Airline Woes and How We Can Help

It is no secret that this year all the major U.S. airlines have been having operational difficulties. Flights have been delayed or cancelled in record numbers all across the nation. These problems are having a direct effect on many of our hotels in Hawaii and on the members of our 'ohana who work there.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, the proportion of flights arriving on time this year has fallen to 71 percent. That is the lowest level reported since the DOT started tracking performance data 20 years ago.

But that is only part of the story. A lot of delays are actually hidden in other statistics. According to the *New York Times*:

- If a plane sits on the tarmac for four hours, and the flight is finally canceled, it is not counted as a delay.
- Flights diverted to alternate airports or cities aren’t counted in the delay statistics either.

“So, chin up. Flight delays are not as bad as they say! They’re much worse,” says blogger “Jezebel” posting on gridskipper.com.

Even if the statistics were adjusted to include cancellations and diversions, they would still not tell the full story of what happens to passengers and how much longer it takes them to get where they’re going. A one-hour delay in a flight can mean a missed connection and many more hours or even days of delay trying to get onto an alternate flight. With flights on popular routes running 85 to 90 percent full, finding a seat on the next plane to a destination can be a real problem.

That has happened to me and, more than once, I have unexpectedly ended up spending a night in a strange hotel after I missed a connection. But at least I’ve always been lucky enough to find a hotel room.

That’s not always the case, and when airport hotels fill up, the airlines or airports bring cots out from storage and set them up in already-crowded terminals. That happened in Chicago just a few weeks ago, according to the *Denver Post*. Two days of thunderstorms caused the cancellation of more than 350 flights, and many passengers waited out the storms on cots in an area that local wags dubbed “Camp O’Hare.”

There are many causes for the surge in airline delays. There are more passengers and aircraft flying than ever before. Our air traffic control system is antiquated. Many major hub airports are at capacity with little hope of adding new runways in the foreseeable future. (Remember how many decades it took to add the Reef Runway to Honolulu International Airport?) And airlines have reduced the number of domestic seats and staff.

On a normal day, this fragile system manages to creak by, but add a few thunderstorms or a blizzard and a couple of mechanical delays, and things go downhill rapidly. Problems at one hub airport can quickly ripple across the nation.

Even security issues at just a single airport can affect the entire system. For example, this week Oakland Airport experienced a possible security breach and required all passengers, including those already boarded and at the gates, to be re-screened. This process took up to four hours. As a result, all arriving and departing flights were delayed until all aircraft on the ground were searched and all passengers re-screened. That, naturally, caused a cascade of missed connections across the nation.

The bottom line is that by the time our guests arrive at the front door of our hotel, chances are they have had a pretty long and difficult day. That’s where we can make a real difference. If the bell and front desk staff greet them warmly, it can erase memories of the challenges guests have often had to endure en route. Those are the “golden minutes,” where we can make the kind of strong positive impression that lingers for a guest’s entire stay and favorably colors their whole experience with Outrigger/OHANA and the memories they later take home with them.

So, as we hit the peak of summer travel in the next couple of weeks, let’s each do everything we can to make our guests’ arrivals a memorable and positive experience. Our smiles and aloha may well be the best thing that has happened to them all day!