Micronesian Memories

The recent announcement that Outrigger will manage a new hotel in Palau brought back a flood of memories about a wonderful trip I took to that island nation and several other spots in what was then the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands in 1974, almost 33 years ago.

The Trust Territory, which included Chuuk (Truk), Yap, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Saipan, and Palau, had long been under the control of Japan, beginning shortly after World War I and continuing until the islands were taken over by American forces during World War II. After the war ended in 1945, the islands were put under a United Nations' trusteeship, administered by the United States, to assist in recovering from damage and neglect during the war years.

Many believed that the development of Travel & Tourism was important to the area’s economic recovery and development. Robert Six, the dynamic and colorful CEO of Continental Airlines, championed the concept. In 1968, Continental formed a subsidiary, Air Micronesia, to serve the Trust Territories and a hotel chain, Continental Hotels, with properties on Chuuk, Palau, Guam, and Saipan.

According to veteran Continental pilot Captain Lennie Sorenson, implementing Bob Six’s vision was a challenge. “Air Mike,” as the airline was affectionately called, had seven stops spanning over 4,000 miles from Saipan to Honolulu. After flying propeller-driven DC-6s for several years, the airline switched to a single Boeing 727-100, nicknamed Ju Ju, the forward section of whose fuselage was configured for cargo. A second jet, Nu Ju, followed soon thereafter. The short runways were paved with crushed coral that blew up clouds of dust on takeoff or landing. Air Traffic Control was equipped with a small hand-held radio hooked up to the battery of a truck parked near the runway.

At first Continental Hotels brought in its managers from the U.S. mainland, but operating a hotel in the remote reaches of the Pacific proved a cultural shock for many. They did not last long. In fact, there is an unconfirmed story about one GM who arrived in Chuuk, took a look at the low-rise bungalows of the hotel, ran back to the airport, and reboarded the plane just before it took off again.

Continental Hotels’ fortunes improved when it picked Bill Charlock, a Hawaii-born hotelier, to oversee its operations. He, in turn, hired general managers from Hawaii who were used to working in a multicultural Pacific environment.

One day, Bill invited me to visit Micronesia. “Bring the family,” he said. “You’ll experience some wonderful hospitality. The scuba diving and snorkeling is great!”

I took him at his word, and in early 1974, I arranged scuba lessons for my children and several of their friends after school in the OHANA East Hotel swimming pool. By the time summer vacation rolled around, all who were old enough were certified scuba divers, and we boarded Ju Ju for the trip of a lifetime.

• The first stop was Chuuk where, during World War II, Japan had had a huge naval and supply center. We dove on the many wrecks of the 41 Japanese ships and dozens of aircraft that had been sunk in the lagoon there during the 1944 American attack, “Operation Hailstone,” often described as “Japan’s Pearl Harbor.” At that time, the wrecks were relatively untouched, and we even found the crew’s dishes still on the table in the mess, where they had been abruptly left on the morning of the attack.

• Next was Palau where we experienced some of the finest reef diving imaginable.

• On Guam, we located more war memorabilia, including spent bullets and potentially live ammunition stuck between coral heads.

• On Saipan, we visited the ruins of the prison, where some believe the Japanese held and executed Amelia Earhart in the belief that her pioneering 1937 attempted flight around the world was actually a spy mission.

At each of the Continental Hotels, we experienced the warm Pacific hospitality promised by Bill Charlock. On occasion, that meant understanding and honoring local traditions. For example, one morning in Palau, I went into the dining room for breakfast and was pleased to see Bill sitting alone at a table. I asked if I could join him, and he replied, “You are welcome to do so, but you may not like the service. In this culture, I am considered a chief, and the staff will serve me first and no one else. You will not get your breakfast until I have finished my meal.” I told him I understood and would abide by the tradition.

That is exactly what happened and, while he ate his breakfast, I had a delightful conversation with him about the joys and challenges of operating hotels on small, far-flung islands across the Pacific. When Bill had finished eating, I was promptly and efficiently served my meal.

Now, over three decades later, Air Mike has been integrated into the parent company, Continental Airlines. The properties of the Continental Hotels chain have been sold and even closed or converted to other uses. The runways and air traffic control are far more up to date, and hotel rooms in Chuuk, Palau, Guam and Saipan can be booked instantly on the Internet.
I hope to be able to revisit the former Trust Territory once again and, when that happens, I am looking forward to seeing all the changes that have occurred in more than three decades. However, I am sure the Pacific hospitality is still as warm and friendly as ever, and I am looking forward to my journey!