

## Tourism officials see promise in Huntsman's nomination

Economy » Move seen as boost to accessing giant Chinese market.

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From Midvale to Miami, tourism officials expressed excitement Monday that Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s pending ambassadorship to China will accelerate the emergence of a travel market with the world's most populous country.

"Leisure travel from mainland China only started in July of 2008. It's in its infancy, but obviously the potential is huge," said Keith Griffall, CEO of Western Leisure, a Midvale-based company that helps organize trips for incoming groups, including almost 40 visits this year by small Chinese tours.

"Having an ambassador from this area who knows and appreciates the beauty of Utah, and knows we have the infrastructure available and the companies to service the Chinese tourism market, will help us greatly," Griffall added. "The governor really appreciates the connection between economic development and tourism."

Tracie Cayford, the Utah Office of Tourism's deputy director of communications and operations, said Huntsman's nomination by President Barack Obama has created a stir around the state's booth in Miami at the International Pow Wow, a weeklong tourism convention featuring more than 1,000 U.S. travel organizations and 1,500 international and domestic buyers from more than 70 countries.

Roger Dow, president of U.S. Travel, told Cayford how he was excited about the news. And a Chinese news agency stopped by the booth for information on Huntsman.

"The announcement is the buzz [here]," she said. "The appointment will help raise the awareness of Utah and the U.S. as a tourism destination for Chinese visitors."

Huntsman has promoted tourism as an economic development tool since his election in 2004, almost immediately working with the Legislature to boost the state's promotional budget from \$900,000 that year to \$7 million in 2005.

"One thing I've heard already via e-mail," said Utah Office of Tourism managing director Leigh von der Esch, "is that Chinese TV is showing pictures of red rock country and skiing with stories about the announcement of Gov. Huntsman's selection. You can't beat that."

Utahns have been eager to tap into the Chinese market since a memorandum of understanding was signed two years ago allowing Chinese tour operators to bring leisure trips into the United States.

"My understanding is that Chinese travelers love the national parks," said Danny Richardson, executive director of the private sector Utah Tourism Industry Coalition, touting Huntsman's ability to influence the growth of that business, especially with Delta Air Lines on the verge of starting non-stop flights between Salt Lake City and Tokyo, a jumping off point for many Chinese travelers.

"He's probably the best pick in America for the job," Richardson said. "He's perfect."

Griffall agreed, noting that Yellowstone National Park has been the favored destination for the limited Chinese visitation to date. "But they spend at least two nights in Salt Lake City," he said. "And we're developing more tours in the south for the winter and 'shoulder seasons' so they can travel year-round."

Huntsman's heir apparent, Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert, indicated his strong support for the travel industry last week in Layton at the annual Utah Tourism Convention.

Noting that he got to know the whole state well while driving through all 29 counties in a weeklong 2004 campaign trip, Herbert said the Huntsman administration has been intent on taking advantage of the worldwide recognition from staging the 2002 Winter Olympics.

And with good reason. Taxes paid by tourists already provide \$704 in tax relief for every Utah household, and the trajectory for more outside support is good.

"It's all about the economy," Herbert said, telling tourism officials "we appreciate what you're doing for our economy in taking advantage of our natural advantages."

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### **Snowbird extends season**

Lift-serviced skiing and boarding will continue on weekends at Snowbird through June 14.

The Tram, Little Cloud and Mineral Basin Express chair lifts will run Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Memorial Day. Starting May 29, only the Tram and Little Cloud will be open Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Ticket prices will then be reduced to \$49.

If warm temperatures don't end the season before June 14, it would be Snowbird's second longest season at 200 days, one short of the record set in the 2004-05 season. That year, lifts closed July 4.

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