

Flight of Friendship shows that Phuket is ready for tourism

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By Arnie Weissmann

Evelyn Curtin-Spencer wanted to do something to help. While on hold, waiting to make a donation to Unicef to benefit tsunami survivors, the home agent from Chadds Ford, Pa., picked up Travel Weekly and read about the Flight of Friendship.

She read how Sho Dozono, owner of Azumano Travel in Portland, Ore., was organizing a trip to Phuket, Thailand, to show support for tourism workers there. And as she read, she realized she wanted to do more than just send money. She wanted to send a message of hope -- in person.

At about that same time, 3,000 miles away in San Francisco, Annie Meyer opened an e-mail from Dozono that described the Flight of Friendship.

Meyer, a vice president of Wells Fargo Bank, manages a \$120 million travel budget that's booked through Azumano. A few days later, she called Dozono and asked if she could join.

The situation repeated itself in one variation or another across the industry and across Dozono's client base. By the departure date of Feb. 7, 61 people had signed onto the Flight of Friendship.

A diversified group

Travel agents, meeting planners and corporate travel managers joined suppliers coming from the aviation, car rental and travel insurance sectors. From his client list, Dozono recruited a member of the Federal Reserve Board, an ex-senator's wife, a city commissioner of Portland and the head of the city's visitors bureau.

And, importantly, he secured the involvement of Nick Stanley, the honorary consul of Thailand for the Pacific Northwest, who then helped secure money to subsidize the trip as well as open doors to the highest levels of officialdom in Thailand.

Industry delegates on the Flight of Friendship

- Rafael Ahlgren, Girard Travel, San Diego
- Mary Lou Boal, Total Travel Service, Madisonville, Ky.
- Fred Bursch, Bursch Travel, Alexandria, Minn., and ASTA treasurer
- Lisa Conway, CSA Travel Protection, Brooklyn, N.Y.
- Evelyn Curtin-Spencer, Chadds Ford Travel, Chadds Ford, Pa.
- Joe d'Alessandro, Portland Visitors Association, Portland, Ore.
- Sho Dozono, Azumano Travel, Portland, Ore.
- Jim Ferguson, PATA director-North America
- Bill Harmon, Azumano Travel, Portland, Ore.
- Tina Harmon, Azumano Travel, Portland, Ore.
- Walter Keats, Asia Pacific Travel, Wilmette, Ill.
- Linda Matthies, PATA Southern California
- Annie Meyer, Wells Fargo Bank, San Francisco
- Kevin Neary, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Portland, Ore.
- Douglas Sachnow, Hemispheres Australia, Boca Raton, Fla.
- Mary Jo Storie, Lotus Travel, Canton, Mass.
- Gail Strickland, PATA, San Diego
- Cynthia Tacci, Travelsmiths, San Jose, Calif.
- Sergio Tacci, Travelsmiths, San Jose, Calif.
- Sara Weiland, PATA Orange County, Huntington Beach, Calif.
- Gil Whelan, Air Philippines, Foster City, Calif.

Upon arrival in Bangkok, the leadership of the delegation was given private briefings by Ralph “Skip” Boyce, U.S. Ambassador to Thailand; ambassador Nitaya Pibulsongkram of the Foreign Ministry; and Secretary Sakthip Krairiksh of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports.

Boyce and Pibulsongkram later addressed the delegation as a whole, and the group met with a director general of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the mayor of the city of Phuket, the vice governor of the province of Phuket and the governor of Krabi Province.

Ready for tourism

Azumano Travel is an American Express-affiliated agency, and Amex co-hosted a reception for the delegates in Bangkok that was attended by Peter de Jong, CEO of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), the leadership of the American Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, advisors to government ministers and the ruling party and local business leaders, including the general manager of Microsoft in Thailand.

The message to the delegation was clear: Many of Thailand’s Andaman Sea resort areas already have recovered from the tsunami, and the local people are eager for the return of tourists.

While some areas, particularly on Phi Phi Island and in Phang Nga province, are not ready for tourism, the majority of properties on Phuket Island are functioning normally but are suffering from occupancy rates in the single digits.

Seeing is believing

After touring Phuket and Krabi (another resort area affected by the tsunami), the message from the delegates to their hosts was equally clear.

We can see that the products are attractive,” Dozono said. “We’re convinced that it’s not too soon, or inappropriate, for travelers to return. And we’ll do what we can to help bring travelers back.”

Regardless of the amount of business that directly or indirectly comes to Thailand as a result of the Flight of Friendship, PATA’s de Jong believes something important has already been accomplished by the mission. “Even if it’s simply symbolic, it’s important to be a messenger, to help change perceptions,” he said. “It’s all about perception.”

De Jong also said “the velocity, focus and agenda of the Flight of Friendship is pretty damn remarkable. It’s the only joint industry-consumer initiative of its kind that I’ve seen.”

Boyce hailed the “citizen ambassadors” of the group, saying, “Speaking as an American, I have to say that this type of reaching out is amazing -- and very timely.”



For many of the delegates, the highlight of the trip was marching in Phuket's Chinese New Year parade. Simply interacting with a festive crowd of residents reinforced the understanding that, whatever disaster may have befallen the town a month and a half earlier, life goes on in all of its dimensions.

Dozono was generous in sharing credit for the mission. He cites an opinion piece in *Travel Weekly* as the inspiration for the project. He

redirects praise for the content of the trip to Nick Stanley, who helped raise money and cut red tape. He acknowledges a debt to PATA, which successfully encouraged its members to join the group.

But by the end of the mission, there was no doubt in any delegate's mind that the Flight of Friendship took off because of Dozono's passion, credibility and organizational skills.

"Sho just has a way of getting you involved," said the delegation's co-chair, Elaine Franklin, a political consultant in Portland.

"He begins a phone call by saying, 'I'm thinking about ... ' and ends it with, 'We have to do this, and I really need your help.' Who can refuse?"

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