

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



1801 Is it Time to Think the Unthinkable About Tourism?

I want you to imagine a situation that some people think is unimaginable. I want you to imagine Guam without tourism. Seems like a strange thing to say, doesn't it? Guam has seen decades-worth of visitors coming here and spending — right? Guam will always have masses of visitors coming and spending — right? What if they stop coming? What would we do? What should we start doing now? Let's see where this takes us, next on The Extra Point.

According to the United Nations tourism website in January, an estimated 1.4 billion tourists travelled internationally in 2024, indicating that the global visitor industry has recovered 99% of pre-pandemic levels.

People in our region didn't get the memo. We are down over 60% from before Covid. Here are the numbers I found.

GVB board chairman George Chiu was quoted as saying that Japan and South Korea sent a combined 1.5 million visitors our way pre-Covid.

I downloaded GVB's monthly reports from June of last year to May of this year, 12 months' worth and current. Those two countries amounted to 550,000. That's just short of 37% of what we had. Global tourism may have recovered, but Guam's industry is on life support.

Industry stakeholders join politicians to say we need to tweak the product to make Guam more attractive. We've been hearing the same rhetoric for decades. A little tweak here, a little tweak there, and it'll be okay. That's all we need.

What IS the product? Tumon Bay is a mini version of Waikiki. Places to shop, places to eat, access to the beach. Did I miss anything?

I know the villages try to get involved and create activities. There's always talk about adding more "culture" to the mix.

There are power players in the industry and each wants his/her way, and wants GVB to spend its money their way. They often don't agree. At the end of the day they all want the same thing: For visitors to come here, spend until their credit cards have skid marks, and then go home.

I don't have anything against that, but let me add something to it. It would be peachy if a decent percentage of these people came back again. I haven't seen that number for a while. When I did track the percentage of returnees, it wasn't pretty.

I know that thousands of jobs are at stake and scores of people desperately want the industry to recapture its former glory. Yet, we need to face reality.

We don't have a monopoly on sun, sand, and spending money. There are other destinations in this part of the world that offer that, and they're cheaper.

But if that is all we have, do we at least do it better than the other places? Is social media ablaze with incredible testimonials about four days in Guam, which drive people in our primary markets to beat down the doors of tour sellers in their countries, demanding that they be booked to come here. If you look at the numbers, apparently not.

So who's to blame? I know the rules. You're not supposed to bring up a critical problem without pointing fingers at somebody — right?

The easy targets are politicians, GVB, industry players who pocketed millions and millions when things were going great, but didn't look into their crystal balls to keep tabs on a changing visitor market, thus not seeing that one day what we had to offer would no longer be able to attract as many people?

(con't.)

I'm not a finger-pointing kind of guy. I'm a question-asking kind of guy. Here's one I'd like to ask everybody in the groups I just referred to.

1. What happens if the numbers never come back, and our visitor count for the foreseeable future is in the range of 45-50,000 per month? What if it's less? What happens then?

Let me take that in two different directions.

2. Do we keep hammering away at the Korean and Japanese markets, spending those promo dollars and hoping things somehow manage to get better?

3. Do we think the unthinkable about tourism, where we accept the low-number trend, put less emphasis on our efforts to build the markets back up, and redirect some of the money to other potential growth projects?

If it was your call, what would you do?

Tomorrow, we're going to jump back into this conversation.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3FM, the Ray Gibson Show, and First Hawaiian Bank, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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