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Visa switch a boon for US hotels, resorts

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Universal Studios Hollywood. [Photo/IC]

Changes to the United States' visa policies are attracting more Chinese tourists, including to lesser-known destinations, providing a boost for hotels, an industry expert has said.

"While the gateway US cities are receiving ever-increasing visitors, such as in New York City and Los Angeles, lesser-known spots are believed to be witnessing a drastic increase in Chinese tourists," said Lindsey Ueberroth, chief executive of Preferred Hotels and Resorts, which provides sales, marketing and distribution services to independent luxury hotels.

"There's a huge opportunity for the industry, and we're very excited about it."

Soon after US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed an agreement late last year to extend tourist and business visas from one year to 10 years, and student visas from one year to five years, there has been a marked spike in interest.

The US State Department has seen a 41 percent increase in Chinese applications for US visas, according to Christopher Thompson, president and CEO of Brand USA.

Brand USA - originally the Corporation for Travel Promotion - is a public-private partnership, with the federal government matching any funding it receives from the private sector, up to a maximum of \$100 million. It was created in 2009, when Congress passed the Travel Promotion Act to promote tourism.

More than two million Chinese visited the US last year, and the US Department of Commerce estimates more than seven million more will arrive by 2021.

The US issued 351,650 business and tourist visas to Chinese citizens in December and January, a year-on-year increase of 68.2 percent.

Ueberroth said the increase is partly the reason why Preferred Hotels and Resorts is trying to promote its brand recognition and build loyalty programs in China. The company, based in Chicago, represents 650 hotels, resorts and serviced residences worldwide, and serves as a reservation and marketing platform for properties.

To boost recognition among the Chinese, Preferred Hotels and Resorts have partnered with Air China to offer members of the airline's Phoenix Miles program up to 1,600 miles when staying at selected properties.

"The strategic alliance is part of Preferred's campaign to raise awareness of its brand among China's outbound travel market," said Anthony Ross, executive vice-president of the

company's Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa sectors. "Our partnership with Air China's award-winning Phoenix Miles program will bring great visibility to our global network of independent hotels, and allow us to extend additional benefits to both consumers and China's greater travel community."

He added that the growing number of flights between second- and third-tier cities in China and destinations in the US is also a positive signal.

The company has recently launched Preferred Residences, a collection of villas, bungalows, condominiums and other units available at luxury hotels and resorts, targeted at families.

"By defining hotels based on experiences versus brands or stars, we're creating stronger positioning for our member hotels and expanding their opportunities to reach more guests," Ueberroth said.

He said the company will introduce updated advertising campaigns in China over the coming months.

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