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Murkowski Announces New Charter Flights to Japan

Direct flights will test the market
More than 1,400 new Japanese tourists will see Alaska this summer

(Juneau) -- With a little more than 10 weeks before the first surge of tourists come to Alaska for their trip of a lifetime, Governor Frank H. Murkowski today announced that Alaskan Vacations, a subsidiary of Anchorage-based Hawaiian Vacations, will offer four nonstop flights between Tokyo, Japan and Anchorage in August 2003.

Murkowski said the weekly flights mean that more international visitors will come to Alaska this August, and that one of Alaska's most respected tourism firms, owned by John Hardwick and Ral West, is working diligently to develop Alaska's tourism economy.

"Alaska's visitor industry provides countless business opportunities for small businesses and employment for thousands of Alaskans," Murkowski said. "As we open new opportunities, such as Alaskan Vacations is doing with this one, we open the opportunity for all people to experience Alaska."

Murkowski said in August one nonstop flight will arrive each week at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport from Haneda Tokyo International Airport, which will bring more tourists and economic stimulus to the state.

"The primary focus of the flights will be to demonstrate that direct air service between Japan and Alaska can be successful, much like the regular summer flights between Alaska and Germany," Murkowski said.

According to the Alaska Travel Industry Association, Japanese visitors comprise about 12,000 of Alaska's annual visitors. But, to date, Japanese tourists and tour companies primarily book air travel on a number of regularly scheduled airlines via Seattle and other major West Coast cities.

"Because of our nonstop service to Hawaii, we're uniquely positioned as a company to fill this void in the marketplace," said David Karp, chief operating officer of Alaskan Vacations. He said that once a week, the DC10-30 will depart Honolulu on its regularly scheduled flight to Anchorage. After deplaning passengers here, the jet will then fly nonstop to Tokyo. After a 21-hour layover at Haneda Tokyo International, the same aircraft will return nonstop from Tokyo to Anchorage with the Japanese tourists before resuming its normal flight pattern between Anchorage and Honolulu. Each flight can accommodate up to 355 passengers, he said.

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Final details and flight schedules are still being developed, but the excitement among tour operators, who will put together and handle the ground packages for Japanese travelers, is beginning to build.

"This is very big news for us and for the Japanese visitor," said Keizo Sugimoto, president of A&P Tours, Inc. in Anchorage. "This is our dream, which we've had for many years. Alaska has spent lots of money in the Japanese market in order to entice travelers to come here. Now we have a direct flight."

Sugimoto said his packages for those who will travel with Alaskan Vacations will include Denali National Park, Katmai bear watching excursions, hiking trips, glacier viewing, Kenai Peninsula fishing and tours to the arctic.

Chris von Imhof, vice president and general manager of Alyeska Resort and a member of an international tourism marketing group, couldn't agree more. "This is a win-win situation for both Alaska and Japan, and I look for it to be a great success and increase our market share of Japanese tourists coming to Alaska, especially in the summer."

von Imhof said that direct air service between Alaska and Japan has been the primary goal of the international marketing group. He said currently visitors make the journey in 18 hours. This new service will decrease the flight time to between seven and seven-and-a-half hours.

"I have to congratulate Alaskan Vacations for planting the seed that I hope will grow into something permanent, and I know the city of Anchorage and the State of Alaska will support this effort and make it successful through marketing efforts," he said.

Under terms of the agreement, the DC10-30 aircraft will be operated by Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Omni Air International. The company currently operates a fleet of DC10s worldwide including providing vacation packages to Europe, the Caribbean, Florida, Las Vegas, Mexico, Tahiti and Hawaii. Omni Air International began operations in 1993. Omni's customers include some of the largest tour operators and cruise lines in both the domestic and worldwide markets.

Karp said that seats aboard the nonstop service to Japan will be available to Alaskans and the average price will run between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per person. Space for cargo may also be available.

Under Murkowski's economic development program to increase public/private partnerships, Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport created an incentive package to help Alaskan Vacations develop the Alaska-Japan route. The airport was able to design an approach that not only encourages new seasonal non-stop air service between Anchorage and Tokyo, but ensures Alaskan Vacations can continue to develop the route into possible year round service. The most recently negotiated operating agreement between the carriers and the airport grants the airport the authority to develop incentives to encourage new air service.

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