In International Travel, Things Can Just Go Wrong

By Dr. Richard Kelley

For the past two weeks, I joined millions of other people around the world to travel with members of my family. Although we had a wonderful vacation, there are always a few things that go wrong, especially on a long international trip. This is always an interesting experience because suddenly I am on the other side of the desk, be it a hotel front desk, an airline counter or the maître d’s stand in a restaurant, and I get some inkling of what our customers experience on their way to vacation at Outrigger and OHANA hotels around the Pacific.

Let me take a moment to relate just a few of the incidents that occurred and reminded us of the importance of providing good hospitality.

When checking in at a hotel, you always hope that your reservation is actually in the computer and the room is ready. However, after traveling halfway around the world and traversing 12 time zones, we ran into a problem at the front desk at our first stop in France. There were several reservations under the last name of “Kelley” and “Carey,” both which can sound awfully alike to someone whose primary language is not English. In fact, there were two in the party named Linda Kelley – my wife and my daughter!

Dredging up my high school French helped me communicate a bit, but generally everyone working on the desks spoke better English than I spoke French. With patience, we got through the issue but I can imagine how frustrating it would have been if we had trouble finding a common language – a situation many visitors from Asia, in particular, must often face in our country.

Airports are more crowded than ever, especially at peak travel times, and the extra screening and security measures can create some real bottlenecks. Even though we allowed plenty of extra time, arriving at the airport three hours early, we barely got to the boarding gate in time for our flight. It took one couple in our party over two and a half hours just to check in on their return flight, departing from Paris’ Charles de Gaulle airport.

On arrival at U.S. ports of entry, there was another delay for processing by Customs and Border Protection officers of the Department of Homeland Security. As a U.S. citizen arriving in Denver, a city with relatively few international flights, it took Linda and me only about 25 minutes to get through, and the officers we spoke to processed us quickly, efficiently and with a smile. Those in the non-U.S. citizen line must have waited over twice that long. Some may have missed connecting flights.

Mechanical delays are inevitable. Bitsy Kelley and her husband Greg Shaw ran into a series of five consecutive airplane mechanical delays and made their connections only by sprinting through connecting airports. Other family members experienced the stress of an in-the-air mechanical problem where the plane needed to turn around and return to the airport from which it had departed.

I am relating these details not to complain, but to help members of our ‘ohana understand what many of our customers go through before they arrive at one of our properties.

I think we should also all be aware that there is a great need for improvement in the travel system if the countries where our properties are located want to get the full benefit of today’s rapid growth in international travel.

In 2012, one billion passengers traveled internationally – a record! If that sounds impressive,
compare it with the planet's population of 7 billion. It's as though one out of every seven people on earth traveled internationally last year!

For the U.S., international travel produces a trade surplus – it brings in dollars we can use to pay for much of the stuff we import – while most other sectors of our economy register a trade deficit.

David Huether, senior vice president of research and economics at the U.S. Travel Association, said this week, "[As of June,] the growth of travel exports has greatly outperformed that of other industries, which has slowed considerably in 2013. Travel exports are up 7.1 percent compared to the same point a year ago, a growth rate more than four times faster than the 1.7 percent increase in other U.S. exports. As a result, the travel industry has generated one quarter of the overall increase in U.S. exports so far this year."

Unfortunately, research shows that long lines and delays at U.S. ports of entry are discouraging overseas travelers from visiting our country. According to Consensus Research Group, "by experience and by word-of-mouth, nearly 100 million overseas travelers are getting the message to avoid travel to the United States – putting at risk $95 billion and 518,900 jobs across the country."

As I have noted before, one new American job is created for every 33 overseas travelers who visit our country.

The U.S. is competing for these international travelers and is too often losing out to countries that make the arrival experience easier, faster and more pleasant. While the global travel market grew by 52 percent between 2000 and today, the U.S. market share actually fell from 17 percent to 13 percent over the same period.

It will take some time and effort to improve this picture, and much of what needs doing will have to be done in Washington, which is where the policies regarding visa issuance and border controls – about which I have written on many a previous occasion – are made.

Despite this, there are still some things every one of us in the Travel & Tourism industry can do to help make a visit to the U.S. – and to an Outrigger or OHANA hotel wherever one is located – a bit more appealing. And that is those first few minutes when a very tired looking couple or family arrives at curbside, a hotel front desk or restaurant hostess station at one of our properties. They may have been awake since the crack of dawn umpteen time zones distant, and been through the wringer at a series of congested airports.

But all of us who greet them have what I and others have called a few Golden Minutes to give them a smile and the warmth of Aloha, to make them feel special right at the start of their visit. Some extra attention and care will do wonders to help exhausted travelers relax and lighten up for perhaps the first time in hours. It can set the tone for a positive experience for their entire visit.

I know it did for me on my recent trip to France. Let's do it for all those who visit us.