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## Ailing tourism industry banks on Biden

Along with vaccine, president-elect seen as cure for lull in foreign visitors

By Christopher Muther  
GLOBE STAFF

After months of feeling mostly dread, with shreds of anxiety and a pinch of panic, Jan Jones, the University of New Haven's coordinator for hospitality and tourism man-

agement, finally felt something different recently: a glimmer of hope.

Some of that came from the news that Pfizer was seeing success rates of more than 90 percent with its vaccine for COVID-19 — the virus that has

battered the travel industry — but she said most of that emotion came from the realization that Joe Biden would become the 46th president of the United States in January.

"I honestly feel like this may open up a better dialogue between countries," Jones said. "That's something that is so important to tourism. [Under Trump] we had a president

who was not seen as welcoming to visitors. I think that's going to change under the Biden administration."

Along with the news of Pfizer and Moderna's promising COVID-19 vaccine trials, the travel community is feeling buoyed by the thought of Biden and Kamala Harris coming to the White House.

TOURISM, Page A6

## Tourism industry hopes for Biden boost

### ► TOURISM

Continued from Page A1

Depending on which set of statistics you analyze, the number of international tourists to the United States either dropped under the Trump administration (leading to the famous "Trump slump"), or, at the very least, stagnated after a decade of steady growth.

President Trump introduced a strict travel ban on arrivals from several struggling Muslim-majority countries, touted building a wall between the United States and Mexico (one of the country's biggest tourism markets), and tightened visa requirements on foreign workers and students. Experts said these moves gave international

tourists the impression that the country had hung a "Closed for business" sign along its borders.

"We can't underestimate the good-will factor of a Biden administration around the world with companies and visitors that are significant to our economy," said John Niser, head of the International School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. "With Biden, you have a seasoned politician. He's not going to be going around saying silly things. That's going to go a long way."

But opinions and perception aside, it comes down to numbers. The number of foreign tourists and business travelers arriving in the United States remained relatively steady under Trump, growing by 3.1 percent between 2015 and 2018. But that increase was downright dismal compared to increases seen by other countries. According to Oxford Economics, a global forecasting firm, tourism to Canada ballooned by 23 percent during that same period, Mexico saw a 49 percent increase, and Spain grew by 41 percent. By 2019, Spain was drawing more international tourists than the United States.

If the number of global travelers is seen as a pie, then the US slice of that pie shrank between 2015 and 2018 from 13.7 percent to 11.7 percent. While that drop may sound minuscule, the US Travel Association projected that the decline in market share represented losses to the US economy of 14 million international visitors, \$59 billion in international traveler spending, and 120,000 jobs.

Both Niser and the University of New Haven's Jones, who came from England and Cana-

da, respectively, said anecdotally that their friends have been watching the political reality show unfolding in the United States and expressed hesitation about visiting.

Restrictions on students and skilled workers coming into the country is part of the reason why Aleksandar Tomic, associate dean for strategy, innovation, and technology at Boston College, said tourism to the United States plateaued under Trump. But he said the strength of the dollar against foreign currencies, not necessarily anti-immigrant rhetoric, may have been a factor in keeping international leisure travelers from planning their pre-COVID-19 travels here.

Not everyone is letting Trump off the hook so easily for the sagging state of tourism during his first three years in office. Robert R. Johnson, a professor at the Heider College of Business at Creighton University in Omaha believes that Trump's America-first, isolationist message drove away tourists and stomped on a lot of longstanding goodwill.

"Without question, the inauguration of Biden will positively impact inbound US tourism," he said. "One need look no further than the US higher educational system for a parallel with US tourism. Colleges and universities are reporting dramatic increases in interest from international students in light of the Biden-Harris victory. The same shift will take place in a post-COVID world with respect to US tourism. There is a pent-up demand on two fronts — health and atmosphere. With both likely to improve by the second half of 2021, we could witness a boon in US tourism, providing a boost to the US economy."

Experts say the election of

Harris as the country's first Black, South Asian, and female vice president also sends a positive message to the world.

But more importantly, travel experts say, the change of leadership is projecting an image of stability, which, post-coronavirus, could help restore the international tourism market. Even nonpartisan, nonprofit groups such as the US Travel Association expressed hope that the arrival of Biden will help make a difference in restoring some of the luster of the United States to the world.

"Obviously the concept of a travel ban was not overly welcoming," said lobbyist Tori Emerson Barnes, executive vice president of public affairs and policy at the US Travel Association. "There were definite challenges."

But for an industry that has been decimated by the pandemic, Barnes is counting on Biden to send a message to the world that the United States will begin a national, coordinated response to the virus and also to put the welcome mat back out to visitors once a coronavirus vaccine makes travel safe again.

"I think it's particularly helpful that he has preexisting relationships with other governments," she said. "In the midst of the pandemic, that can really help to bring folks together to find global solutions to help not only the country, but our industry specifically. I do think that there will be a greater amount of diplomacy, which I anticipate will go a long way in helping our image in the world."

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