

U.S. trying to lure foreign tourists

By Kevin Sullivan, Washington Post

The Obama administration, along with the U.S. travel and tourism industry, is spending millions of dollars this year to lure foreign visitors. A “Discover America” campaign includes television commercials in nine nations; ads on the Tokyo subway; banners in London and Vancouver, B.C.; Facebook pages in Portuguese and German; and Tweets about the charms of the Dakotas.

The United States has Hollywood, the Grand Canyon, the Statue of Liberty, Hawaiian surf, Maine lobsters, Florida beaches and the neon dreams of Las Vegas. We have Graceland, the Golden Gate Bridge, Disney World and the bright lights of Broadway.



The Golden Gate Bridge is a huge draw for foreign visitors. Photo/LTN file

But as global travel and tourism has boomed to historic levels, tourism industry officials said the U.S. share of those visitors has shrunk by almost a third in the past decade. That’s partly because of increased U.S. security after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, but industry analysts say it’s also because China, Turkey and other nations have become huge

tourist magnets.

So the United States is now doing what once seemed profoundly unnecessary: shelling out millions of dollars to promote America as an international travel destination. It's an investment, U.S. officials said, in growing the economy and creating jobs in hotels, restaurants, stores and anywhere else where tourists spend money.

"The more folks who visit America, the more Americans we get back to work," President Obama said last year in announcing an executive order designed to increase visitors by marketing America abroad and cutting red tape for tourists seeking visas.

The Obama administration, in partnership with the travel and tourism industry, is spending \$150 million this year on its promotional effort. Part of it is a "Discover America" campaign that includes television commercials in nine nations, ads on the Tokyo subway, banners in London and Vancouver, Facebook pages in Portuguese and German, and tweets about the charms of the Dakotas.

U.S. officials also have added to staff and offices in China and Brazil to speed the visa process for millions of new visitors.

Some Republican members of Congress have criticized Brand USA, the partnership between the federal government and the travel industry that is coordinating the effort, as a waste of taxpayer dollars that benefits mainly wealthy companies in the travel business. But supporters say that promoting tourism benefits the U.S. economy as a whole.

"Travel and tourism is the quickest way back to economic development and jobs," said Christopher Thompson, chief executive of Brand USA. "9/11 changed the world and changed the way people look at us, so we had to up our game."

Record numbers of tourists are coming to America; last year more than 66 million came, and they spent more than \$168 billion here, according to the Commerce Department. But tourism officials said those statistics mask the fact that growth in tourism to the United States has not kept pace with growth in global tourism.

Officials at the U.S. Travel Association, a private industry group, said that a more revealing look at the state of U.S. tourism comes when visitors from Canada and Mexico are removed from the statistics. That leaves “long-haul” tourists, those who travel from one world region to another – say, Europe to Asia or the United States. Those tourists are the most sought-after: They tend to invest more to get here and spend more when they arrive, so they are widely considered a better indicator of the strength of the U.S. market.

Geoff Freeman, a top executive at U.S. Travel, said the number of long-haul travelers to the United States has grown 1 percent in the past 10 years, while long-haul travelers globally are up 40 percent. So the U.S. share of the global market has sharply decreased.

Freeman describes a “lost decade” after 9/11: Long-haul tourists in America did not return to their 2000 levels until 2010. In that decade, the nation lost 460,000 jobs and more than \$600 billion in total travel-related spending by foreign tourists, his group estimates.

“There was a perception that America didn’t want their business,” Freeman said, noting that heightened security and stricter visa laws created a “Fortress America” image that deterred many potential tourists.

Other countries have flung open their doors. From Southeast Asia to South America to Eastern Europe, countries have pumped up their tourism marketing budgets. Some, including Australia and Mexico, are spending more than \$100 million a year

promoting themselves, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

Brand USA is quickly expanding its marketing campaign. It began last year with advertising blitzes in Britain, Canada and Japan. In the coming months, it will restart ads in those countries and add Mexico, Brazil, South Korea, Germany, Australia and China.

“Those nine markets represent 75 percent of all inbound travel to the United States,” said Anne Madison, a Brand USA spokeswoman. “We want to fish where the fish are biting.”

She said that Brand USA has offices in nine countries to pitch U.S. travel to tour operators and the travel press, and it is about to open six more, including ones in China and India.

The marketing campaign features TV ads with a tune called “Land of Dreams,” written and performed by singer Rosanne Cash, and inviting scenes of American life – picnics, beaches, weddings, ballroom dancing. There also are ads in the Tokyo subway, billboards in Vancouver and even a banner near London Bridge.

On Twitter, Brand USA staffers Tweet about everything from Zion National Park in Utah to “the gentle rumbles of the Old South at the Mississippi Delta.” Brand USA also is about to launch a partnership with ESPN to deliver advertising and promotional programming to TV viewers and Web users in Britain.

In October, DeMint and Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., issued a report accusing Brand USA of waste and political patronage. The report said Brand USA threw an needlessly lavish launch party in London last year and has a board stocked with major Democratic donors.

Brand USA officials said the launch was held at the world’s largest English-speaking travel trade show and made “good

business sense.” They said all board members are experienced travel industry leaders appointed by the secretary of commerce in a “politically neutral process.”

The report criticized what Brand USA was claiming as “in-kind” contributions when seeking matching federal funds. It said Brand USA had claimed that newspaper stories or television interviews about Brand USA’s activities had a value that could be used to claim matching funds. For example, it said, Brand USA claimed a segment on Travel Channel International had an in-kind value of \$4.9 million.

Madison, the Brand USA spokeswoman, said all such in-kind contribution requests have been withdrawn. She said Brand USA officials are working with the Commerce Department, which approves the organization’s requests for matching funds, to create clearer guidelines for in-kind contributions.

“I think clearly there are hiccups that the Brand USA team went through in the early stages,” Sorenson said. “I think if we could start the whole thing all over, some of those hiccups would have been avoided. I don’t think they’re monumental.”

Beyond Brand USA’s activities, the State Department is spending millions of dollars to make the visa process easier for foreign tourists, especially in China and Brazil, where demand is growing fastest. It has added two consulates in Brazil and one in China, and several more are planned. Others are being renovated and expanded, and the department has added more staff to process visas.

Edward Ramotowski, the State Department official in charge of visa services, said improving services in Brazil and China was the best way to get “bang for our buck.”

U.S. officials said that in 2011, the number of Brazilian tourists increased 26 percent, to 1.5 million, and that they spent and estimated \$8.5 billion. The number of Chinese tourists increased 36 percent, to nearly 1.1 million, and they

spent an estimated \$7.7 billion. The average tourist from Brazil or China spends more per visit than tourists from any other nation, industry officials said.

A visa process that often took just days before 9/11 took weeks or months after the attacks when Congress mandated that almost all foreigners applying for visas be interviewed personally by U.S. consular officials abroad.

Average waiting times have now been cut from almost five months to less than a week in Brazil and from 72 days to less than three weeks in China, Ramotowski said.