American-Turkish-Armenian Fellows

Proudly announces:

Prominent Academics and Professionals Gathered at ATA Fellows’ Unique Conference: Conference on Tourism and Hospitality: The Highway to Sustainable Regional Development

GAINESVILLE, FL, U.S.A. – Some of the best and the brightest academics and practitioners from around the globe gathered at ATAF’s one-off special meeting successfully organized and conducted in Yerevan, Armenia to discuss, generate, disseminate and exchange ideas for promoting peace through sustainable tourism across borders in the Caucasus Region, specifically between Turkey and Armenia. The goal of the meeting was to reexamine, review and evaluate the past and present status of tourism development in Armenia and the Caucasus in general, and strategically chart the way ahead for sustainable tourism development for cross-border peace.

“This is a very special and well-focused meeting with the cream of the crop speeches and discussions, supplemented with well-organized social activities for an excellent opportunity to experience Armenia and Armenian culture as well as to network and share information with colleagues,” said the ATA Fellows Project Director Dr. Asli Tasci. “Attending this unique conference is the best way for the interested parties to learn from one another, make new connections locally and globally and get involved in potential future endeavors regarding the Caucasus Region, Armenia and Turkey.”

During the three-day conference, held June 28-30, 2013, ATA Fellows furthered their network, relations and communications with relevant publics in Armenia and around the globe. US Ambassador to Armenia John A. Heffern made the opening of the conference, emphasizing the importance of the ATA Fellows Project. Thought provoking and inspiring speeches and discussions were delivered by speakers including Dean Abraham Pizam, Dr. Fevzi Okumus and Dr. Robertico Croes from the University of Central Florida; Dean Kaye Chon from Hong Kong Polytechnic University; Dr. Muzaffer Uysal and Dr. Mahmood Khan from Virginia Tech; Mr. Armin Zerunyan, the Hilton Worldwide Country General Manager Full Service Hotels, Turkey, and Mr. Roland Loog, the Executive Director of the Alachua County Visitors and Convention Bureau besides other faculty and students who shared the same passion that was fueled by this meeting. Armenian Industry represented at the meeting included Caucasus Research Resource Centers of Armenia, the Union of Manufacturers and Businessmen of Armenia, International Center for Agribusiness Research and Education of Armenia, Armenia Holidays, and HyeLandz Eco Village Resort LLC.
Critical themes of the sessions included Peace and Tourism, Tourism and Sustainable Development, Tourism Management and Corporate Responsibility, Sustainable Tourism Issues, Stakeholders, and Capacity Building as a Prerequisite for Sustainable Development. Speakers shared their cumulative knowledge, experience and opinions with the attendees, which included industry practitioners as well as students from Armenia, Turkey and some other countries.

The University of Florida team including, Dr. Michael Sagas, Dr. Asli Tasci, Dr. Yong Jae Ko, Dr. Svetlana Stepchenkova, Dr. Kelly Semrad and Ph.D. student Semih Yilmaz contributed to the meeting by actively being involved in organizing the meeting as well as sharing their latest research and exchanging ideas. Their presentations included: peace driven projects conducted by UF, consumer behavior in sustainable tourism and hospitality, community based tourism consumer profile, the image of Caucasus and Turkey from the Americans’ perspective, mega events in improving destination image and consumer loyalty, tourism impact on reducing social distance and curriculum development for capacity building in sustainable tourism development. Led by Dr. Gurhan Aktas and Dr. Artak Manukyan, Turkish and Armenian teams of faculty and students presented several topics, including the need for open borders between Turkey and Armenia, sustainable tourism and hospitality for equitable economic development, curriculum development for capacity building and sustainable tourism issues and stakeholders.

Several interesting questions were posed and comments were made by both the speakers and the audience regarding tourism development in Armenia. Specific attention was brought to Diaspora tourism and winter tourism. An intimate brainstorming environment was created at the end of the meeting to formulate future plans for further development of the ATAF project and similar others. The participants formulated project ideas in the general areas of Policy development, Research, Product Development, and Image and Brand Development. One common comment mentioned by different attendees in this session was that ATAF group and their philosophy should be sustained into the future. ATAF Fellows are eager to contribute to crystalizing these new project ideas in the near future.
One attendee from Europe said, "I applaud ATAF's efforts to venture into such a difficult task of promoting peace through tourism between presumably unfriendly nations.” Dr. Ko from UF said: “It was amazing. I left feeling inspired, empowered and encouraged. This refreshed my faith in our field, what we do really matters!” Dr. Sagas from UF mentioned: “This was a great wrap up of a very meaningful and engaging three year project; I look forward to the ongoing activities to develop as a result of this meeting.” Dr. Khan from Virginia Tech stated “This was a very productive meeting.” Dr. Pizam from UCF reassured by saying: “The meeting was a great success, congratulations for a perfect organization.” This event was a success, leaving a mark in attendees’ hearts and minds, as manifested in the words of Mr. Loog, the Executive Director of the Alachua County VCB: “I thank ATAF for showing me some of the world’s most stunning regions and allowing me to have these special memories.” Dr. Tasci from UF concluded: “ATAF appreciates and honors those who contributed to the meeting and made a difference.” Detailed information, photos, proceedings and presentations can be accessed at:

About ATAF© (http://uftourism.org/atafellows/index.shtml)
ATA Fellows (American, Turkish and Armenian Fellows ) is a team of academics from the University of Florida, U.S.A., Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey, and Armenian State University of Economics, as well as industry practitioners from each country, who see tourism as a catalyst for cultural understanding, mutual respect, goodwill and peace. ATAF Fellows endeavored to explore the prospect of peace via travel and tourism as an opportunity to normalize and strengthen dialogue between Turkey and Armenia through a project of collaboration between academics and practitioners of tourism industry in all three partnering countries, to educate, train, research and bring together resources for sustainable regional tourism development for increased cross-border tourism between Turkey and Armenia. This endeavor received financial and logistics support from the Embassy of the United States in Ankara, Turkey, as well as relevant public, NGO and private sector authorities in all three countries. Over a three year-period, ATAF conducted three visioning meeting in three countries, delivered online courses for students from partner institutions and conducted two field trips to Turkey and the USA for Armenian and Turkish students and faculty. This meeting, the Conference of Tourism and Hospitality in Armenia is the final activity of the project to share and exchange experiences, knowledge and insights about the project as well as generate new ideas for future collaboration. ATAF Fellows are energized with Eleanor Roosevelt's philosophy:

“It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it.
And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”