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MEDIA STATEMENT

Latest ABS international tourism data sadly the new normal

Today's formal release of important but backward facing visitor economy data on international visitor arrivals will further kickstart a long period of similar negative statistics for Australia's largest services export – tourism!

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) international arrivals data for the month of February 2020 highlighted a 12.5% decrease in short-term overseas visitor arrivals from the prior month of January. This has been the first major fall in international arrivals (to 647,000) since the Asian economic crisis and longer term the 9/11 terrorist attacks and SARS outbreak.

The February 2020 data represents a tragic 26% reduction on arriving international visitors to Australia from the comparative February 2019 month period.

The Australian Government commenced implementing international travel bans for overseas nationals that first came into effect with China from the beginning of February. These subsequently expanded and now cover all international visitor markets into Australia.

Australian Tourism Industry Council (ATIC) Executive Director Simon Westaway said the future release of this monthly ABS data will only reflect a worsening picture that industry has already directly faced as a result of COVID-19 and the public health response to it over the 2020 year.

He said it was important official data releases continued by the ABS and Tourism Research Australia to make it patently clear to governments and industry stakeholders of the future mountain that will need to be climbed in terms of an oft-spoken but still distant visitor economy recovery.

Mr Westaway said industry remained steadfast in their support of collective Australian governments, led by the Commonwealth, striving for a successful public-health led response towards COVID-19.

“Without effective management and control of COVID-19 across Australia and closing our international borders to overseas visitors has been a key part of this response, we will never be able to effectively turn the corner and see the hoped-for green shoots of recovery. For the tens of thousands of Australian tourism enterprises where the international market has been their core business these are clearly stark and unbelievably challenging times,” Mr Westaway said.

“ATIC again calls on the Australian Government and respective State Government tourism organisations to refocus their attention on repurposing and reprioritise our domestic tourism market which has always been the economic backbone of our industry.

“ATIC's policy consistency is for Tourism Australia to have a permanent return to domestic tourism, and particularly over the short to medium term, have its primary focus around a more resilient and future recovering domestic tourism industry. We are afterall unlikely to see any loosening of a hard-closed international travel border for some time.”

Mr Westaway said any future anticipated international market return would most likely and logically come from New Zealand. He said industry has been encouraged about early thinking as to how this may sustainably occur in the months ahead as well as from critical markets from South East Asia. In the latest ABS data New Zealand remained our largest international source market.

ATIC represents thousands of local tourism enterprises, where a feature of our industry is over 90% of 300,000 still registered tourism businesses are small to medium enterprises and sole traders that collectively employ 1 million people.

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