

Why I'll be on the Flight of Friendship

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To contact Arnie Weissmann, send comments to aweissmann@travelweekly.com.

By Arnie Weissmann



The final factor that got me off the fence and booked onto the industry's Flight of Friendship trip to Phuket, Thailand, next week was a conversation with Rainy Chan. The Flight of Friendship is the industrywide effort to assist tsunami-affected tourism businesses.

Its goal is to have a representative from each U.S. state onboard to help assess the situation in Phuket, show solidarity with those affected and report back to both travelers and the industry on the state of the resort island.

Trip organizer and agency owner Sho Dozono of Azumano Travel in Portland, Ore., who has arranged sponsorship to cover the land portion of the trip for participants ("[Reaching out to Phuket](#)," Jan. 24), says there is still room, though time is running short -- the program begins Feb. 8 in Bangkok.

But back to my conversation with Rainy Chan, and what she said that convinced me to go.

She's the general manager of the Peninsula Hotel in Bangkok, and used a few of her vacation days earlier this month to fly to New York and speak with some key travel agents.

Her purpose was not to promote the Peninsula or get the word out that everything is OK with her property. Rather, she wanted to talk about what's happening regionwide to hoteliers in east Asia.

Perhaps Chan's previous experiences help explain why she chose to spend her vacation time this way.

On 9/11, she was working at the Peninsula Hotel in New York and saw the hospitality industry all but crumble during the dark months that followed the terrorist attacks.

She was working at the Peninsula in Hong Kong when SARS hit and watched occupancy rates plunge into the single digits.

Most recently, she was in Bangkok when the tsunami crashed into the western coastline of Thailand.

Thai tourism officials announced last week that they have revised estimated arrivals downward and expect inbound traffic to be off by 1.4 million visitors in 2005.

But it's not just the coastal areas that are affected -- the economic impact has reached much,

much farther inland.

“A lot of the hotel bookings throughout Thailand are pre-beach or post-beach,” Chan explained.

As a result, the perception that Phuket and other beach areas are out of commission has hurt properties in the landlocked capital.

The Peninsula in Bangkok, which is not exclusively a leisure property and somewhat buoyed by business travel, has seen occupancy rates drop by 25%.

And the problem extends beyond Thailand.

“Properties in areas that were even farther from the tsunami -- Bali, for example, which has already gone through so much -- are suffering for no reason at all,” she said. “And then the initial talk about disease in tsunami areas had a chilling effect on bookings regionwide.”

Like Flight of Friendship organizer Dozono, Chan acknowledges that the larger businesses will be all right in the long run, but she is concerned about small tourism businesses in the region.

“People who have saved up their whole lives to open a little shack that sells something to tourists on the beach -- the only way they can rebuild their lives is through the return of tourism,” Chan said.

When I told her about the Flight of Friendship, it struck an emotional chord with her. Chan thought it was a terrific way for the industry to help -- not just for Phuket and Thailand but the entire region.

“It’s really ...,” she paused, searching for the right words, “exactly what we need. It’s very, very important to us to see that the industry over here really cares.”

And so I decided to go. Any lingering doubts about the effectiveness of a show of support were gone.

And it’s not too late for you to go, too.

For details and to sign up, visit www.flightoffriendship.com.

See you in Phuket.