

## Rebuilding normalcy

By Arnie Weissmann, Editor in Chief

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I was speaking last week with a casual acquaintance and asked if she had a nice holiday over the New Year. She told me about a trip she had taken where she had encountered a few minor travel hassles. "At least I wasn't vacationing in ... that place," she said. Where? I asked. "You know, where they had the tidal wave," she said.

This conversation made me cringe, but hadn't prepared me for a question from an industry friend who wondered whether, because of the tsunami, he should cancel a trip to Delhi he was planning in April. I replied that was like asking if he should cancel a trip to St. Louis because a hurricane hit Miami four months earlier. As in the aftermath of other disasters, there will be two classes of victims of the tsunami, direct and indirect. The media has effectively covered the plight of the direct. The indirect are those across South Asia and parts of Africa who will feel the economic aftershocks that occur when geographic ignorance collides with travel planning.

The lack of geographical knowledge among some Americans is certainly embarrassing, but worse, it's harmful to people who work in countries traumatized by catastrophe. Most tourist sites in the affected countries were unaffected by the tsunami. The economies of these countries will be burdened by relief efforts, and it certainly won't help the economic picture if travelers avoid the entire region. Travel agents, tour operators and hoteliers can give geography lessons to clients planning to visit affected areas, but perhaps more importantly, the industry is in a unique position to help the survivors who were more directly impacted by the tsunami.

I've seen reports that resorts in certain affected areas, like Phuket, Thailand, are undamaged and ready for business. Would I recommend sending someone there? At this point, I think it's understandable that people wouldn't want to vacation in an area that has recently undergone a disaster.

Could you relax, guilt-free, in a swimming pool while half the people in town are in mourning? But I would also keep in mind the uplifting effect tourism can have for people living where calamity has recently struck. And tourism's positive potential can take effect much sooner than most people might think.

For instance, it made national news when, by Columbus Day 2001, travel agency owner Sho Dozono of Azumano Travel in Portland, Ore., brought a group of 900 members of his local chamber of commerce to New York following the attacks of 9/11. He called it the "Flight for Freedom" and did it in part because he knew New York was a great destination, in part because prices were attractive and in part to demonstrate solidarity between Portlanders and New Yorkers. That trip had an important symbolic impact on both the travelers and the hosts that was far greater than the economic benefit. It was seen as an encouraging sign, during very dark days, that the return to normalcy had begun.

Similarly, after the critical, lifesaving needs of the surviving victims of the tsunami have been met, they'll still be in need of economic attention and shows of support from the outside world. While I bemoan the level of geographical awareness in this country, it's hard to overestimate the generosity of Americans. Once the basic infrastructure of affected areas is back in place, group visits, like Dozono's to New York, could be promoted as inherently interesting and as an opportunity to show support for people rebuilding normalcy. I'd imagine that clients who might otherwise return from a trip with complaints about conditions in developing countries would, in this instance, come back satisfied to have made a connection with people who, in every sense, live in a world apart.