A MESSAGE FROM RICHARD R. KELLEY TO OUR OUTRIGGER ‘OHANA

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OUTRIGGER ENTERPRISES GROUP
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“Saddle Sore” – An Old Condition That Afflicts Air Travelers Too

By Dr. Richard Kelley

After you have been on a long horseback ride for the first time in a while, you end up so sore and tired that you can hardly dismount or move from the corral to the barn. When today’s travelers emerge, after a long flight, from the packed coach section of an aircraft, they often exhibit the same symptoms when they arrive at one of our hotels. Unfortunately, it is about to get worse – a whole lot worse – according to travel writer Joe Brancatelli.

My sisters, Jean and Pat, and I learned the meaning of “saddle sore” in our youth when our parents took us to Wyoming and Montana for summer vacations. We often stayed at dude ranches where we rode horses for hours on end. During the first few days particularly, our joints would be stiff and our muscles would ache while still in the saddle. After we dismounted, the discomfort would continue through the evening. I confess that sometimes during those painful hours, our demeanor would be somewhat less than pleasant.

I think that today’s travelers, who fly for many, many hours in a coach or economy-class seat, i.e., “saddle,” come off those flights with a feeling not much different from being “saddle sore” and, when they arrive at our hotel front desk to check in, their demeanor might sometimes be less than pleasant.

I am old enough to remember the “good old days” of commercial flying when airline seats were large, widely separated and placed only two abreast. Passengers could easily shift in their seats and tilt back to get a snooze. The person in the window seat had enough room to get up and walk to the bathroom or stretch his or her legs without disturbing anyone else. When people arrived at their destination, they were not stiff, sore, tired and grumpy.

Since that time in the almost mythical past, people have been getting bigger while airline seats have been getting smaller and packed ever-closer together.

Tom Patterson recently reported on CNN that in 1962, the U.S. government measured the width of the American backside in the seated position. It averaged 14 inches for men and 14.4 inches for women. Forty years later, an Air Force study showed American male and female butts had blown up on average to more than 15 inches. This was not enough to be of concern to the airlines, which felt that seats 17 to 19 inches wide were still adequate.

“That’s the wrong dimension,” says Kathleen Robinette, who has studied human body measurements for the Air Force for three decades. “The widest part of your body,” she notes, “is your shoulders and arms. And that’s [usually] much, much bigger than your hips. Several inches wider... The result: Airline seats are approximately five inches too narrow. And that’s for passengers of the 1960s, let alone the ‘supersized’ passengers of today.”

In airline lingo, the distance between the same spot on two seats going from front to back is known as the “pitch.” It equates more or less to legroom. The pitch has been reduced from 35-36 inches or more in the “good old days” to 31-32 inches in most airlines’ coach section today. On low-cost carriers, the seat pitch can be as little as 28 inches.

As a result, airline passengers, particularly those flying in coach across the vast Pacific areas served by Outrigger and OHANA hotels, are usually confined to a tiny bit of “living space,” 17 to 19 inches wide plus just inches of wiggle room between their knees and the seat in front.

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To put that into some perspective, consider that while I am writing this article, I am sitting in a simple secretarial chair purchased from The Home Depot. The seat is 18½ inches wide. I am not locked in with another seat bolted on either side and occupied by large gal or guy I never met before. I can get up for a cup of coffee or a break any time I wish.

Recent announcements by major airlines indicate they are soon going to try squeezing their sardines – I mean coach passengers! – even tighter.

- American Airlines currently has nine seats in a row on its Boeing 777 but recently revealed new layouts show 10 seats per row!
- Layouts for the soon-to-be-released Boeing 787 Dreamliner show a coach cabin configuration of eight seats across on Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways but nine seats across on United Airlines. Since the fuselage of the Boeing 787 is narrower than the Boeing 777, coach passengers on United are most likely looking at more and more flight hours in 17-inch-wide seats.

And, to fit more seats into a confined space, the padding is being slimmed down, too! The perfect prescription for saddle soreness!

I am glad I am in the hotel industry, as opposed to the airline industry. We don’t try to pack more guests into a room by making the beds narrower and the mattresses thinner! Quite the contrary!

Sadly, for a number of reasons, our Travel & Tourism partners at the airlines have felt they must reduce their product to a commodity that is sold in small, minimal packages to the lowest bidder. Even in first class, breakfast is now often a warmed-over bun in a brown paper bag.

By contrast, the hotel industry has generally gone the other way. We are constantly adding features, giving our customers more space, more pillows – and bigger, softer ones – supersized television screens, even free, cooked-to-order hot breakfasts, and cocktail hours with the manager.

Whether we provide airline seats or hotel rooms, we all can serve our customers better if we understand what they endure as they fly from Point A to Point B. Hopefully, that knowledge and understanding will lead to solutions and better days ahead for everyone.

On the other hand, perhaps those of us in the hotel business should create special rooms reserved exclusively for the people who dictate the design of airline cabins, particularly seat size and layout. These accommodations would feature not only narrow beds and thin mattresses, but also tiny closets with shelves just out of reach, faulty air conditioning, dim lighting and only enough space between the end of the bed and the wall to turn a middle-of-the-night excursion to the bathroom into a shin-barking adventure. Perhaps after a few months of this special treatment, we might see conditions aboard our nation’s airliners start to improve!