Outrigger on the Lagoon-Fiji Celebrates 10th Anniversary

By Dr. Richard Kelley

This week, David Carey, Kathy Kelley Carey, and I traveled to Fiji to help our resort there celebrate its 10th anniversary. It was an amazing, wonderful experience. The President of Fiji, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Tourism Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, and regional chiefs attended the festivities, along with many other dignitaries, suppliers, and loyal friends.

Activities included exquisite choral singing by a group with cultural roots in the tiny island of Kadavu. A traditional kava ceremony and speeches followed. Tourism Minister Sayed-Khaiyum, resort Owner/Developer Geoffrey Shaw, and I joined forces to make the first cut in a giant birthday cake with a sugar cane machete. Then we all enjoyed delicious food served from multiple stations, each representing a different part of the various cultures of Fiji and the Pacific. The evening’s grand finale was a delightful performance by the world-famous Fiji Marching Band.

It was a great party even though everyone had to scramble to move the event indoors when rain began to fall in the afternoon of what had begun as a bright sunny day.

To fully appreciate this beautiful resort, one must look twice – first at the buildings and grounds, then at the special people who work there.

The story of Outrigger on the Lagoon–Fiji began in 1989, when Australian businessman Geoffrey Shaw purchased the 72-room Reef Hotel that occupied a lush, tropical, 140-hectare (346-acre) piece of beachfront real estate about an hour’s drive east of Fiji’s main international airport at Nadi, on the main island of Viti Levu.

Over the next decade, Shaw set about obtaining the necessary government approvals and community consent to redevelop the site into his vision of a unique Fijian village with individual villas and lush tropical grounds. The herculean task included moving the Queen’s Highway, the main road between Nadi and the capital city of Suva, transplanting 250,000 tropical plants – a quarter of a million plants! – as well as building individual villas along the shore, a modern, high-rise hotel tower, a swimming pool, multiple restaurants, recreational facilities, and infrastructure.

Outrigger became a project partner, and our now-retired Chief Operating Officer Perry Sorenson attended the opening ceremonies in October 2000.

Political unrest, a coup in 2006, and floods in 2009 complicated operations but everyone involved persevered. The property is now

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classified as a five-star resort and has received countless awards. Occupancy has been running high, and I was thrilled to have a luncheon snack in the poolside restaurant and watch nearly a hundred guests enjoying the sun, relaxing, or enjoying a fast game of volleyball in the pool.

The thing that really distinguishes “FOR,” Outrigger’s code for the property, is the people who work there. Most of the staff come from one of two nearby villages, Korotogo and Malevu. They are sincere, enthusiastic, gentle, respectful, happy, dedicated, hard-working, concerned, pleasant ... I am running out of superlatives and adjectives, but I know readers will understand what I mean to convey.

Members of our *vuvala*, Fijian for ‘ohana or family, really like what they do. Turnover is low. We have many members of the same family working at the property.

In return, Outrigger on the Lagoon–Fiji is significantly engaged with local communities in a number of ways. So far this year there have been at least seven specific community activities, ranging from refurbishing the Sigatoka Hospital Maternity Unit, to upgrading the local Koroinasau primary school. FOR has also introduced a program to mentor unemployed youth and train them in hospitality skills, which are vital to securing employment at any of the resorts along the Coral Coast.

What Fiji needs now is more visitors. Currently, the country receives only about 600,000 visitors annually, a number far below capacity. Yet Travel & Tourism is vitally important and represents about 60 percent of the total economy.

Geoffrey Shaw complimented the government of Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama for its unprecedented funding of Tourism Fiji marketing. It is paying off, and the number of visitor arrivals has jumped a gratifying 18 percent this year.

In my remarks on page 3, I stressed the vital importance that government-sponsored brand and destination marketing plays in Travel & Tourism in the world today. Drawing on our

David Carey, Peter Hopgood, Geoffrey Shaw, and ten-year service award recipients

Una and Koroi

The traditional kava ceremony - Warriors Jovesa, Lorima, Isoa, and Erami

Chefs - Executive Chef Shailesh Naidu (4th from left) with his kitchen team

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experience in marketing Hawai’i, I pointed out that government funding is not an expense but an investment that returns approximately 370 percent on the dollar to the 50th State. I suggested that the results of increased marketing expenditures for Fiji might exceed what we have experienced in Hawaii because tourism is an even larger part of the Fijian economy.

After four days of enjoying magnificent hospitality, I was sad to leave Outrigger on the Lagoon–Fiji. Many staff members gathered in the lobby to say goodbye. They sang beautifully as a group and then came forth individually to shake my hand and wish me well.

