About 35 years ago, I heard Honolulu City Council Member Leigh-Wai Doo extol the beauty of Hainan, China, and how much its climate and geography resemble that which we find so delightful in Hawai‘i.1 This week, I finally had an opportunity to visit Hainan and see for myself the dramatic recent growth of Travel & Tourism in that island province, which will soon be the location of Outrigger Hotels’ first property in China.

The island of Hainan is China’s smallest and southernmost province. A narrow, shallow strait separates Hainan from the mainland but a bridge carries a large volume of rail and vehicular traffic to and from the island every day.

For centuries Hainan was part of Guangdong Province. Then, in 1988, the island became the major part of the newly created Hainan Province. In terms of land area, Hainan is about two and a half times the size of the Big Island of Hawai‘i. Economically, Hainan began to awaken from its historical dependence on fishing and agriculture in the late 1980s when Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping made it a Special Economic Zone.

In December 2009, the government of China announced plans to establish Hainan as an “international tourist destination” by 2020 and, from what I saw in and around the city of Sanya, on Hainan’s southern coast, they are rapidly achieving that goal.2 An unbelievable number of major international hospitality companies have either opened or are building large resort properties there. Driving around, we quickly found the logos of Sheraton, Marriott, Hilton, Kempinski, Jumeirah, Shangri-la, Fairmont, Wyndham, Hyatt, Raffles, Mandarin Oriental and Ritz-Carlton.

Visitor arrivals in Hainan this year are expected to approach 30 million, almost all from mainland China. Compare those numbers with Hawai‘i’s expected 8.4 million total visitor arrivals in 2014, of which fewer than 200,000 will be from China.

Outrigger Enterprises Group has a signed hotel management agreement in place at Clearwater Bay, a massive new mixed-use resort destination located about 30 minutes by car from Sanya Airport.

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Also included, either finished or under construction, in the Clearwater Bay development are golf courses, yachting marinas, a hospital, condominiums, apartments, employee housing facilities, shopping centers, and other facilities and amenities needed for a smooth-running, upscale, mixed-use resort destination.

The 499-room Outrigger Clearwater Bay Resort has been designed by one of the world’s leading resort architects, Kevin Scholl of WATG London, and the interiors have been designed by Hirsch Bedner Singapore. Design direction and management was driven by Outrigger’s Asia Pacific team, which is very proud of what has been achieved. The design development process is now 100 percent complete, and we are just waiting for final approval of the construction plans by the local government before construction begins.

It was exciting to drive there and stand on the currently bare piece of land where our partner, Hong Kong-based Agile Properties, will start work as soon as regulatory formalities are completed.

There are thousands and thousands of details to consider and implement before Outrigger Clearwater Bay Resort opens, but I hope I will be there saying “Nǐ hǎo” (greetings!) when the first guests check in.

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1 It is not surprising that the climates of Hawai‘i and Hainan are very similar as they are very close to each other in latitude – Sanya, Hainan’s southernmost city, is at 18 degrees 25 minutes north latitude, while on the Big Island of Hawai‘i, South Point, Hawai‘i’s southernmost piece of land, is at 18 degrees 9 minutes north.

2 For more information on Hainan, see: http://en.visithainan.gov.cn/en.