Mahalo & Aloha to
Aram and Rosie Melkonian

At the end of the year, we will say mahalo and aloha to Aram and Rosie Melkonian, who are retiring after having represented Outrigger Hotels & Resorts in the eastern Canadian market for more than 40 years. It is always difficult to say farewell to long-time colleagues, especially when they have been such good friends and integral members of our Outrigger ‘ohana.

While Aram and Rosie prepare for this new chapter in their life together, I’d like to look back and share with Saturday Briefing readers a bit of the history of our relationship with this dynamic team.

Although based nearly 5,000 miles away, Aram and Rosie have had a long love affair with Hawaii and Outrigger.

It all started in 1967, when Aram began working with Keith Cooke and Associates (KCA), a Canadian travel company serving the retail industry with offices in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Rosie was already working for KCA when Aram joined the company, which, at the time, was the exclusive representative for Outrigger Hotels, Trade Wind Tours of Hawaii, and InterIsland Resorts.

To put 1967 in perspective, recall that was the year the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel opened. The United States was in the middle of the Vietnam War (1964 – 1975) and had about 500,000 troops in that country. Many of our guests were military personnel on Rest and Recreation leave (R&R) from the battle zone and their families, who came to spend a few days with them in Hawaii. Hotel rooms were in short supply throughout the war.

After six years as KCA’s Montreal District Manager, Aram took on the responsibilities of Vice President and General Manager, and he and Rosie moved to company headquarters in Toronto.

Aram speaks fondly of those times. “KCA was the foremost producer of packaged and FIT travelers to Hawaii. I remember how we used to manually issue over 300 flight tickets a week for our departures from Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver.

“I also vividly remember our annual pilgrimages to Honolulu to discuss, beg, and bargain for room blocks with Dr. Kelley. Stellex and other hotel computer systems were only ideas on drawing boards. Everything was recorded manually in the reservations office located next to Dr. Kelley’s office, behind the Front Desk in the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel (see photo above). Room block ledgers, Sell-N-Report charts, progress reports, passenger manifests, etc., were forwarded to Honolulu by Telex, which was the fastest communication mode of the time.”

By 1989, Aram had become the Owner and President of KCA, but times were changing. Hawaii was still the dream destination for every Canadian, and Aram and Rosie served them well. However, in 1992 an economic downturn hit North America hard. Shorter-distance travel became more attractive to the Canadian vacationer, and other destinations penetrated the eastern Canadian market and promoted themselves aggressively. Hawaii lost market share, although it remained a dream vacation for Canadians.

KCA was one of the casualties of the times and closed down in 1992, but that didn’t stop Aram and Rosie from regrouping and starting a new business. Without missing a beat, they created World Access Travel Marketing, and I was pleased that Outrigger Hotels & Resorts could continue to have Aram and Rosie as our Sales Representatives for eastern Canada.

For the past 16 years, they have continued to graciously and expertly convey the ever-evolving Outrigger story to the travel community in their region. Aram and Rosie have worked long and hard on behalf of our company and have played an important role in establishing Outrigger as a recognized brand; their company has established a strong reputation as Hawaii experts in the Canadian travel agent
I asked Aram for his thoughts about the Canadian market today. He says, “Hawaii has been and still is a very popular destination with Canadians, even with central and eastern Canadians. However, there are several issues that limit the number of travelers at this time.

• “There is a shortage of direct flights to Hawaii from Toronto or Montreal.
• “It is a relatively long distance from eastern Canada to Honolulu, and therefore, Hawaii attracts only those vacationers who have time and money. Unfortunately, younger Canadian travelers presently prefer long, four-day weekend getaways or a maximum one-week trip. Hence Mexico, Florida, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and other Caribbean islands, and cruises are currently quite popular.

• “The decline of the Canadian dollar will have a short immediate impact, but we are used to it. Travel has always been a priority for Canadians.

• “One last observation—something I have been complaining about forever—is the lack of promotion of the destination. Neither the HVCB nor the Hawaii Tourism Authority has spent significant advertising or marketing dollars in eastern Canada. Wholesale tour operators who have a sharp eye on the bottom line are the primary promoters of travel. They concentrate on closer destinations, which are easier to serve with all-inclusive air charter packages.”

“Having said that, I hasten to point out that Australia and the South Pacific promote their destinations relentlessly in eastern Canada and have successfully increased their incoming Canadian business year after year.”

Please join me in extending a heartfelt mahalo to Aram and Rosie for being such great supporters of Outrigger over these past four decades. We wish them well, as they enjoy time with their family and follow the successes of their three grandchildren.