

U.S. looks to tourism for revenue

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President Barack Obama is trying to take advantage of what's quickly becoming the country's largest service export: international tourists.

With overseas visitors pumping \$153 billion into the U.S. economy last year — an increase of \$19 billion that Commerce Department figures show put it ahead of the combined benefits of the new trade pacts signed with South Korea, Colombia and Panama — the administration has launched a task force to issue more travel visas to Brazil and China, among other developing countries. Already, the number of Brazilian tourists jumped 26 percent last year to 1.5 million, while Chinese visitors were up 36 percent to more than 1 million.

Tourists are a special kind of stimulus: They spend their money here and head back home without imposing costs for health care or education on taxpayers, essentially allowing the United States to siphon some of the prosperity in developing countries, where there have been large, albeit uneven, wealth explosions.

"The richer countries become, the more tourists come our way," said Mark Doms, chief economist at the Commerce Department.

More tourism spending means more jobs — 44,000 last year, thanks to an additional 1.5 million visitors who came to the United States from abroad, according to the U.S. Travel Association. That's still a level well below the peak in 2000: America's share of international tourism has dropped to 12.4 percent from 17 percent.

This spring, Obama's task force will issue its strategy on boosting tourism. A marketing campaign through a group called Brand USA will begin in April, according to the Commerce Department. The effort seeks to introduce international travelers to lesser-known American cities.

"There are things that the administration can do, like send more consulate operations to China and reduce the wait times and facilitate more travelers," said Blain Rethmeier of the U.S. Travel Association. "But what really has to happen is Congress needs to expand the visa waiver program."

Among the trickier provisions: The administration wants to expand the list of 36 countries — including the United Kingdom, Japan and Germany — that are allowed to have their citizens stay in the U.S. as long as three months without a visa.

But that expansion would require support from House Republicans. The Travel Association already has begun lobbying them.

“You have some conservative Republicans seeing this as an immigration issue, rather than as a security and economic issue,” Rethmeier said.

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