Recent Storms Bring Challenges – And Opportunities

By Dr. Richard Kelley

Almost everyone on earth seems to be enduring unusually severe weather this year, and that is creating unbelievable inconvenience, discomfort, and costs for travelers, as well as companies and their employees, in almost every segment of the global Travel & Tourism industry. We need to keep this in mind, as we welcome guests to our properties, not only now but year-round.

In terms of weather, the past few weeks have been amazing.
• Record rainfall has triggered flooding on a near-biblical scale in Queensland, Australia, sweeping away automobiles, houses, livestock, and – particularly sad – human lives. (See Grant James’ excellent article on page 3 for a first-hand report on what is going on Down Under.)
• A series of winter storms has caused flooding and landslides in Hawaii and along the U.S. West Coast. (In fact, heavy rainfall across Hawaii washed out the first two days of play at golf’s prestigious Sony Open, flooding sand traps and leaving standing water on some of the Waialae Country Club fairways.)
• Multiple heavy snowfalls in the U.S. Midwest and along the East Coast from Georgia to Maine have repeatedly disrupted all forms of transportation.
• Many major airports in Europe have been closed for significant periods thanks to serial snowstorms. I do not recall a similar period of such intense, widespread weather chaos in my lifetime.

Members of my family and I have personally experienced disruptions in our travels recently. Here are just a few examples:
• Grandchildren at college trying to return to Hawai‘i for the Christmas holidays have had flights canceled abruptly.
• During the Thanksgiving holidays, my wife, Linda, and I spent some six hours with thousands of others in packed holding areas at the airport in Dublin, Ireland, while authorities attempted to deal with the first snowstorm in a couple of decades. Snowplows had not been included in the 2010 budget!
• I am writing this message at 35,000 feet, bound for San Francisco en route to Denver after visiting our Honolulu headquarters, but my flight is nearly five hours late due to weather-related delays.

The stress of travel can and does take a toll on the human body and, in particular, the mind. Travelers often get up early to cope with traffic and get to the airport on time only to find their flight has just been delayed or canceled.

Following a flight cancellation, there is a scramble to rebook, find a place to rest in the airport terminal, or secure a room in a nearby hotel for the night. The airlines have been doing what they can to help passengers, but the massive number of displaced passengers has recently caused most of their systems to crash. A couple of loyal return guests from the Philadelphia area related to me that their airline told them to call back in 24 hours for help in rebooking their canceled flights to Hawai‘i.

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One anecdotal report suggests that Hawaiian Airlines may be an outstanding exception and that company has gone the extra mile to take care of displaced passengers’ needs.

I should add that United Airlines handled my delayed flights this week very well. When I finally arrived in San Francisco at about 7 p.m. on Wednesday, the airport TV monitors were flashing the news of fresh winter storms, airport closures, and thousands of flight cancellations to or from airports all along the eastern seaboard. A reporter added, “Florida is the only state in our nation that is not dealing with some kind of snowfall today!” (Yes, even Hawai‘i had snow – at the upper elevations of the nearly 14,000-foot Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa volcanoes on the Big Island.)

I noticed the United Airlines agent checking me in for my flight to Denver looked more than a little frazzled. “Have you and your colleagues had a rough day,” I asked.

“Yes, we really have,” she answered. Then, with a big smile, she added, “Thanks for asking. That means a lot to us.”

Having endured the rigors of traveling from say New York or Sydney to any one of our properties in the Pacific, our guests have usually had quite a day. They are tired, maybe hungry, and perhaps grumpy or even angry. When they pull into the porte-cochere or entrance of an Outrigger or OHANA hotel, or one of the properties in our Condominium Collection, what we do in the next few minutes can make all the difference in the world.

These are the “golden moments” when a sincere, friendly greeting and welcome does wonders toward reversing the strain and stress our guests may have endured over the previous 10, 20, or more hours.

A smile, a bit of concern, understanding, and pleasant conversation at the Front Desk tells them that they have might have arrived at the best hotel or condo in the world.

A little more chat and assistance by a member of our Bell Staff on their way to their room confirms that impression. Heart rates slow and blood pressure falls.

Yes, the weather has been going crazy recently, but that gives us in the hospitality industry a unique opportunity to really make a difference in the lives of our guests. They’ll never forget it!
Queensland’s Devasting Floods
By Grant James, Queensland, Australia (January 11, 2011)

We are extremely thankful at this time that none of the Australian Outrigger ‘ohana working at our two properties (Outrigger Little Hastings St. Noosa and Outrigger Twin Towns) have been badly affected by the devastating floods currently impacting Queensland, but we are unsure at this time if any of their extended families have been affected.

As of 10 p.m. today, there were 10 people dead and 98 people missing in the areas around Toowoomba (75 miles west of Brisbane, Queensland’s capital), which saw what has been titled “An Inland Tsunami” roar through the center of town with waters as high as 7.4 feet.

At this point, 75 percent of the state of Queensland has been declared a disaster zone, with at least five towns suffering their fifth episode of flooding in 30 days.

To provide some scale of the problems Queensland is experiencing, consider that its area is 668,206 square miles, comparable to Alaska (656,425 square miles). In total, the recent floods have affected 75 percent, or approximately 500,000 square miles, of Queensland, an area larger than Texas and California combined!

Over the coming days, Brisbane, on the coast and thus at a lower elevation than the affected inland areas, is expected to see perhaps the worst flooding since 1974. Based on current modeling, the record high water mark of 5.4 meters (17.7 feet) probably will be exceeded.

With some 40,000 houses and businesses in Brisbane alone expected to be extensively flooded and an additional 12,000 properties expected to be somewhat water-damaged, this is a disaster of significant proportions. The city’s central business district was evacuated on January 12 (January 11 in Hawaii). 100,000 people were expected to be impacted when electrical power was to be cut off to all flooded areas in Brisbane and its suburbs.

The homes affected include the 53-year old, two-story home of our local legal counsel, which is expected to be submerged today.

The township of Ipswich (population 70,000), just over 40 minutes’ drive west (inland) of Brisbane, has one third of its town affected by flood waters, with at least 2,500 homes affected, 20,000 people without power and all evacuation centers FULL.

At this time, I am happy to report there has been no significant damage to any of Outrigger’s Australian properties and that the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast airports are fully operational, including Brisbane International Airport.

Our ‘ohana is doing everything possible to support each other and our guests and also to be available to help people who may need accommodation. The Managers and Staff will ensure our values of Wahi (“we protect, care for and live in harmony with the land, our workplace, its peoples and cultures”), Na Mea Ho’okipa (hosts) and ‘Ohana (family) are in the forefront of our minds, as we do everything possible to help people affected.

Our sister property, Outrigger Twin Towns, at the southern end of Queensland’s Gold Coast, fortunately has not been affected, and occupancies have remained constant. However, with more rain forecast, this could change.