Miami Rocks
Visiting the Competition

It has been over 15 years since I visited Miami, Florida, so when I had an opportunity to attend a meeting there two weeks ago, I jumped at the chance to find out what is going on in one of the world's largest centers for Travel & Tourism. I was really amazed at what has happened in the past decade and a half. It is a tribute to the spirit of the people who live there and the American free enterprise system.

My last visit to Miami was in 1989, when I attended the World Congress of the American Society of Travel Agents to accept the ASTA Hall of Fame recognition on behalf of Roy and Estelle Kelley. At that time, Miami was a scary place. The area was still recovering from the effects of the Freedom Flotillas of 1980, when about 125,000 Cuban refugees were boatlifted to Florida, primarily from the port of Mariel. Although most were political and economic refugees, there were also many hardened criminals, released from prison by the Cuban government, which was only too happy to make them Uncle Sam’s problem. The entire state of Florida had a difficult time dealing with the sudden surge in population, and Miami had one of the highest rates of crime in the nation.

That has all changed, and the Miami of 2005 is a vibrant center of tourism, international trade, commerce, arts, music, and medical research. With 52 percent of its residents born in some other nation than the United States, the city is a lively blend of cultures and ideas. Writer Phyllis Shapiro calls it “a tossed salad -- a jumble of many flavors, each retaining its own distinctive crunch.”

With a population of 5.2 million, the Miami-Dade County metropolitan area has somewhat suddenly become the fifth-largest in the United States, after Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. The area is growing rapidly, and construction cranes were visible everywhere, particularly in Miami's South Beach area, where many of the old pink art deco structures are being replaced with massive, modern condos and hotels.

Governor Jeb Bush opened the meetings I attended and thanked those present for visiting Florida, noting that Travel & Tourism is a vital part of Florida's economy. “I hope you spend a lot of money when you are here,” he added with a smile, obliquely reminding the audience that Florida does not have a personal state income tax and wants to keep it that way.

Gov. Bush said the state is recovering from the costly 2004 hurricane season, when four powerful storms crisscrossed Florida. This year, over 77 million visitors are expected. Ten years ago, that number was 42 million.

The Port of Miami is the world's top cruise center, with 18 cruise ships handling nearly four million passengers a year. As we drove between our South Beach hotel and events in Miami, we could see rows of gleaming white ships lined up along the docks, engaged in the weekend scramble of disembarking and embarking passengers while loading fresh supplies, all in just a few hours.

The streets everywhere were filled with tourists and shoppers. The bars, clubs, and discos in the hip South Beach area were swinging and lively, with a clientele that is very international.

The headquarters for our meetings was the The Ritz-Carlton South Beach. The hospitality was outstanding. I was discussing this with a loyal Ritz-Carlton frequent guest one evening, and he explained that the company really focuses on and reinforces its Gold
Standards program, a written set of guidelines for employee behavior as it relates to guests. The Gold Standards are discussed every day during staff meetings before each shift. Part of the standards is “20 Basics,” a definitive list of what is expected of each employee. For example, Basic 13: “Never lose a guest. Instant guest pacification is the responsibility of each employee. Whoever receives a complaint will own it, resolve it to the guest’s satisfaction and record it.”

I said to my friend, “That is nice in theory, but does it actually happen in practice?” He said, “Just watch.” He then polled the wait help in our area, and everyone had a copy of the folded eight-panel Gold Standards wallet card on his or her person. Nearly 80 percent recalled which Basic of the Day had been discussed at their staff meetings earlier that day. To prove that it was company-wide, he then used his mobile phone to call several other Ritz-Carlton hotels around the country, and almost every employee he contacted quoted the same Basic of the Day.

I am not suggesting that Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts adopt a similar format. We offer outstanding hospitality to our guests by living our values and speaking from the heart – not from a printed card. However, the Ritz-Carlton approach appears to work in their circumstances.

After nearly a week in Miami, I learned a great deal about our competitors. They are aggressive, provide excellent facilities and hospitality, and would like very much to gain back some of the tourism market share they lost after 9/11 and the hurricane season last fall. We, who do business in the Pacific, private enterprise, and government leaders too, should keep this in mind as we build for the future.