

On My Mind
4/9/99

More on the benefits of off-island travel, as promised: it helps one to put things in perspective. I saw the world-famous Giza pyramids, the sphinx, more monuments than I can remember, while I was in Egypt on my trip - all of them colossal, all of them architectural, engineering, artistic wonders, and all of them exceedingly old. Most were built between 2,000-5,000 BC, and while theory holds that the CNMI was inhabited about 1500 BC, there are no written records of habitation until 1521 AD. Nan Madol is said to be only 800-1,000 years old. This place, in other words, is still very young in terms of other parts of the world; in terms of permanent markers of any kind.

It's also very small. The entire population isn't much bigger than an ordinary-sized town, elsewhere. Compared to big cities like Cairo and Jerusalem, it's only a "neighborhood," one of dozens - or maybe hundreds - of identifiable parts of the city as a whole.

Such realizations can be rather humbling, if not downright depressing. A look at the long coastline of the Red Sea, or the Gulf of Aqaba between the Sinai and Jordan, and the thought of all the coral, all the sea life at risk because of unzoned, uncontrolled tourist development makes a concern with Saipan's beach degradation seem picayune, petty, trivial. There is so much more at stake elsewhere, with much more far-reaching repercussions. It makes a concern with tiny Farallon de Medinilla seem almost farcical - even if one ignores the fact that to only begin worrying about its reefs and marine life 20 years after it's been used as a firing range target is already farcical.

But it can also be rather reassuring to realize that the CNMI is not alone in trying to find ways to encourage tourism while still protecting its natural resources, to learn that other countries are also looking at the trade-offs between infrastructure needs and available resources, to find other places struggling with preserving quality of life environs in the face of developer zeal.

The most striking success story - in terms of tourism development - that I saw was the charming town of Sharm-el-sheikh, a tourist resort on the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula. Unlike most third-world development, Sharm-el-sheikh did not just accidentally happen - it was planned from the very beginning. And zoned. The ocean front had beach umbrellas everywhere, and was reserved for sun-bathing, swimming, snorkeling, and a few island-style open eateries. Set back from the beach was a wide pedestrian-only walkway. On the other side of the walkway, amid a lot of familiar tropical vegetation - oleander, bougainvillea, aloe, palms - were the hotels - but even the Marriot and the Hilton were only one story high. There wasn't a high-rise anywhere.

The walkway led, at one end, to an open-air "mall" - small boutique-type stores built around a large central open area. As seems to be typical in area markets, the rugs, galabayas, alabaster, perfume bottles, leather goods, t-shirts, pottery for sale were out on the broad sidewalks - though more could be found inside the stores. The vendors greeted passing tourists in several different languages: "guten morgen," "bonjour," "buone giorno," "buenos dias," "good morning," - until the passer-by responded. But the vendors knew more than just the greeting - those I talked to

had a good knowledge of English; I heard some speaking Italian, German with other tourists. One told me he'd been sent away to school just to learn the languages he needed in his business.

It was all pretty impressive, pleasing, inviting. As was the cleanliness evident everywhere. No styrofoam cups, plastic bags, glass or plastic bottles, cigarette stubs, straws or straw wrappers or candy wrappers on the street, on the sidewalk, on the beach, on the boardwalk.

Which all goes to prove that restrictions, zoning, limitations, aren't always bad. Other people, in other places, are using them to their advantage.

Travel is costly. But if its lessons are put to good use, it can bring rich dividends to the entire community.

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Met any Russians lately? Other than some alleged Russian "ladies of the night" said to be on island, that is? A group of Russians was spotted in a store in Sadog Tasi a few days ago, comparing prices on liquor. No, they weren't tourists, either. They were crew - from a cargo ship in Tanapag harbor.

Turns out that one shipping line that serves the CNMI actually has two ships with Russian names - whether they are registered as Russian, or some other country is another matter - that regularly travel between such exotic places as Fuzhou, Xiamen, Kaoshiung - as well as Singapore, Shanghai, Kobe, Melbourne, Bangkok and Jakarta - and Guam and the CNMI.

Cargo-ship crew, shopping? Could this be a whole new market niche for Saipan retailers? Maybe the MVA, or the Chamber of Commerce, should aim some of their marketing efforts at more than just the tourist ships that come into the harbor?

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Speaking of the Chamber of Commerce, it might be interesting if its members, together with HANMI members, were asked to provide some statistics on what percentage of their guest workers have been in their employ for more than three years. The law requiring all guest workers to exit the CNMI for a period of six months after three years' employment is already in effect, but no hard data was ever supplied either in support of, or in opposition to, the requirement.

There seems to be an expectation that the law will not stay on the books for three years, so there's no need to worry about its consequences, but it might be worthwhile - just in case that expectation isn't met - to have some actual facts in hand on just how large the problem created by that law really is.