

4/6/12

For a government that depends on tourism for much of its income, the CNMI's sure doesn't behave like one. One would expect such a government to be organized to ensure that tourism, and tourist-related matters, were given first priority. After all, if your income depended on tourists, wouldn't you want to make sure that those tourists were well taken care of?

Yet, if media reports can be relied upon, there wasn't a single government official in evidence last week-end when four Chinese tourists, on Saipan for their honeymoon, lost their wallets, their cameras, their passports and other miscellaneous items to thieves who broke into their rental car at Ladder Beach.

"What should happen in a situation such as this is for MVA [Marianas Visitors Authority] to immediately step in with a rapid response team to offer assistance to the victims and help them salvage their vacations," says a letter to the editor that appeared in both papers today. But that did not happen. The tourists were left to flounder on their own, for there is no office or agency within government charged with making sure that tourist safety is assured, that tourist needs are met, that tourists are protected from the unsightly, the unscrupulous and the unlawful.

Further, noted letter-writer Ron Fusco, "DPS [Department of Public Safety] and MVA [should] set up some sting operations. Wildlife monitoring cameras (very appropriate, since we are dealing with animals) are available for less than \$200. Put one at every tourist site. DPS and Commerce [should] hammer the pawn shops....Check their records. If they don't have records for every item in their shop shut them down and prosecute them." Simple, obvious, inexpensive steps that should have been implemented long ago, but have not because there is no agency within the CNMI charged with tourist protection and advocacy per se.

The cost to the CNMI in lost tourism - because, thanks to the internet such bad news will spread far and wide - is immeasurable. Isn't it high time the CNMI government began putting words into action, and changed MVA's enabling legislation to hold it responsible for more than just enticing tourists to come to Saipan, Tinian, Rota? One could, of course, advocate the establishment of a new office of Tourism Protection and Advocacy, but particularly in today's economy, and with MVA already in existence, broadening MVA's responsibilities would appear to be the more cost-effective solution.

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If government's goal really is to promote tourism, more needs to be done as well to clean up, repair and maintain tourist sites. Again, current CNMI law holds no one accountable for doing so. In the meantime, concrete railings crumble and fade, cigarette stubs litter the grounds, monuments chip and turn grey, fallen leaves and eroding soil cover sidewalks, vines and tangentangen overgrow landmarks, restrooms remain unkempt or locked ....The distant vistas may be lovely, but what's underfoot, close at hand, is not.

With government unwilling and/or unable to do the obvious, the necessary, in terms of promoting tourism, perhaps its time people took things into their own hands and formed a volunteer Tourism Support Group that would take over. There's no reason that volunteers could not repaint the monuments at Banzai Cliff, or take on clearing the Marpi path on a regular basis, or repair and repaint the concrete fake railing at Bird Island Lookout. There isn't any reason the MVA couldn't require its security guards to pick up cigarette butts, but since they seem unwilling to do so, volunteers could do that as well.

The Chamber of Commerce, made up of businesses which rely, in one way or another, on tourism for their own survival, could form the nucleus for volunteer groups - assigning tasks, making schedules, soliciting volunteers. After all, it's to their benefit to make sure the tourist finds things inviting - neat, orderly, clean, in good repair.

Nor need the effort be restricted to Chamber members. The Chamber could recruit members of the community, students, other civic organizations. A healthy tourism industry benefits everyone; it only makes sense that everyone should help to make sure that the industry is, indeed, healthy.

The economy is not going to improve unless tourism traffic increases. But quality tourism traffic is not going to increase unless and until the quality of the tourism environment improves. And that is up to the people - and the government - of the CNMI.

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With a headline that reads "Society of Jesus expands Micronesian Seminar programs," today's *Marianas Variety* reported that MicSem's library and archives will be moved from Pohnpei, site of the Federated States of Micronesia's capital, to Chuuk's Xavier High School, and its discussion forum discontinued. Hardly an expansion! While much of the content is available on the web, those seeking in-person access will now have to travel to Chuuk - with its more limited connecting flights - in order to do so.

Initial discussions are under way, the report states, to transition the "social research component" of MicSem to the University of San Francisco, a Jesuit university. How this constitutes an expansion is not at all clear either, particularly since San Francisco is far-removed from the site of the social research in Micronesia that MicSem had been doing.

Other than the statement that "Fr. Hezel has agreed to pursue conversations with USF on behalf of the Society of Jesus," Father Hezel's future role in MicSem, of which he was founder and long-time director, is not identified.

The moves are the result of an external study of the research and pastoral functions of Micronesian Seminar, but no indication was provided in the newspaper account as to why the study was undertaken, nor what reasoning was used to reach the decisions that have been made. Hezel is a highly regarded scholar and prolific author of Micronesian history and ethnography. He will be a keynote speaker at the 1st Marianas History Conference (see below).

Short takes

- Washington, D.C.'s cherry blossoms are in bloom, and lovely pictures of them amid the surrounding D.C. monuments are all over the net. Japan's also blossom in April and May. Saipan's flame trees are beginning to bloom, with the Flame Tree Arts Festival taking place at Civic Center Park in Susupe April 20-22. Would anyone in the CNMI even know if the blossoming of the trees was being featured anywhere abroad?

- The up-coming CNMI Flame Tree festival has set "Be a Part - promote, preserve, and perpetuate your Culture" as its theme. That's all very well for encouraging area artists to participate, but one wonders what appeal that has for visiting tourists. Surely, effort is also being made to encourage tourists to attend?

- The 1st Marianas History Conference will take place June 14-16, 2012, at the Fiesta Hotel on Saipan, co-ordinated by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council and the Guam Preservation

Trust. The conference theme is ♦ One Archipelago, Many Stories. ♦ Keynote speakers are Robert Underwood, President of the University of Guam, and Father Hezel, former director of

the Micronesian Seminar. More information is available at <  
<http://guampreservationtrust.com/images/1st%20Mariana%20Islands%20History%20Conference.pdf>>.

- Kudos to *Marianas Variety* reporter Tamy Doty for her series and accompanying graphics detailing the governor's FY 2013 budget. Which of course, doesn't make any more palatable the increase in the budget of the Department of Community and Cultural Affairs (by 69%), that of the governor's office (by 32%), or that of the legislators' discretionary funds.

- Today's newspaper anomaly: a Supreme court press release states that a ruling has been issued in the "In re: Cushnie" case regarding a petition for a writ of mandamus, but does not appear to indicate what that ruling was - whether the petition was granted.

- Lastly, several readers pointed out that it was James Cameron - rather than George, as I had written - who dove the Marianas Trench last month. My apologies. I have no idea where "George" came from. And many thanks to the sharp-eyed readers!