

Pacific Business News (Honolulu) - July 30, 2007

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## **PACIFIC BUSINESS NEWS**

Friday, July 27, 2007

# **Kauai seeks new ways to revive its Japanese tourism business**

Pacific Business News (Honolulu) - by [Jon Letman](#) PBN Contributor

Golden Week, the spring holiday period when Japanese travel reaches a frenetic pitch, was tepid at best on Kauai this year.

The lack of Japanese tourists on Kauai is glaring, but not surprising considering the host of factors contributing to the decline.

Once the most popular destination for Japanese outside of Waikiki, Kauai has, over the years, seen the international market (about 85 percent of which is Japanese) decline by more than half since 1990.

### **Honeymoons and Elvis**

Looking back to the 1970s, visitor industry experts recall the days when busloads of Japanese honeymooners toured Kauai, flocking to experience the Fern Grotto, which Elvis made famous for weddings.

Sue Kanoho, executive director of the [Kauai Visitors Bureau](#), said the shift in the Japanese market on Kauai has been the result of decreased airline inventory and hotel room blocks, an industry trend toward the North American market and external factors such as the Japanese recession of the 1990s and growth in Japanese travel to other destinations such as Korea, Bali and Australia.

The biggest challenge, however, is language, Kanoho said, adding that on Kauai, where most island activities require safety briefings, few vendors can offer instructions in Japanese.

"The message we've received from wholesalers is, 'We'd love to come if there was more Japanese language and the ability to block rooms'," Kanoho said, noting the difficulty of hiring full-time Japanese-speaking staff without the tourist numbers to merit them.

Kauai's international arrivals reached a high of 217,872 in 1991, having recovered from Hurricane Iwa nine years before. Then Hurricane Iniki struck on Sept. 11, 1992, forcing Japanese wholesalers to redirect their market to Maui and the Big Island, according to JTB director and general manager Yujiro Kuwabara.

When the old Kona-Keahole Airport became Kona International in 1993, Japan gained a new direct flight from Narita and the 1987 inscription of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park as a UNESCO World Heritage site made the Big Island even more attractive for Japanese.

Despite no direct flight to Kauai, the post-Iniki closing of the popular Kauai Westin, a lack of duty-free shopping and rising airfare costs during a period of economic gloom in Japan, international

arrivals on Kauai recovered to 196,828 in 1998, but fell sharply after Sept. 11, 2001.

The 2002 severe acute respiratory syndrome scare and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq didn't help, but by the early 2000s the Japanese overseas travel market already had shifted to new destinations that offered exotic tropical beauty and good shopping and were attractive to more budget-conscious Japanese.

### **Cheaper, closer, shorter**

The trend of *ankintan*, a Japanese term indicating cheaper, closer and shorter travel, has been exacerbated by fuel surcharges imposed on flights to Hawaii since 2005. On May 1, Japan Airlines added 16,800 yen (about \$140) for a round-trip flight to Hawaii.

The scheduled discontinuation of United Airlines' Honolulu-Kansai route creates another obstacle in getting Japanese visitors to Kauai and the rest of the state.

Yet, industry experts point to a bump in arrivals on Kauai of seasoned Japanese travelers who prefer independent Internet bookings and rental cars to packaged tours.

"We have seen more independent Japanese visiting," said Kamika Smith, general manager of Smith's Motor Boat Service, which operates boat tours along Kauai's Wailua River to the Fern Grotto. "They feel comfortable going on their own."

Kanoho said that despite the drop in numbers, there is a dedicated core of Japanese committed to Kauai. She said the Kauai Visitors Bureau launched a Web site in 2004 that reaches Japanese travelers interested in new destinations.

Takashi Ichikura, executive director of **Hawaii Tourism Japan**, acknowledged that while Japanese leisure travel numbers remained flat between 2000 and 2006, Japanese business travelers have increased somewhat. He said HTJ is waging an aggressive marketing campaign in Japan with TV spots and print media to present the familiar face of Hawaii in a new light, emphasizing Hawaiian culture, art, history and events where tourists can mingle with locals.

Yumi Ozaki, director of Hawaii Tourism Japan's Honolulu office, said that as Hawaii competes with new travel destinations such as Eastern Europe, Vietnam and Dubai, HTJ is modifying how it markets Hawaii to accommodate the consumer.

"We want Japanese travelers to know there is much more beyond the stereotypical images," Ozaki said.

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