World Tourism Day

On September 27, many in Travel & Tourism took a moment to recognize and celebrate our industry on World Tourism Day. While there is certainly a great deal to rejoice about, we also need to think about the many challenges ahead.

The World Tourism Organization, a United Nations specialized agency whose mission is to foster awareness of the importance of Travel & Tourism, established World Tourism Day in 1980. Every September 27 since then, World Tourism Day celebrations have been held in various locations around the world. This year, the Persian Gulf state of Qatar proudly hosted the event in the booming visitor destination of Doha. The theme was “Travel and Transport: From the Imagination of Jules Verne to 21st Century Reality.”

Verne’s fertile mind imagined the future, and he wrote many books including *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1869), and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865). Now, a little more than a century and a quarter later, travelers routinely circle the globe in far less than 80 days, and the U.S. Navy has nuclear-powered submarines capable of traveling submerged even farther than 20,000 leagues (69,000 miles). Astronauts have traveled to the moon and back, and private enterprise is offering tourist flights into space.

Travel & Tourism has grown as well and is now one of the largest industries in the world, accounting for 10.6 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) of all the world’s nations and 221 million jobs worldwide. During the past 12 months, most travel destinations around the world enjoyed a banner year by almost any measure—visitor arrivals, hotel occupancy, visitor income, job opportunity, and taxes collected.

Yet World Tourism Day is also an appropriate time to focus on some of the challenges faced by everyone in Travel & Tourism, no matter what his or her position or title may be. These include international terrorism, health risks, natural disaster, and the cost of energy.

Terrorism is high on the minds of everyone in Travel & Tourism. The images of the attacks of September 11, 2001, are still fresh. And this summer's bombings in the Egyptian coastal resort of Sharm el-Sheik—following the bombing of a Bali disco in 2002 and the Jakarta Marriott in 2003—remind us that terrorists also target hotels, restaurants, and other sites frequented by tourists.

The SARS epidemic of 2003 and persistent reports of new cases of bird flu in Asia remind us that Travel & Tourism can be hit hard when an epidemic strikes, even thousands of miles away.

This summer’s twin hurricanes, Katrina and Rita, devastated a vibrant tourism industry all along the Gulf Coast of the United States. Members of our ‘ohana in Hawaii and Guam understand this all too well, having survived hurricanes Iwa (1982) and Iniki (1992), and typhoons Paka (1997), Chata’an (2002), and Pongsona (2002). This week, Hawaii is tracking tropical storm Kenneth, which is pointing directly at the Big Island and Maui, and may cause flooding and wind damage.

Just recently, Waikiki had a chance to test its defenses against rising water, when a combination of high tides and big waves started to bring the ocean into the basements of the Outrigger Reef and Outrigger Waikiki. See the article by Dr. Chuck Kelley on Page 8 for more details.

Finally, the cost of energy poses another threat to the vitality of Travel & Tourism. The price of jet fuel has helped drive many air carriers into bankruptcy and raised the cost of all forms of transportation to the point where people are seriously concerned about the future
of travel and the economy in general.

So World Tourism Day 2005 brings a mixed message. Let’s celebrate our successes and all the great things that have happened over the past 12 months. At the same time, let’s think realistically about the many challenges the future holds for us.