

PRESS RELEASE: TAG

TAG EFFORTS SUCCEED IN INCREASING VISITOR ARRIVALS

Following the events of December 5, Fiji's tourism industry faced a major crisis, with arrivals plummeting and a significant cancellation in forward bookings.

With tourism the most important money earner in the country, action was urgently needed to address the crisis.

While the Fiji Visitor Bureau is responsible for marketing Fiji overseas, in this situation called for an industry-wide initiative where instant decisions could be made with the support of all the key industry players.

Enter the Tourism Action Group (TAG)! Made up of representatives of all the major industry-wide associations as well as the Fiji Visitors Bureau, TAG held its first meeting shortly after December 5.

Damend Gounder is Chairman with Air Pacific CEO, John Campbell, and marketing manager, Michael Nacola, as well as representatives from Air New Zealand and Virgin Blue; Dixon Seeto, President of the Fiji Islands Hotels & Tourism Association (FIHTA) joined by members Aaron Mcrath, Robert Wade, Patrick Wong, Lorna Eden, Richard Bussiere, and Paul Hughes; the Society of Fiji Travel Agents, Gerry Harvey and Tony Whitton. Chief Executive of the Fiji Visitors Bureau, Bill Gavoka, and Jo Tuamoto were part of TAG as was Cherill Watson who replaced Tuamoto when he left the Bureau for other employment.

TAG first organised the strategy for a phased promotional programme.

The first phase was to organise national advertising campaigns in New Zealand and Australia with the primary purpose of bringing visitor numbers back to Fiji and in restoring confidence in the destination.

This was accomplished through tactical campaigns with reduced airfares and attractive discounts and value added packages, especially in accommodation.

At the same time the TAG team launched public relation activities primarily in New Zealand and Australia to counteract the immense negative publicity resulting from the military takeover.

The second phase of the campaign that will conclude at the end of April will continue with much of what was done in phase one but with a greater emphasis on media visitations that began in February.

Besides organizing and implementing the Phase I strategies the tourism industry contributed in excess of \$8 million through accommodation and airline discounts. It also paid for task force visits to Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. This is over and above the free airfares, accommodation, transfers and meals provided by the industry for media and travel agents visits.

The results of these efforts have seen the steady return of visitors to Fiji. An indication of the success of the TAG efforts is in the booking patterns from the December low of -105% (an indication of the massive cancellations following the December 5 event) to an average growth of 25% for bookings from the January thru March 2007 period.

A further sign that the campaigns were working was that January was only down by 15% from last year, although it must be cautioned that hotel discounts were 40% so even though the numbers were up the revenue was down.

In addition to the work TAG has done towards returning the tourism industry to normal, it has also played a major role in increasing tourism awareness through its campaign "Sharing the Bula Spirit."

Through workshops organized by TPAF, through television, newspaper and radio commercials, through billboards and posters, and decals with the "Sharing the Bula Spirit" logo, a major effort has been made to reinforce to all those directly and indirectly involved in tourism to "make that extra effort to ensure that the visitor enjoys the very best in hospitality."

"TAG faced this major challenge of rebuilding the tourism industry as one voice and one message. It has taken enormous sacrifice by all of those involved but it is an indication of how committed those in the industry are towards returning tourism to normal," said Damend Gounder, TAG Chairman.

TAG is expected to cease its operations by the end of April turning all of its work over to the Fiji Visitors Bureau.

“Essentially TAG has stopped the decline in numbers and restore confidence in Fiji as a holiday destination. This has come about at an extreme expenses to the industry, and we are still faced with many challenges. The current travel advisories are still hindering visitor arrivals and the reduction of the marketing funds for the FVB are limiting our marketing efforts. Besides these setbacks I am confident that we will meet these challenges with the same professionalism that has made tourism the number one industry in Fiji.

“Essentially the crisis is over and our work is basically done. As it has done so affectively in the past, the FVB will continue to market Fiji overseas,” said Mr. Gounder.