Shanghai-Hawaii Flights Possible

By Dr. Richard Kelley

The most vibrant, exciting city I saw during my recent trip to China was Shanghai. With a population of around 20 million, it is one of the world’s ten largest cities and is widely considered China’s financial and commercial center. Before long, it may also be linked to Honolulu with direct flights – more on that below.

Located at the mouth of the Yangtze River on the East China Sea, Shanghai has been a booming, growing metropolis for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly during the decades leading up to World War II. The brutal occupation by Japan during that war, and, following that, the civil war and radical period of communes and “Cultural Revolution” under Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong brought economic growth essentially to a halt. Beginning around 1990, the economic reforms introduced by Mao’s economically liberalizing successor Deng Xiaoping resulted in massive redevelopment and revival of the city’s spirit. Today it is hosting the huge Expo 2010, which touts Shanghai as “the next great world city.”

The old European-style buildings along the Bund, Shanghai’s waterfront financial district and the hub of Western commerce in pre-Communist times, have been beautifully restored. On the street in front of the major banks, they have just installed an updated version of the famous Charging Bull of New York’s Wall Street. Arturo Di Modica, the artist who created the Wall Street bull, designed Shanghai’s as well, but with several refinements to make it uniquely appropriate for that city. According to the artist, the bull is reddish, in tribute to China’s politics. It is said to look “younger and stronger” than New York’s, with its head looking up and its tail pointing to the sky, signifying a prosperous, uplifting future.

After several extremely busy days in Shanghai, we were transported to the city’s superb Pudong International Airport on the fabulous “maglev” – magnetic levitation – bullet train. This is the world’s first commercial high-speed train of this revolutionary

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The maglev bullet train speeds away from Pudong International Airport.

The spectacular Pudong skyline, Shanghai.

Old European-style buildings along the Bund, Shanghai’s waterfront financial district.

The maglev bullet train type. Built in Germany, the train “floats” on a powerful magnetic field that not only suspends it in the air above its guideway, but also pulls it forward at a top speed of 431 kilometers per hour (268 mph). During a test run, it hit 501 kilometers per hour (311 mph)! The train runs to and from the airport every 15 to 20 minutes and completes the nearly 19-mile journey in only seven and a half minutes.

With our limited time, we did not see Expo 2010. However, the week after we left Shanghai, it was Hawaii Week at the Expo. Governor Linda Lingle and several key legislative leaders joined the Hawaii Tourism Authority in opening the Hawaii celebrations in the U.S. Pavilion. They also spoke with officials from Hainan Airlines about that carrier’s plans to begin direct flights from Shanghai to Hawaii. There are many details to work out, and the most difficult might be not landing fees and time slots, but the U.S. visa application process.

As I pointed out in Saturday Briefing two weeks ago, it takes up to 100 days for a potential traveler seeking a visa to enter the United States to get an appointment for the mandatory personal interview at the U.S. Embassy or nearest U.S. consulate. Applicants are interviewed alone without family or legal assistance. The visa application process – which is much the same in all countries that are not part of the “visa waiver program,” that is, most countries outside Western Europe, Japan, Korea and Australia – is intended to discourage illegal immigration by people posing as tourists. It seems a terrible way to treat the residents of a rapidly-modernizing country that is home to 20 percent of the world’s population.

The policy seems all the more foolish in light of the fact that, in Hawaii, Chinese visitors spend more than any others – about $310 per day on average, approximately twice what North American tourists spend and even more than the average of $254 per day spent by travelers from Japan.

Let’s hope those direct Shanghai flights start soon. Hawaii needs the business, and I know that many Hawaii residents would like an easy way to check out Shanghai’s breathtaking growth.