

Notes on Hawaii on the Back of an Airline Boarding Pass - By David M. Brudney, ISHC, August 2008
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My article deals with a very recent Hawaii tourism experience and some additional thoughts.

Positive airline experiences. Karen and I just returned from attending a long wedding weekend in Hawaii and our experience with United Airlines could not have been any better. We flew round-trip coach from LAX to Honolulu on a 767-300. The plane departed on time and arrived ahead of schedule on both legs. Speaking of legs, we paid a little extra and got a 'little extra' legroom near the bulkhead separating coach from first class.

The Honolulu-based flight attendant crew was attentive, warm and friendly, the free movie was enjoyable and though we purchased lunch packages prior to takeoff, we thought the \$5 snack pack was pretty good. The plane was clean as a whistle and full yet it did not seem to be 'packed' and best of all, both trips were uneventful!

Hawaii's hurting. Perhaps no place feels the effects of the U.S. economic crisis more than the Hawaiian Islands. According to the Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, visitor arrivals to Hawaii have declined to the lowest levels since 2001.

The State of Hawaii is experiencing double digit declines by visitors arriving by air from the U.S. West Coast - - historically, the bread-and-butter market for Hawaii. The week of our visit (Sept. 15th), the Honolulu Advertiser reported domestic arrivals were down 19.5 percent and international arrivals were down 13.9 percent.

Statewide, hotel occupancy fell to a 10-year low in July - - historically a 'harvest' month for all Hawaiian hoteliers. The island of Maui ran 68 percent occupancy in July compared with 80 percent the previous year.

'It's the worst I've ever seen,' said Keith Vieria, senior vice president and director of operations for Starwood Hotels and Resorts Hawaii, a tourism industry veteran of 34 years.

The biggest concern now, however, could be the anticipated 4th quarter cancellations, especially so for all of the upscale and luxury hotels and resorts throughout the islands. A decline in bookings by as much as 30 percent is forecasted.

Tourism officials are responding with an aggressive \$66 Million marketing campaign scheduled to run through March 2009. The new fiscal year bed tax revenue was projected to be \$88 Million. 'I'm not sure we can get anywhere close to \$76 Million,' said Hawaii Tourism Authority Board Chair Kelvin Bloom.

One would never know there were tough economic times on the mainland by checking out the foot traffic on the sidewalks of Waikiki's busiest streets, especially the dinner-time crowds waiting for tables at the Cheesecake Factory. The biggest difference I noticed - - my first visit to Honolulu in nearly a decade - - was that a good 70 to 75 percent of the visitors appeared to be Japanese, but unlike 1999, these Japanese tourists were mostly younger married couples with small children and much more Westernized than I can ever recall.

Given all of this gloom and doom news, I was expecting more in the way of visitor recognition and appreciation. Surely, all deplaning passengers would have been met at the airport with open arms, Mahalos, leis and waiting complimentary limousines. There was none of that.

I had to make a few sales calls while in the Islands, of course - - standard for any self-employed, sole practitioner. I was impressed with the buzz, the 'alive' of Downtown Honolulu, the foot traffic, the high-rise office towers, the local merchants and all of the warm and friendly locals.

I was so 'there' that I found myself jaywalking across South Hotel Street when one of Honolulu's finest walked slowly passed (speaking under his breath) 'Jaywalking, what a stupid thing to do.' Rightly embarrassed, yes, but no ticket. Mahalo, Officer.

I must mention also my delight in visiting the Ala Moana Shopping Center after at least three decades. This has to be absolutely one of the finest retail malls anywhere. I could not believe the mammoth ground floor international food court with such a collection of F&B outlets. It seemed like every ethnicity in the world was represented. Later, I was entertained surprisingly by a terrific live talent show on one level and then stumbled across a truly amazing Hawaiian children's fashion show inside Neiman Marcus - - all recorded on camera by doting parents.

Hilton's Hawaiian Village. We made reservations at the Hilton Hawaiian Village because most of our family would be headquartered there. We learned upon arrival that the new Kalia Tower - - where we had been confirmed - - had been shut down. The very nice front desk clerk told us we would be 'upgraded' to a newly renovated room on the 23rd floor of the Rainbow Tower.

The best thing about the Rainbow Tower is that the views are spectacular and that guests are closer to the beach. Our guestroom was very clean and the new furnishings and extra large lanai were all four-star plus, but we were very disappointed that the renovation plan did not include our bathroom (or major upgrades of the five Tower elevator cabs). Overall, now industry-standard curved or bowed shower rods were missing and all of the hardware was very dated. Strange, given Hawaii's atmosphere, there was no body lotion included with the amenity tray.

We noticed a \$3 charge for use of the guestroom safe - - seemed like just one more 'nickel-and-dime' thing the hotel could have waived in appreciation of our business. Maybe they could have waived the normal in-room Internet access fees or set up multiple stations in or near the business center for guests to check on e-mails and read hometown newspapers. What I found instead was a full service Xerox Business Center that rents time on computers. Let me be quick to add that the complimentary Honolulu newspaper at our door (weekdays only) was most appreciated.

The hotel features two 'casual dining experience' restaurants, the Rainbow Lani and Tropics. The breakfast waiting lines were long every morning and the Tropics featured a \$20 and change buffet served on paper plates. We opted for either CJ's village deli or walked over to a really good Waikiki coffee shop. All of our evening dining was outside the hotel - - two outstanding service and dinner experiences at Roy's and 3660 On The Rise, along with other social activities involved with the wedding.

Lasting impressions? The hotel experience was overwhelmed by all of the merchandising. No matter where you turned, there was something new for guests to reach into his/her pockets. I realize this Hilton is a large property, but how nice it would have been if someone from senior management would have been visible, recognizing and thanking guests for their patronage during such difficult economic times. Even more so, I would have liked to have seen more eye contact and smiles from management-level individuals as they passed guests every day.

No matter what, Hawaii is still Hawaii and the Brudney family enjoyed every minute of it.

The Hawaii wedding experience

The wedding experience was priceless - - the fourth of five we will have attended this year. With Palm trees swaying and the vast Pacific Ocean as a backdrop, a relatively small number (65 guests) gathered around the gleaming white Diamond Head Gazebo on the lush grounds of The Kahala Hotel & Resort. Ah, there is something so very special about a Hawaiian wedding.

A few additional thoughts . . .

One of my favorite subjects: Next Gen. The Y Partnership together with PhoCusWright have collaborated in producing an outstanding report, 'The Next Gen Traveler,' timely and significant insights into the evolving travel patterns of Next Gen - - defined as U.S. adults with active use of the newest entertainment, computer or consumer technologies and have taken a trip of 75 miles or more from home in the past 12 months. All hospitality marketers would benefit greatly from studying this well-conceived survey, loaded with invaluable insights, information and ideas. To order a copy of the report go to www.ypartnership.com and click on 'publications'.

Panel: 'In the Year 2020'. It will be my great pleasure to appear on a distinguished panel during the International Society of Hospitality Consultants' (www.ishc.com) annual conference the end of October at the Fairmont Hotel in Washington, D.C. Moderator and ISHC founding chair Chuck Pinkowski has asked the panelists to share our visions on what the hospitality consulting profession and the hotel industry in general will look like in the year 2020. This represents a bit of challenge for me because I have trouble visualizing what I will be doing next Tuesday.

I would love hearing any ideas, comments or questions from my readers. This should be a most interesting panel and conference. I'll report more in my next article.

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