



The Biggest Challenges for US Tourism: Interview with the CEO of US Travel

Visas, international competition, air traffic and the corporate market are a focus for Geoff Freeman

SAN ANTONIO - Responsible for the United States Tourism lobby at the North American Congress and association that encompasses the main industry entities in the country, US Travel is experiencing a moment of achievements to celebrate, but also of many challenges to face. President and CEO of the institution, Geoff Freeman spoke with Portal PANROTAS during the IPW 2023, which took place last week in San Antonio, Texas.

And the fair is precisely the most recent reason to be celebrated. The main exhibition event for United States Tourism to the world, the IPW returned to pre-pandemic levels even without the usual large participation of Chinese and Japanese buyers. More than five thousand professionals from 60 countries attended the Texas IPW. More than 30 Brazilian companies embarked representatives among the buyers.

Freeman also celebrates the end of the requirement of proof of vaccine for entry into the United States, the boiling domestic demand and the definitive resumption after the times of crisis by the covid-19. Brand USA, one of its partner entities, equivalent to Embratur in Brazil, believes that the United States will surpass the 2019 rates by the end of 2024, a year earlier than experts predict.

"My predecessor (Roger Dow) did an excellent job building US Travel and left it very strong, with the ground ready for great growth. The industry is doing very well in leisure, particularly in Home Leisure. The American traveler is not only traveling and is also spending much more on travel than it did before the pandemic", says Freeman, who before taking over US Travel led the Consumer Goods association.

MICE AND COMPETITIVENESS WITH EUROPE

In the meetings, events, incentives and corporate travel sector, MICE, there is still much to be done to return to pre-pandemic levels. "We have to solve these problems and we will," he predicts.

An even greater challenge lies in accelerating the visa issuance process in leading issuing markets for the United States, such as Brazil (527 queuing days); India (647 days) and Mexico (406 days). Geoff Freeman is concerned with intensifying the competitiveness of global destinations, with all the marketing of European countries in the dispute for international visitors, and he knows that much needs to be done on this issue.

"We challenge the State Department to lower the queue to a maximum of 30 days at each US consulate. In the meeting we had here in San Antonio, they demonstrated some progress, but it's clearly not enough. Foreigners will not be coming to the States United while this lasts. We encourage the Biden administration to address this issue that is so serious and puts us at a disadvantage," said the president and CEO of the US Travel Association.

RELATIONSHIP WITH WASHINGTON D.C.

For this, US Travel needs government support. When asked whether such support exists, Freeman was not able to respond with much conviction. "Sometimes," he stated. "Perhaps people thought that the pandemic would wake up government leaders to understand how important Tourism is about what happens when the industry stops. However, the health crisis has passed and, unfortunately, the mindset of most congressmen has returned to what it was before, that is, waiting for the trips to return naturally, without needing great efforts."

One of US Travel's roles is to show that there has to be work, competitiveness. "There are countries that do not require a visa from Brazilians, which puts us in a position of inferiority. We will continue working, but it is clear that they have captured the message that the waiting time to obtain a visa in some markets is embarrassing."

In fact, the US State Department got the message and agrees that the waiting time for issuing a visa in Brazil is "unacceptable", as executives told the PANROTAS Portal.

AIR TRAVEL CHALLENGES

Other important tasks on Freeman's agenda, in addition to the visa issue and international competitiveness, are reducing queues at airport immigration upon arrival of foreigners and improving the air travel experience.

"Delivering a world-class air experience is a huge challenge for the United States, and it affects the entire industry. Capital is needed to improve airport technology and to hire more air traffic controllers. We have 200% less professionals in this role than we had ten years ago. The challenge is enormous, as their training is very intense, so it takes a long time to put these people on the front line. We are introducing drones to try to advance, but it is still not enough."

Finally, Freeman, who assumed the leadership of US Travel in September last year, emphasizes the role of the travel agent in the production chain. "It is an indispensable category. In times of explosive demand like the current ones, having specialists like travel agents working for Tourism is a privilege both in the domestic and in the international reception. Understanding a place like San Antonio, for example, is much more uncomplicated with the figure of a consultant", he completes.