It was hard to hold back the tears.

To each and every member of our vuvale in Fiji, vinaka (thank you) for a wonderful experience. I hope I can return again soon.

*Dr. Kelley’s remarks to the FOR vuvale

President Ratu Epeli and his lady Koila; Minister of Tourism Khaiyum; Mr. Geoffrey Shaw; Mr. David Carey and his wife, my daughter Kathy; Honorable Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen ...

Bula Vinaka. Greetings and thank you for taking the time to be with us his evening. We are very honored by your presence as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of this magnificent resort.

Outrigger on the Lagoon - Fiji is a very special place – indeed one of my favorite places on earth. I always look forward to being here – seeing the beautiful grounds and the sparkling ocean waters lapping gently on the reef and the sands along the shore.

But most of all, I enjoy spending time with the wonderful staff we have here and their friends and families in the area.

Our partner here, Mr. Geoffrey Shaw, and I are good friends. I also admire him greatly. He has put his heart and soul, and his wallet, into bringing this resort to life.

Originally called The Reef Resort, it had only 72 rooms and employed about 100 staff. Now there are 250 rooms and the resort employs over 420 in a variety of positions ranging from entry level to those requiring advanced managerial skills and the latest in technology.

Mr. Shaw and I share the belief that everyone connected with this resort are part of our vuvale or family. Indeed, the defining facet of Outrigger on the Lagoon - Fiji is its connection with the people, for it is they who are the very essence of Fiji.

We have staff here from successive generations of the same family – husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and cousins. We honor and respect them all and are so pleased that they have chosen to work here with us. They care for our guests with a spirit unmatched in any other part of the world.

We can build resorts and fill them with the best facilities in the world, but without the embracing charm, openness, and support of their staff, such as we enjoy here, they are just buildings. Our staff fills the buildings with genuine smiles and warmth, which, like magic, turn concrete into true hospitality. For that, we are forever grateful.

We are also pleased when we see members of our vuvale learn new skills and advance in their careers. Many have received national and international awards for their work as individuals or as a member of our resort team.

Last year we received the AON Fiji Excellence in Tourism Award. And this year, we received several other awards such as the Travelers’ Choice Award as the Best Resort for Families in the South Pacific.

And congratulations to our three Staff Volleyball Teams! All three made it to the finals and two were champions of their leagues once again this year!

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We also know that our resort has a big impact on the local communities where our staff lives.

Wages, salaries, and tips earned at the resort are spent in local stores and for local services, multiplying the impact and benefits of Travel & Tourism several times over.

* Local jobs are created.
* Education is improved.
* There is more access to health care.
* Taxes are generated for government services that do so many other things for our communities.

But we cannot do it alone. We need the help and partnership of the Fijian government. Each entity in the private sector can spend millions of dollars annually to promote and advertise their individual properties or activities. That helps to bring to their individual doors people who know about the wonders and beauty of Fiji.

But there are so many people who do not know about Fiji – even where it is in the world. For that we need lots of destination advertising and brand marketing. That is where government funding and Tourism Fiji come in.

We have had a partnership like that in Hawai’i for years. But it was not always that way. There was a time when the entire state of Hawai’i spent less on marketing every year than MacDonald’s spent advertising hamburgers in Los Angeles every quarter. Las Vegas, Florida, Mexico, and the Caribbean were “eating our lunch.”

Working together, we changed that and got Hawai’i on the map and in consumer’s minds. We now host around 7 million visitors annually. Travel & Tourism now accounts about 40 percent of Hawai’i’s economy and generates over 40 percent of the state’s tax revenues.

I frequently say, “In Hawai’i, Tourism Is Everybody’s Business.”

And guess what! Funding destination advertising and brand marketing does not cost the state of Hawai’i anything!

In Hawai’i, the funds that government spends for Travel & Tourism marketing return a spectacular $4.70 for every dollar invested. That’s a return on investment of 370 percent!

In Fiji, Travel & Tourism accounts for an amazing 60 percent of the economy – far more than Hawai’i! So government investment in destination and brand marketing should also bring far greater returns.

You might say, just as in Hawai’i, “In Fiji, Tourism Is Everybody’s Business.”

So, we are all members of the same economic team working together to build a better future not only for Outrigger on the Lagoon - Fiji and the local communities but also for the entire nation of Fiji. I am honored that our company is member of that team and proud of its efforts as we work toward the continued growth and awareness of all of the great possibilities of Fiji.

Thank you again for being here on this special occasion. And remember: “In Fiji, Tourism Is Everybody’s Business.”