

Made Possible by Tourism

In his important new book, *The Empathic Civilization*, futurist and scholar Jeremy Rifkin writes about how empathy, “the action of understanding the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” as Merriam-Webster phrases it, has been nurtured by hospitality. With developments in passenger jet technology, global travel began to climb during the late 1950s, Rifkin writes. In 1950 international travel tourist arrivals numbered 25 million people—by 1980, the number had reached 286 million. “In 2005, 806 million people traveled internationally,” he writes. “The European Union is the largest travel and tourism economy, accounting for 35 percent of the global market share.

“This kind of exposure and interaction with our fellow human beings is of a magnitude and a scale never before experienced in history,” writes Rifkin. “The long and short of it is that people are getting to know each other—even if it’s at the most superficial of levels—in a myriad of relationships and encounters made possible by tourism.”

It’s remarkable how far we have come, both literally and figuratively, to understand other cultures, meet new people and encounter new ideas—all with the simple gesture of packing a bag and seeing what’s around the bend. “Global travel and tourism is now the single largest industry in the global economy, representing more than 10 percent of the world’s domestic product and 8.3 percent of the world’s employment,” writes Rifkin. “In 2007, 231 million people were employed in the travel and tourism economy. That’s one out of every 12 jobs in the world.”

And yet ever-emerging Internet and cell phone technologies have allowed us to stay connected like never before, without ever leaving the front door. Nevertheless when air travel shut down completely due to Eyjafjallajökull’s volcanic ash during the recent eruption, it became clear how much our modern global economy relies on the actions of countless people who travel the world daily, conducting business, visiting friends or enjoying vacations.

Over the past decade, the United States has been unable to attract its share of overseas visitors. As a result it has lost billions in spending and tax receipts that could have helped fuel economic recovery. In fact, the United States welcomed 2.4 million fewer international visitors in 2009 than in 2000, costing the U.S. economy

an estimated \$509 billion in total spending and \$32 billion in direct tax receipts, according to U.S. Travel Association data.

The United States is now rolling out the welcome mat, not only for hospitality’s sake but for the good of the overall economy as well. In early March, President Barack Obama signed the Tourism Promotion Act into law, the first-ever travel promotion act of its kind. Championed by our own Senator Amy Klobuchar, the new law allows government agencies to partner with private enterprise and work together to address the decade-long decline in international tourism and travel to the United States.

A successful Travel Promotion Act will yield \$4 billion in new spending annually and create 40,000 new jobs along with \$321 million in new tax revenue each year, according to Oxford Economics. The Congressional Budget Office reports that it would reduce the federal deficit by \$425 million over 10 years. The good news is that the new initiative may be getting underway with a bit of a head start. U.S. arrivals jumped 22 percent in February from the same month in 2009, the fifth straight month of increases according to the International Trade Administration. International visitors spent \$1.1 billion more during March 2010 than they did the previous year, the second consecutive month of reported growth in U.S. travel and tourism exports by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Perhaps such efforts to stimulate travel signal a new era of public-private partnerships, not unlike efforts made last year when Governor Tim Pawlenty joined Explore Minnesota Executive Director John Edman in announcing a first-of-its-kind partnership with key leaders in the state’s tourism industries to help keep meeting business here in our state, as Minnesota’s \$11 billion hospitality industry employs nearly 11 percent of the state’s total private sector. All of it, “made possible by tourism.” Staying connected is good for hospitality; it’s even better for the economy.



Joel K. Schettler

— Joel Schettler, editor