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On the Road

At U.S. Entries, No Welcome Mat

By JOE SHARKEY

YOU hear a lot of chatter at travel conferences like the World Travel and Tourism Council's annual meeting, held recently in Washington.

But a business traveler from Germany got my attention when he described what travel to the United States could be like these days. "At the airport, I was questioned very rudely for 20 minutes," he said. " 'Who are you?' 'What are you doing here?' Before unification, I was treated better at the checkpoints going into East Germany."

Whoa. What do we make of a foreign business traveler comparing his arrival in the United States with a pass through the surly gantlet at Checkpoint Charlie before the wall came down?

One thing became clear at this year's tourism council meeting, after all the happy proclamations about travel's global economic impact (leisure and business travel will account for more than \$3 trillion in direct spending worldwide this year, for example). We have a problem, and Jay Rasulo, the chairman of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, addressed it in a speech to more than 500 representatives from the world's travel industry.

"The U.S. share of international travel has dropped double digits since 2000, and 35 percent since 1992," he said. "Meanwhile, the global travel market is growing by leaps and bounds."

Mr. Rasulo suggested a marketing campaign on the scale of "an Apollo project" to sell the United States more effectively around the world. But even the cheery representative from the happy realm of Disney acknowledged the big fat Dumbo in the room: For many foreign travelers, entering the United States has become an unpleasant proposition.

Even for residents of the relatively few countries where visas are not required, there is confusion about post-9/11 requirements for entry to the United States. "The general takeaway is that the U.S. doesn't trust you," Mr. Rasulo said.

Others at the conference addressed that perception, and the obviously delicate balance between security and accessibility.

"We are emphatically behind the idea that we must in this country be full partners with the rest of the world in a robust and free-flowing pattern of travel and trade," said Michael Chertoff, the secretary of homeland security.

Homeland Security and the State Department earlier this year announced a joint initiative to do a better job in handling foreign visitors.

Some of that initiative has to be focused on the Middle East, one of the world's fastest-growing travel markets, said Maurice Flanagan, the vice chairman of Emirates Group, owner of Emirates Airlines, based in Dubai. He said the United States had developed a

"blind spot" and put too many obstacles in front of travelers from Arab countries. "The Arab travel market is very large, very first class and growing very fast," he said.

Added Thomas J. Donohue, the chief executive of the United States Chamber of Commerce, "If you want to do business with the Arab world, you have to go to London."

The government is working to address the growing demand for air travel while improving security, partly with the creation of a technology-based air travel system called NextGen, said Norman Y. Mineta, secretary of transportation. The system is still on the drawing boards.

"Imagine how much more attractive travel will be in a future with virtually no flight delays, where a pilot can choose the most direct route around weather and congestion, saving hours of time and millions of gallons of jet fuel," Mr. Mineta said.

"I see the NextGen initiative," he said, "as having greater implications for travel tourism and commerce than any other transportation project undertaken by the United States government since creating the Interstate Highway System in 1956."

Let's end with a report on the conference's dinner, sponsored by Disney. Engraved invitations to the "magical evening" went out to all attendees, including reporters from around the world. The media were shunted to a loading dock out back and assembled out of sight in a holding pen set off from the ballroom by a high blue curtain.

"Security," the loading dock guard explained.

The previous afternoon, I had wandered over to the mall to witness a big pro-immigration demonstration. At the dinner the next night, I couldn't help but notice that the waiters and bartenders, nearly all of whom appeared to be Latino, wore brightly colored Mickey Mouse hats.

"They said we had to," one waiter explained.

It's a small world after all.