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1997 uncertainty causes travel boom

By ROSALYN PANG

Local out-bound tourism has grown rapidly so far this year with some travel agents reporting that the number of clients going to North America has shot up by as much as 300 per cent.

The uncertainty of Hongkong's future has contributed to the boom, some operators believe.

Cosmos tours to the United States — in which customers can organise their own activities before joining the package tours in the country — particularly interested Hongkong people, with one travel agent saying about 300 brochures regarding the service have been snapped up.

"The brochures we're using now are photocopies and we only give them to customers who are really interested," said Mr. Howard Young, managing director of the Swire Travel.

Mr Young said US Cosmos tours — operated mainly by the Cosmos Tour of

London, a major travel agent in America — were introduced to Hongkong only about a year ago.

Swire Travel, which helps the agent sell its package tours in Hongkong, has attracted many more customers this year than it did last.

"The trend will continue to grow and I won't be surprised to see the number of clients exceeding a hundred this year," Mr Young predicted.

The US Cosmos tour is attractive to Hongkong people in several ways, says Mr Young, and the free activity time before touring is one of the main inducements.

"This system allows the customers to arrive in the United States under their own arrangements at any time before the tour starts.

"In this way, customers can arrive earlier, and do other private business before enjoying a holiday."

Mr Young said his company never asked customers what they intended to do before

joining the tour, although it can help them arrange air tickets and accommodation.

"But I guess quite a number of them visit relatives or sound out immigration opportunities."

The tours work out at about \$9,800 for 14 days in the United States, including air tickets and accommodation.

This compared with a regular fee of at least \$11,000 for an 11-day tour which sets off in Hongkong.

Growth was also recorded in Swire Travel's European tour section, Mr Young said, with the number of customers increased by about 10 per cent.

He described the growth rate as "better than expected" and attributed that to the success of a low-interest loan scheme the company introduced at the end of last year, in conjunction with a bank.

Another travel agent, the Choicest Holiday, also said more people wanted to travel to the United States and Canada this year.

In fact, the demand was so great that the

company intended to double the number of tours to both countries this summer, a spokesman said.

Most US or Canadian-bound tours already organised are now between 70 and 80 per cent full, the spokesman continued, and clients are mostly families or young couples with "strong" financial backing.

"I think the uncertainty of Hongkong has driven some Hongkong people to seek alternative settlement.

"Anyway, what's wrong with shopping around while touring around?"

For the company's Southeast Asian tours, the spokesman said, the growth has levelled off this year as the price of air tickets has increased at least two-fold and the minimum package price is to be put up next month.

More people are now turning to China and Macau instead if they want shorter and less expensive holidays, the spokesman said.

The chairman of the Hongkong Association of Travel Agents, Mr Bill Newport, said: "Everything is fine in the trade this year."