The Challenges of Travel Today

You really do make a difference

Like many executives, I travel a great deal. It is part of my life, and it helps me keep abreast with what is happening in the global Travel & Tourism industry. It also puts me into the shoes of a travel consumer so I can understand our customers and how we can better meet their needs. The fact is, today’s travelers face a lot of challenges, and my recent trip to South America brought that point home to me once again.

Travel has changed in many ways during my lifetime. My early trips away from Hawaii were on a Matson liner because ocean travel was literally the only way to go in those days. Voyages to or from California took about four and a half to five days, each way.

My first flight came shortly after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Women and children had been advised to leave the Hawaiian Islands because of the invasion that was feared as a very possible follow-up to the bombing attack. My mother Estelle loaded my sisters, the daughters of a friend, and me onto a Pan American “flying boat” that took off from the waters of Keelhi Lagoon, adjacent to what is now Honolulu International Airport. We kids slept on the floor between the rows of seats during the 19-hour flight to California. Outrigger’s Vice President Business Development Bill Henderson, also left Honolulu about the same time, by ship, but he was still in his mother’s womb when she and his three-year-old sister set sail on the SS President Taylor! He was born at sea on the way to California. (Neither of our fathers made the trip with our mothers. Bill’s dad, a Marine, was already being deployed. My dad, Roy Kelley, remained in Hawaii, where he soon volunteered for the Navy. He flunked the physical—the examining physician told him he’d be blind in six months, and he was, although surgery later restored much of his sight in one eye.)

Following World War II and the Korean War, travel by air entered a long, wonderful period when there was ample passenger space in every section of an aircraft and the onboard meals were outstanding. In the late 1940s and 50s, before jets were introduced, they had to be. Although the four-engine propeller aircraft of the day flew twice as fast as PanAm’s lumbering “Clippers,” flights to and from Honolulu still took nine hours or so. Braniff International Airways decked out its aircraft and flight attendants in flashy colors. Continental Airlines’ planes featured a pub complete with piano. United Airlines proclaimed Hawaii its “little corner of the world.” In those days, the ads said that “getting there is half the fun”—and it really was.

In recent years, partial deregulation of airlines, the Internet, terrorism, and the escalating cost of jet fuel have combined to knock that model right off its pedestal. Travel is now usually an exhausting challenge. Travelers must leave home hours before flight time to allow for traffic and finding a parking place. Airports are crowded. Check-in lines are long. Delays for security screening are common. Aircraft seats are narrow and crammed together. The scramble for space in the overhead bins for carry-on luggage is approaching combat. Flight cancellations, delays, and missed connections are commonplace. And this applies not only to long flights, but to interisland travel as well.

It is hard on passengers and even harder on those who work in the airports and airlines.

My wife Linda and I experienced all of the above and more during our recent journey to South America. We arrived exhausted and then wondered what challenges awaited us at our hotel.

I am happy to report that in contrast to our flights, our hotel experiences were wonderful. We were warmly greeted at the porte-cochere and assisted into the lobby. A cold
towel or chilled fruit juice awaited us as we approached the Front Desk. We were quickly registered and whisked to our rooms. Our bags followed momentarily. Everyone with whom we came in contact—Front Desk, Bell staff, and Housekeeping—was welcoming and friendly. They called us by name and told us they were glad we had chosen to visit their country and their hotel. Checkout was equally friendly, efficient, and personal.

I have often said that the experience of a guest during his or her first few minutes in a hotel is critical. Particularly in these troubled times, almost every arriving guest has had a long and trying day. As they step into one of our Outrigger or OHANA lobbies, guests form a lasting impression of that hotel and of our brand. Every person who comes into contact with a guest during those moments makes a tremendous impact—good or bad.

That was true before deregulation, the Internet, terrorism, and the airlines’ financial woes. It is even more true in 2005. It applies equally to all our guests, whether they are traveling for business or pleasure. Someone coming into our lobby may be a first-time visitor, a long-time repeat guest, a hard-working member of the airline industry, or an honored member of our military. They all deserve special attention and a warm welcome.

That is what Linda and I received in South America and, in spite of recent record occupancies, I know that it is the standard at all Outrigger and OHANA Hotels & Resorts across the Pacific. Believe me, it makes all the difference in the world.