**Denight: Guam’s Chamorro culture is its most valuable differentiator**

Buenas yan Håfa Adai! At this time of year, most of our source markets are getting cooler, and travelers are planning their winter getaways, hopefully to our warm and sunny island. It’s also that time of year that the travel industry publishes some of their world’s-best rankings.

I recently read the November issue of Conde Nast Traveler that features the 2017 Reader’s Choice Awards. The underlying reason from more than 300,000 readers on why they select a destination was most intriguing, although not surprising. Travelers expressed a desire to deeply connect with the unique cultures of the destinations they visit, which brings me to the fifth objective of the Tourism 2020 strategic plan – promoting the Chamorro culture.

The Chamorro culture has always been Guam’s differentiating factor.  Exit surveys have reinforced that visitors value their cultural experiences. They enjoy interacting with our people, Guam’s natural environment, and partaking in local food, music, dance, and art. GVB believes the same: the Guam brand and the Guam experience are not complete without experiencing the Chamorro culture.

The Guam brand goes beyond creating a sense of place. It’s about heightening awareness for our indigenous people and culture and perpetuating them through quality experiences. We want to be known for our rich 4,000-year-old history, rather than just a sun, sand and shopping destination. From the time of arrival, we want visitors to hear, see, taste and feel our culture.

As indicated in the S.T.A.R. survey, residents strongly agree and insist that the Chamorro culture and traditions be at the forefront of how we market our island. Promoting our culture and growing the Håfa Adai Pledge are the foundation of our marketing and branding programs. When we travel to shows, we bring cultural practitioners to help tell our story and give travelers a glimpse of our culture to draw them to Guam.

GVB’s Cultural and Heritage Committee (CHC) ensures that Guam’s culture is accurately represented in GVB’s promotions. In fiscal 2016, CHC extended grant money to 43 groups and organizations that promote and perpetuate our culture. In 2009, the CHC piloted the first Guam Chamorro Dance Academy in Tokyo under the guidance of Master of Chamorro Dance Frank Rabon to foster cultural exchange between Japan and Guam. Today, we have three cultural dance academies (gumas, meaning “houses”) in Japan, two in the US mainland, and one in Taiwan. When we opened the first guma, Master Frank Rabon summed up the experience beautifully. He said, “Bunito I dinaña taotao tano yan I kinahulo' atdao para I Kotturan Chamorro,” which translates into “It is beautiful that the unification of the Chamorro people and the people of the rising sun (Japan) come together in the preservation of the Chamorro culture.”

Sharing our culture is essential to our people. It’s about respecting our identity and heritage and remembering those who came before us. Through our Håfa Adai spirit, we warmly welcome visitors to experience this gem we call home. There is so much more we can do, and we are optimistic that our cultural pride will help us get there.

Next week, I’ll talk about the sixth objective of Tourism 2020 – extend our visitors’ average length of stay.

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