

New Zealand Prime Minister promotes tourism between Houston and his country

Ileana Najarro Published 2:12 pm, Friday, September 23, 2016



Photo: Al Lewis

John Key, Prime Minister of New Zealand, visited the Houston Chronicle office to discuss tourism promotion between Houston and his country.

Direct flights between Houston and New Zealand and kiwis' safety measures have largely contributed to the growing tourism between both destinations said the Prime Minister of New Zealand, John Key, during an editorial meeting with the Houston Chronicle on Friday morning.

"When you have point to point direct services you just naturally get a bigger increase in the flow of people that go in both directions," Key said.

Key, who was also scheduled to speak at events hosted by the Greater Houston Partnership and Tourism New Zealand, was in town promoting tourism exchanges between Houston and his country.

He applauded the success of Air Zealand's Houston-Auckland route in boosting the number of Texan tourists visiting New Zealand in the few months the direct flight has been in operation. Between Dec. 5, 2016 and Feb. 5, 2017 the direct flight from Bush International Airport will increase services from five times a week to daily service.

He also noted New Zealand's level of safety as a big draw for American tourists. In the aftermath of the latest string of terrorist attacks in Europe, Key has seen a drop in Asian tourism in particular heading there as they divert over to New Zealand.

He added that with the requirements of gun licensing and gun-owner licensing, the probability of someone drawing a gun in a restaurant or mall in New Zealand is incredibly low. Most gun-owners in the country tend to be either farmers or hunters, rather than average civilians, he said.

"It's a cultural thing," Key said.

Then there's kiwi friendliness. The prime minister noted jokingly that Americans can find a much more welcoming tourism environment in New Zealand than in major U.S. cities.

"When you walk down the street in New York and someone says 'hello' there's probably a really good chance they're going to mug you," he said.

New Zealand also offers world-class golf courses, fishing opportunities, picturesque landscapes and even a bit of Hollywood. The prime minister noted that 14 percent of American tourists in the last few years that came to New Zealand were there because they wanted to see the film sets for Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings movies.

With regards to Houston, kiwi tourists are drawn to the NASA Johnson Space Center, Texan steakhouses and an overall unique Texan experience.

It took New Zealand 13 years to go from 2 million to 3 million tourists, the prime minister said, and he hopes that in four years they will see an increase from 3 million to 4 million coming from Asia, Australia and the U.S., Texas in particular.