International flights returning to Kona Airport

By Dr. Richard Kelley

I was very excited this week to learn that Hawaiian Airlines has been authorized to fly from Tokyo’s Haneda Airport direct to Kona, on the Big Island of Hawai‘i, with the first flights starting as early as this October. Haneda, Tokyo’s main domestic airport, is considerably closer to the center of the city than Narita, its primary international airport, so that should make the service particularly convenient and attractive.

Kona has not had international flights since Japan Airlines (JAL) pulled out in 2010. The loss of international service has had a severe impact on all segments of the Big Island’s economy.

While it took a great deal of work just to put all the necessary pieces of a complicated puzzle in place to arrange the new service, even more work will be required before we can finally drape lei around the necks of the first passengers from Japan to deplane at Kona (KOA).

The application process was long and difficult. It took the cooperation of many levels of government – federal, state and county – working with Hawaiian Airlines and their counterparts in Japan.

The big hurdle at this point is creating appropriate facilities at KOA to handle the customs and immigration processing required for passengers arriving directly from abroad. In these times, where international terrorism is an almost daily news item, Kona Airport will need a new building or significant work on its existing facilities. That takes time and money and, even if quickly funded – a long shot – there is only the slimmest of chances that the work could be completed by the hoped-for start date, just five months from now. However, while a temporary facility may be approved for use until a modern structure can be designed, approved and completed, even that is unlikely to be ready by October.

Therefore, until appropriate facilities can be made ready at KOA, passengers, crew and the luggage/freight load of Hawaiian’s three weekly Haneda-Kona flights will have to be diverted to Honolulu International Airport for customs and immigration processing before reboarding and reloading for the short onward hop to KOA.

Haneda travelers, the aloha begins the moment you step aboard your Hawaiian Airlines plane

(Haneda traveler, photo courtesy of Hawaiian Airlines)
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It’s not an elegant solution, but it’s probably the best that can be done, given the circumstances. The important thing is the rebirth of direct international flights to and from Kona, which will provide a much-needed shot in the arm to Hawaii Island’s economy.

My congratulations to Hawaiian Airlines President and CEO Mark Dunkerley and his associates, and to everyone in the federal, state and local governments who worked so hard to make this service possible. Direct international flights to Kona are almost back again. Let’s keep working together to create appropriate facilities for international flights so that the link to Tokyo will be the first step toward flights to and from additional destinations!

The international arrival area at KOA has not been used nor any improvements made since direct international flights to Kona ceased in 2010. (Photo courtesy of kona123.com)

This was the waiting room for passengers arriving on an international flight to the Kona airport. NO food or beverages sold in this area, uncomfortable seating, and not much shelter from the environment. This is not a very inviting or welcoming site for our visitors arriving after one or more long international flights. (Photo courtesy of kona123.com)