Is the Jumbo Jet an endangered species?

By Dr. Richard Kelley

It is hard to believe that it was 47 years ago this week, on February 9, 1969, that the first Boeing 747 “Jumbo Jet” took off from the airstrip next to Boeing’s aircraft assembly complex in Everett, Washington. Long known as the Queen of the Skies, that aircraft has indeed ruled the skies for nearly half a century. In fact the use of the Jumbo Jet and the growth of tourism in Hawai’i have interesting parallels.

But times have changed. Boeing is significantly cutting back 747 production and will probably end it altogether within a few years, while the tourism industry in Hawai’i and around the world seems set to continue growing.

The years around 1969 were times of stress and change. Here are a few reminders:

• On January 20, 1969, Richard Nixon took office as the 37th president of the United States.
• In 1969, in response to the previous year’s Tet Offensive, the U.S. increased the number of troops in Vietnam and neighboring countries to about 549,000.
• On the weekend of August 15-17, 1969, an estimated 400,000 people swarmed over an upstate New York dairy farm 63 miles from the town of Woodstock to hear Jimi Hendrix and some 32 other acts perform on an outdoor stage.

Several years earlier, Roy and Estelle Kelley had made a commitment to Queen Emma Estate to build several hotels on the former royal lands in the heart of Waikīkī. These were the Outrigger Waikiki, which opened in 1967, and three other hotels – the Outrigger East, Outrigger West and Outrigger Surf – which were still under construction in 1969. No one really knew where the visitors needed to fill those rooms would come from or how they would get to Hawai’i. Visitor arrivals in the Islands in 1968 had been only a little over 1.3 million, a fraction of what Hawai’i receives today, but still up a very respectable 11 percent from the previous year.

In retrospect, it is clear that it was in 1970 that the floodgates opened. That was the year that Pan American World Airways became the first airline to fly the 747. Other airlines followed quickly. Everyone enjoyed the enormous amount of space available in the cabin of a 747. Wide, fully reclining seats were a major upgrade from what the old Boeing 707 could offer.

Then, “the battle of the lounges” began on flights to distant destinations. Every carrier flying the 747 – whose distinctive upper deck was ideally suited to a lounge area – tried to offer bigger and better lounges to keep passengers happy up at the planes’ 40,000-foot (7.5-mile/12-km) cruising altitude. They provided seating at restaurant-like tables and cocktails from a fully stocked and serviced bar. American Airlines added a piano bar to its lounge, including a pianist who was, in effect, a member of the crew.

Boeing 747 dwarfs a 707
Under federal law in the early 1970s, airline capacity, routes and rates were all subject to review and approval by the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB), a now-defunct government agency. Airlines competed on service but the fixed fares for each route were high, which made these lounges affordable to the carriers. In 1970, 1.7 million visitors flew to Hawai‘i, many taking advantage of the 747’s perks.

In 1970, the CAB approved a new type of airfare for Group Inclusive Tours (GITs). Under the GIT rules, airlines could offer discounts to authorized tour operators who packaged air transportation, hotel accommodations and some ground activities for groups. Group sizes were specified. At first the minimum size of the group was quite large, around 100 people as I recall. Then the CAB allowed progressively smaller groups – 30, 20, 10, etc. Then they said, just package air transport, hotel room and some ground activities, and you’ll qualify for a lower rate.

This effectively cut airfares just as the Outriggers East, West and Surf were completed. Enough visitors arrived that year to keep these new hotels filled. Many guests arrived on Boeing Jumbo Jets in the happy company of 300 to 400-plus other passengers.

When Congress passed and President Jimmy Carter signed the airline deregulation laws in 1978, the game changed overnight. All the airlines began competing on price, particularly in the U.S. where federal laws kept (and still, to this day, keep) foreign-flag carriers from serving U.S. domestic routes. In that year, 3.7 million visitors took advantage of the drop in airfares and flew to Hawai‘i. From that point, the visitor count kept climbing.

Airline deregulation also made GITs obsolete. Like the dinosaurs, they vanished overnight. This took a big load off everyone’s back, including hotels that had previously had to come up with room blocks that could accommodate these groups. It was quite a challenge. I used to spend hours at it every week. Travelers, of course, also benefited from the lower fares that were now available without being tied in to particular hotel and activity packages.

However, as might be expected, the most important impact of deregulation was in the air. Space formerly used for in-flight lounges was replaced with additional seats, so the cost of air travel fell further. In 1979, visitor arrivals in Hawaii were just shy of 4 million! This included large groups from Japan that would arrive in Honolulu early in the morning on a Jumbo Jet. From the airport, they would be taken to breakfast, tours and shopping before their hotels were ready to check them in.

At the peak of its popularity, the twin-decked 747 carried a great many people on each flight. The 747-400 accommodates 524 passengers in a typical two-class layout, or 660 in a high-density, one-class configuration.

In recent years, the market for Jumbo Jets has changed dramatically. Improvements in engineering and technology have improved the power and reliability of jet engines, making it possible for smaller, two-engine, mid-sized aircraft to carry large numbers of passengers safely, even over long ocean routes. The cost of fuel per passenger is much lower on a two-engine plane. Airlines have also moved away from flying large jets to a relatively small number of hub cities. That pattern has been replaced with multiple city-to-city flights on smaller, twin-engine aircraft.

Most of the current 747s coming out of the Everett plant, about one a month, are used to carry airfreight. However, one customer is finalizing an order for three special passenger models of the Jumbo Jet – the U.S. government. The executive branch is currently flying two 747s, both called Air Force One whenever the president is
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aboard, to fly the commander-in-chief around the globe. These will soon be replaced with three 747-8 models outfitted with features that include a presidential suite, conference room, and state-of-the-art electronics and communications gear.

After that, the area used for assembling 747s in Everett will be converted to other uses. That day will mark the end of a magnificent era in aviation.

So much for the big picture. Now I have a confession to make: I wrote this article in part out of my personal attachment to the 747.

I love the plane’s spaciousness, its fully reclining first-class seats, its quiet operation, and the upstairs seating (in the post-lounge era).

In addition, Outrigger was one of the largest customers of Wardair, a Canadian airline no longer in operation. We provided rooms for many of its passengers, who flew in from several major cities in Canada on the carrier’s four 747s.

Wardair’s CEO, Max Ward, flew for the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. He started his commercial aviation career in 1946 as a rough-and-tumble bush pilot operating out of Yellowknife, in Canada’s Northwest Territories. He purchased a small de Havilland Fox Moth biplane to carry both passengers and freight. When he was unable to obtain a commercial flying license on his own, he found a partner and established Yellowknife Airways Limited.

Max and I became friends and he once invited me to spend a week fishing with him. We flew to Yellowknife where we were picked up by a float plane and taken to a remote lake where Max had set up a camp with several tents, one of which was a dining tent. It was an unbelievable setup. Max had flown in good-sized kitchen equipment as well as the chef from the Westin hotel in Edmonton.

Several of the other guests were from Boeing and had worked as a team on the design of the 747. To sit around the campfire at night and listen to those engineers talk about the special features and technology they put into the design of the 747 was inspirational. They spoke in hushed tones with emotion in their voices as a group of priests might when describing the features of a fine cathedral. It was an amazing experience I’ve never forgotten. I’m reminded of it every time I board a 747 Jumbo Jet.