NMI should tap heritage tourism potential

BY ALEXIE VILLEGAS ZOTOMAYOR
Saipan Reporter

GUALO RAI, Saipan — A visiting archaeologist has suggested that the Northern Mariana Islands follow the example of the state of Florida and capitalize on heritage tourism.

According to Jennifer Mckinlin, an underwater archaeologist who used to work for the historic preservation office in Florida prior to relocating to Australia to teach at Flinders University, "There are several studies on heritage tourism and how much money it brings in to the local economy. One particular study was done in Florida where they identified different types of tourism."

Mckinlin was referring to "Economic Impacts of Historic Preservation in Florida," a study initiated by the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources. With funding assistance from the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of Interior, the study revealed striking evidence that Florida's investment in the preservation and protection of historic places and the legacy of the cultures that created it are paying huge dividends — $4 billion annually.

The study further revealed that historic preservation activities created jobs, made substantial contributions to tax collections in the amount of $657 million to state and local governments as tourists spent $3.7 billion.

"People spend a lot of money going to historic/heritage sites. If you were to develop an underwater trail, and market it internationally, market it through dive magazines and dive shows, you could have a world-class World War II underwater heritage trail," Mckinlin said.

Mckinlin told the Journal that her application for a grant to develop an underwater archaeology trail was approved by the National Park Service under the Battlefield Preservation Project Grants for 2009. She said that the $40,067 grant would allow them to conduct an archaeological survey, and GIS mapping of Invasion Beach at Tanapag Lagoon to identify and document submerged remains of the battle of Saipan for use in the future development of an underwater maritime heritage trail.

"For us, it is really a good opportunity to jumpstart heritage tourism, get people out diving and more tourists coming to dive in World War II sites and generate money," McKinlin said.

Mckinlin said the main goals of the project were to choose three to four underwater sites, map those archaeologically, research their history, and create brochures and underwater site guides so people can dive them and know what they are looking at.

"After those three to four sites have been developed from this grant, we would be looking for more money to develop more sites," said McKinlin who also works with colleague Ronnie Rogers of Saipan's Historic Preservation Office have been envisioning an underwater heritage trail.

Initially, McKinlin and her team have started mapping and background research. They also conducted training under the auspices of Flinders University in Australia. Believing that the $50,000 grant won't be sufficient, McKinlin said they offered training to raise awareness and develop a voluntary case. "$50,000 won't be enough so we will rely on the diving public to help us out," she said.

For an emergent heritage tourism industry to flourish, McKinlin put a high premium on the diving industry's readiness. She said dive shops will have to do training and be involved in the process. She also highlighted the role of the tour operators and the Marianas Visitors Authority to be actively engaged in the project to market it.

Once an underwater trail has been opened to the public, regulatory agencies including the Department of Public Safety and the United States Coast Guard will need to monitor and protect the wrecks.

In the meantime, McKinlin is encouraging interested individuals to sign up for the maritime archaeology training.

Asiana has new Saipan GM

BY ALEXIE VILLEGAS ZOTOMAYOR
Saipan Reporter

GUALO RAI, Saipan — Heung Sik Choi is filling the shoes of Kwang Joong Kim as general manager of Asiana Airlines on Saipan.

Effective July 2009, Choi, who has been with the airline since 1989, will be handling sales and marketing of Asiana Airlines at the Saipan International Airport. Kim returned to the airline's Korea office on June 30.

Prior to this assignment, Choi was general manager of the airport office and station manager at the airport office in Bangkok, Thailand, from 2000 to 2004. Choi, commenting on his predecessor, said he admired Kim for his many contributions to the Asiana Airlines Korea-Saipan route and also credited him with increasing the flight frequency.

Marianas Visitors Authority also hailed the achievements of Kim who was instrumental in bringing in Kumho Asiana Group that acquired Lao Lao Bay Golf Resort and for helping to increase Korean tourist arrivals on Saipan.

Asked about his impressions of Saipan, Choi said, "Saipan offers Korean tourists a good environment, clear sky and fantastic sea."

He also said he is looking at introducing Saipan to Korean tourists via Korean Broadcasting System.

Choi added that he is optimistic that flights will continue to increase despite the economic slowdown.