. For every international traveler who visits the U.S., our hotels, restaurants, retailers and other businesses rack up an average of \$4,000 in sales. By recapturing our previous 17% share of the market, America could realize \$859 billion in economic stimulus and create 1.3 million new jobs by 2020 at no cost to American taxpayers.

The question is not whether more international travelers are willing to bring their money to the U.S., but whether our government will let them. Important safeguards have been instituted after 9/11, such as in-person interviews with consular officers. With better planning, more resources and the use of new technology, our visa process can be safe, effective and competitive.

The supply of visas for travel to the U.S. has not kept pace with skyrocketing demand in key emerging markets. Applicants are sometimes kept waiting more than 100 days for an interview. And with a limited number of America consulates around the world, thousands of potential visitors lack easy access to the visa process.

Take the example of a family of four living in Manaus, Brazil—a city of about two million people. Before the family can visit the U.S., each member needs to travel 1,250 miles to Brasilia for an

interview at one of only four U.S. consulates in the country capable of processing visas. This ordeal alone can cost \$2,650, and the process can drag out for more than four months.

By contrast, the same family from Brazil can travel to Europe without a visa for visits under 90 days. No wonder six million travelers from China, India and Brazil visited Western Europe last year while only 2.6 million came to the U.S. This self-inflicted wound is especially painful since travelers from China, India and Brazil rank first, second and fourth respectively in total spending once they get to the U.S.

It's time for our country to get back in the competition for global travel. Our government must set a national goal to recapture our 17% share of world-wide overseas travel, and to match Western Europe's current share of the long-haul travel market in Brazil, China and India by 2015. This will require strong support for travel promotion in international markets, expanding the visa waiver program—which currently includes only 36 countries—to include new countries, and matching State Department resources with forecast visa demands.

No one understands the stakes better than Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Under her leadership, the State Department has begun to eliminate visa backlogs in China and Brazil by keeping consular offices open longer and sending more officers to process visas. This is a step forward, but more needs to be done.

Congress holds the key to implementing critical reforms. Members of the House and Senate have introduced legislation to clear away some of the highest hurdles created by our visa system. The proposed reforms include setting a 12-day maximum processing standard, hiring more consular officers to serve in high-demand countries, using video-conferencing technology for visa interviews, and expediting the visa process for travelers willing to pay a premium.

These are low-cost, bipartisan solutions that would make immediate improvements to our visa system without any changes or compromises to our country's important security requirements. While each bill takes a different path, they all lead to the same destination: a more effective visa process, a more competitive travel industry, and a faster-growing economy.

This is where America's economy needs to go in the years ahead. It is time to travel the road to recovery.

Mr. Dow is the president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association.