Coconuts Are Falling

This has been a tough week in the U.S. airline industry, particularly for the carriers serving Hawaii. Aloha Airlines stopped flying on Monday, with a clunk that jarred us from sleep, like a coconut falling on the roof at two in the morning. On Thursday, a second coconut crashed down, when ATA Airlines suddenly discontinued all operations, not only to and from Hawaii, but across the continental U.S. In addition, there were flight cancellations by United, and, to a lesser extent, American and Delta airlines, as they scrambled to do neglected safety inspections and re-inspections required by the Federal Aviation Administration. With all these coconuts falling, nobody is getting much sleep these days.

Business travel writer Joe Brancatelli, whose father-in-law lives on the Big Island of Hawaii, notes that with the ATA and Aloha shutdowns, in a span of just 72 hours, about 3,000 seats per day between Hawaii and the mainland vanished into thin air. While other carriers will eventually step in to meet demand, in the short term, at least, that’s going to hurt a lot of people, from hotels and restaurants to lei makers and cab drivers. The Ala Moana Hotel, which housed ATA crews, will definitely see a drop in occupancy.

Outrigger, OHANA, and other major hotel companies are doing their best to help passengers stranded by the Aloha and ATA flight cancellations by offering deeply discounted rooms and waiving cancellation penalties. Many others helped stranded visitors at airports, such as the Hawaii Island Visitors Bureau, which set up a tent with refreshments to serve travelers standing by for open seats on other carriers.

These airline failures are a sign of the times. The economy is sputtering, while the cost of jet fuel has been heading for the stratosphere. But that does not stop some people from playing the blame game. You can take your pick—unions, government, predatory pricing by competitors, incompetent management, etc. Then choose a soapbox on an Internet street corner to bash your favorite villain.

Hawaii, more than any other state in the nation, is extremely dependent on quality, economical airline service. As a state and as an industry, we should examine everything about air travel and see what can be done to prevent the events of the past week from happening again. Clunk!