What I Learned on *My Summer Vacation*

During the past two weeks, my wife Linda and I toured the lands of our ancestors, Scotland and Ireland. For a change, we were travel consumers. As always, it was interesting for me to be on the traveler’s side of the front desk. It gave me a perspective that is sometimes lost when one is working an administrative position or any other job at a hotel day after day.

I am happy to report that during our recent journey, almost everything was perfect. We stayed in small hotels and were always treated most graciously and efficiently at every stop. Particularly memorable was an inn called The Mustard Seed, in the tiny town of Ballingarry, near Shannon Airport, County Limerick, Ireland.

What really caught my attention was the fact that in small hotels such as The Mustard Seed, almost everybody had three or four jobs.

The person who greeted us upon arrival at the front door would most likely check us in at the front desk, which might be a small office desk stashed in a corner. That same person might also carry our luggage to our room. When we returned to the lobby for a cocktail before dinner, the same friendly staff member might now be splitting his or her time between monitoring the front desk and the telephone switchboard, while tending bar and making an ice-cold martini, “shaken not stirred” in the best tradition of Agent 007, James Bond.

The next morning, that same tireless worker was often there to serve us coffee and a full Irish breakfast. Later, he or she might be found in the garden harvesting fresh vegetables for the next meal or doing any other job that needed to be done.

It is all so different than, say, working at a large hotel such as the Outrigger Waikiki, with a large staff with three shifts and multiple departments. Everybody works hard in either case, but watching a few people constantly shifting jobs throughout the day brought back memories of one of our company’s first hotels, the Islander, built in Waikiki 62 years ago. Manning the desk, handling the switchboard, folding towels, hauling baggage up stairs, and serving breakfast was all part of a typical day I experienced as a kid.

But not everything we witnessed during our trip was so tranquil or nostalgic.

Reading the Irish and British daily newspapers was interesting. In the United Kingdom, the leadership of Prime Minister Gordon Brown was crashing before our eyes. Day after day full front page articles revealed how a large number of the Members of Parliament had been falsifying their expense reports and were asking taxpayers to reimburse them for things that were far from the “normal and necessary expenses” of their jobs. One day, five of Brown’s cabinet members or inner circle resigned due to the scandals. Opposition parties and, indeed, some members of his own party, are calling for Brown’s resignation and early elections.

The current global economic turmoil is wreaking havoc with the Travel & Tourism industry throughout Europe. Overall unemployment in the European Union is over 11 percent. In France, it is 8.9 percent and a frightening 18.1 percent in Spain. Ireland’s unemployment rate is currently 11.8 percent.

Many of Ireland’s famed golf courses and the associated tourism facilities are suffering from the loss of both domestic and international business. The five-star Baltray Course, venue of the Irish Open, is scheduled to close at the end of the year, according to Ireland’s *Business & Finance* magazine.

The recent trip reminded me of how important true hospitality is in the Travel & Tourism industry. We were fortunate in our travels. Everything worked like a fine watch. We were even slightly
ahead of schedule in many instances, and all of our baggage arrived with us.

However, it does not always work that way. When guests miss a flight and arrive late at a hotel after spending far too many hours on a crowded aircraft, and perhaps after dealing with equally stressed airline personnel over the problems of lost luggage, or standing before unsympathetic immigration agents, they need immediate assistance, understanding, efficiency, and care. That is why the first few minutes after arrival at a hotel are so important.

Every week I receive emails from guests who have experienced true Aloha at one of our company’s properties. I hope we will always keep it that way, but it is particularly important during these challenging times.

It is always educational to travel, but it’s also great to be back in the good old U.S. of A.