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Another Day In Paradise – The Lesson Behind the Tatami Hampton Incident

By Paul Tse

Free dinners at the Lan Kwai Fong, free trips to the Ocean Park, Disney and Ngong Ping 360, all it seemed the 44 travelers affected by the Tatami Hampton Incident were, after all the ordeals, properly settled. And Hong Kong was saved from being the laughingstock in the tourist world. Or was it? Simply browse the comments left on the internet by Chinese and Singaporean tourists, in which many were saying “There is no way we are coming to HK” in one way or other, and you’ll find the answer was a resounding “No”.

What made it worse than the incident itself, was the fact that the above-mentioned “solutions” were not initiated by the Tourism Board, Tourism Commission, nor the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong, rather it was the affected tourists who dared to take matters into their own hands and forced the HKSAR government and TIC to properly address this thorny issue. And that was exactly why they had the “privilege” to visit Lan Kwai Fong, instead of having to spend the night at the Henry Leung Yaumati Community Center, as if they were a pack of homeless people. It was their defiance, and days of continuous slamming from the media that finally made the authority buckled under pressure.

As people can imagine, if the tourists were “nice” and “forgiving” enough to accept such arrangement, TIC, in its best George. W. Bush imitation and “Mission Accomplished” mindset, would’ve never bother to come out in the public and offer its apology. True, the incident was solved, but unfortunately not by the government or the industry watchdog, but by the affected tourists themselves.

It’s obvious that TIC never quite shed its old habit of acting slow and ineffectively. Remember in 2000, an “Emergence Contingency Mechanism” was established to safeguard the interest of all inbound tourists? Founded by TIC and headed by executives of major travel agencies, it serves as the focal point between tourist industry and related government branches when needed, and is capable of summoning dozens of buses within an hour to swiftly dispatch hundreds of tourists to available

hotels, so in case of unfortunate events like Tatami Hampton, tourist won't have to be left unattended on the street, at bus stations, airports or ports. Now people have to ask, what happened to the "Emergence Contingency Mechanism" when the 44 affected travelers needed help most? It's TIC's failure to take swift and proper action cost HK's reputation as the Tourist's Paradise.

For the past decade, TIC had, and has been the "bully on the block" for too long. Members of the Council think fellow industry professionals will never notice the deterioration of the market environment. Tourism, being one of the bedrock of HK economy, those in the industry are making far less than, say financial service, another key sector of the economy, not to mentioned the huge gap in professional image.

"Silence is a crime!" as Bertrand Russell once famously put, fellow travel industry professional should learn not only from the Tatami Hampton Incident, but also from the 44 affected travelers. If we are fed up and disgusted with how things are, shouldn't we get on our feet and fight, like the tourists?