

What can Vietnam do?

Expert panel discusses ways to boost tourism from North America

In a crowded function room upstairs from 2016's bustling ITE conference in Ho Chi Minh City's District 7 a panel convened to discuss ways and means for Vietnam to drive tourism from North America in the years to come.

Chairing the panel was Mr. Dinh Ngoc Duc, Director of the International Cooperation Department of the Việt Nam National Administration of Tourism, and flanked by Ms. Mary Mendoza, Vice President of Marketing for The Grand Ho Tram; and Mr. Oliver Martin, Principal of Twenty 31, a travel consultancy based in Canada. The session saw a fascinating blend of two different visions for the growth of travel and tourism in Vietnam, both centered on driving both increased visitor numbers, and increased spend from visitors.

"Central to the focus of all of the development at Ho Tram is a commitment to be one of the key drivers of the Vietnam prime minister's goal to have tourism deliver 10 percent of the nation's GDP in the years to come," said Ms. Mendoza. "With this in mind we have set about developing and delivering a something-for-everyone property with The Grand, and ensuring that travelers from around the world have access to all the information that they need to see all that we have on offer."

With American and Canadian tourists numbering around 425,000 in the first seven months of 2016 – and growing at a clip of slightly over 13 percent YOY – the market is significant and substantial. According to data presented by Mr. Martin, these visitors – who normally are entitled to three weeks of annual leave per year – are typically staying in Vietnam between 10 and 15 days – meaning that it is their 'one big trip' of the year for them and their families. He called on Vietnam then to ensure that it has a compelling offering for them on arrival.

Ms. Mendoza, a Macau native who was integral to the development of her homeland as an entertainment destination above and beyond the casino trade in the early 2000s presented some recommendations on what travelers from this part of the world are calling for.

She stressed the need for partnerships between tourism operators, airlines, investors and resorts with local authorities, such as VNAT and relevant provincial authorities, praising VNAT for convening this panel where driving the growth of US and Canadian visitors can be explored.

"It's a cycle that can be both virtuous and vicious," she said. "Communication is at the center of it all. You can have the best property in the world, the best facilities, the best amenities, but if no one knows it is there, it is doomed from the beginning. However if you actively promote, and then disappoint visitors from social-media rich markets such as the US and Canada, they will be quick to post and quick to criticize. You may delight 20 customers and never hear about it, but if you anger just one, he or she will tell the world! You need also to take this feedback, and put it into action, just as we have done at The Grand in the past year, where we have rolled out a host of new amenities and facilities for our guests from near and far."

Mr. Martin concurred, urging the market to move away from cookie cutter, everyone-gets-the-same-trip treatment of years gone by, and toward a model that allows for individualizing authentic travel

experiences to where guests feel as though they have a chance to explore and learn about the real Vietnam.

He highlighted visa reform as a key driver for the nation's future growth in attracting visitors from the US and Canada, highlighting that Vietnam's neighbors all have far simpler processes – whether that is the pre-approval free visa on arrival processes of Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia; or simply no visa requirements such as those of Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. He indicated that this was an area at which Vietnam was at a competitive disadvantage compared to other countries in the region. Vietnam's own experience mirrors this, with removal of UK and many EU visas seeing visitor numbers jump by up to 25% (in the case of Italy) and 16% (for UK visitors). Mr. Duc indicated that this was a matter that the relevant authorities were working on, with an e-visa system presently under development.

Both Ms. Mendoza and Mr. Martin were effusive in their praise for all that Vietnam has to offer visitors from around the world, with Ms. Mendoza highlighting pristine beaches, a rich and vibrant culture and a strong service ethic as particular highlights of her adopted home here. She went on to stress the need for the country to continue to innovate its travel offering to continue to make the most of these assets, and to develop rich, real and authentic travel and tourism offerings for wealthy and affluent visitors to make Vietnam a place they come to love and choose to return to.