Later this month, I will have a chance to visit the city of Sanya, Hainan Island, China to attend the World Travel & Tourism Council’s Global Summit. I will also have the opportunity to visit the site of one of our future properties, Outrigger Clearwater Bay Resort, which will soon be built on a waterfront site nearby. In the process of arranging my travel plans, I applied for a visa to visit China. It took several telephone calls, emails and a short visit to a visa-processing firm in Denver, Colorado. The experience caused me to think about how much more difficult it is for citizens of China to get a visa to visit the United States and why the U.S. is getting only about 1 percent of China’s boom in high-spending international travelers.

To get my China visa, WTTC arranged for the Hainan Provincial Tourism Development Commission to send me an official letter of invitation to the Global Summit. Then, using my native language, English, I filled in a three-page form that asked for basic personal information, passport number, travel dates, hotel and airline details; paid a $145 consular fee; added the letter of invitation and my passport plus an extra photograph; and handed it all to a pleasant gentleman at a visa-processing firm about five miles from my home in Denver. My visa application was immediately sent to Chicago, one of the five U.S. cities with a Chinese consulate that issues visas. I was told I could expect to receive my passport back with a Chinese visa in less than two weeks.

Now, let’s look at what a person in China must do to visit the U.S. – let’s say Hawai’i – as a tourist. Let’s call our applicant “Mei...
Ting,” using the name of a famous Chinese actress. Our fictional Mei Ting lives in Chongqing, a large city formerly known as Chungking with a current population of over 9 million (28 million in the metropolitan area). There is no U.S. consular office there.

Follow the graphic (right) to see what Mei Ting has to do to get her U.S. visa.

1. Gather a proper photo of herself and other necessary documentation (such as proof of employment, reason for travel, home ownership or other indicators of financial status, whether or not she has family members in China and/or the U.S., etc.) listed on the U.S. Embassy website.
2. Pay a $140 fee to CITIC Bank.
3. Purchase a pre-paid PIN card, which she will need to make an appointment at a U.S. consulate.
4. Complete her visa application form online in English (not her native language).
5. Get an appointment to be interviewed by a U.S. consular official in one of the five Chinese cities that have a U.S. embassy or consulate. Mei Ting chooses the nearest, Chengdu.
6. Travel by train to Chengdu, about five hours away, depending on routing.
7. Stay in a Chengdu hotel for two to three nights.
8. Go to the U.S. consulate for an interview. (She must appear for her appointment alone and is not allowed to carry a cell phone, computer, camera, backpack or purse to the interview room.)
9. Get fingerprinted and have her documents reviewed by U.S. consular clerks.
10. Walk alone into the interview room where a U.S. diplomat grills her about her documents, her reason for traveling, her family, her job and financial status and anything else that might make it appear she would try to remain in the U.S. as an undocumented alien.
11. Return to Shenzhen by train and wait for up to 60 days for the approval or denial of her visa application.

For many years, very few Chinese were allowed the privilege of traveling abroad. This began to change in the 1990s. By the year 2000, some 10 million Chinese citizens were able to travel to international destinations. In 2007, China gave the U.S. its “approved destination” status, and for the first time, the flow of Chinese visitors to the U.S. began exceeding what had previously been a mere trickle. The pace has picked up noticeably since then, and in 2013, it is estimated that nearly 1 million mainland Chinese visited the U.S.
as reported in a recent USA Today article. But that is still only about 1 percent of the estimated 97 million Chinese who went abroad last year. Interestingly, Chinese are big spenders when they travel abroad, ranking in the top 5 or 10 percent or higher in almost every study.

Until the U.S. government wakes up to the dramatic shift in the market and makes it much, much easier for citizens of mainland China to get a U.S. tourist visa, you will see many more Chinese travelers in places like Japan; Thailand; Indian Ocean resorts in the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius; and European capitals like Paris, London, Berlin, Amsterdam and Rome than you will in New York, Las Vegas, San Francisco or Honolulu.

In 2013, Hawai‘i received only 132,634 visitors from China, just 1.6 percent of the 8,235,510 visitors to the 50th state, according to the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority. It does not need to remain that way.

The U.S. Travel Association and many, many leaders in Travel & Tourism have worked hard to improve the visa processing system for China, India and Brazil. Check out their detailed program at www.smartervisapolicy.org. I feel sure this will be a topic for discussion at the WTTC Global Summit later this month.