

On My Mind
11/09/01

A September 7th letter in the <I>Tribune</I> offered some worthwhile suggestions on how to improve tourist traffic to the CNMI. Since then, tourist traffic has declined even further, making the suggestions even more fitting. Just as something that is not broken should not be fixed, when something is 'broken' (as is the rate of tourist traffic), it should be fixed - and the sooner the better. That means doing something different, and not the same thing more loudly, or more often, or more extensively.

The writer suggested that since there isn't all that much to do to hold the tourist, once he gets here, for more than a few days, travel agents should focus on trying to sell a CNMI visit as part of a longer trip that includes other destinations. For example, working with travel agents in the Republic of Palau and the FSM for Asian tourists, and with travel agents in Japan and Korea for European tourists, to include the CNMI in their package tours. So far, at least, those destinations - as is true of the CNMI - are less subject to terrorism attacks than is the U.S. mainland.

Developing more activities for tourists to keep them on island longer takes imagination, but it needn't incur major costs. The CNMI has a tropical climate, tropical foliage - how about eco-tourism activities such as opening the Marpi Trail to tourists? Building other nature trails? Providing nature tours of wetlands, mangrove swamps, Education Island? Providing tours of the Northern Island volcanoes? Developing camping grounds? None of these require expensive infrastructure development, but each would offer something lasting, educational, useful, different, to tourists, to encourage them to spend more time on island.

The writer also points out that there is too much garbage everywhere and too many boonie dogs.

A relatively inexpensive way of tackling the garbage problem might be to re-institute the competition once held among village homeowners for the most beautiful and well-kept homes. As recounted by a reminiscing islander, this custom existed "before tourism became economically important and before island beautification meant cleaning up our island for our visitors. We used to do this for ourselves.... "

Talking about village commissioners, the islander said, "We weren't quite clear what their duties were, but I know we took their monthly village inspections quite seriously. Once a month the village commissioners inspected homes and gave awards for the most beautiful and most well kept homes. I'm not sure if the awards were monetary or not, but the competition sure worked to motivate homeowners and families to clean up their yards, paint their houses, dispose of their trash, and so forth. Although our house never won any awards, the pressure was always on to keep up with the neighbors. We didn't want to be embarrassed that our next door neighbor had a better-kept yard."

Once again encouraging this former pride of place wouldn't take a lot of money either, but could easily lead to a much more attractive, inviting, cleaner island - not only for tourists, but for island residents as well. Wouldn't it be more productive and cost-effective for MVA - in conjunction with, perhaps, the Mayor's office - to spend its time and effort improving the product it's trying to

sell, rather than advertising an imperfect one in the dog and pony shows it keeps trotting out abroad?

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One such "product improvement" could be to turn the Nauru building into a real visitor's center. The Nauru building was once an impressive embodiment of substance and progress - with its tiered fountain, elaborate landscaping, rotating restaurant, spacious atrium and the only escalators on island. Unfortunately, it has fallen on hard times but particularly with its location, it still has potential - assuming its mechanicals (escalator, rotating top floor, fountains) can be repaired and restored.

The ground floor atrium could be devoted to a permanent display of welcome to both tourists and investors - a place where mawr-mawr making is demonstrated and finished mawrs are for sale; a place where island artifacts are on permanent display and for sale by the Arts Council, the Museum, and others; a place where information on nature walks, historic sites, information about the local birds, fish, corals are available and on display and, possibly, posters and postcards for sale; a place where local fruits can be displayed and local foods sampled (a la Tun Kiku's Market); a place where slides and films about the CNMI's history and culture could be shown on an on-going basis....

If there were space on the main floor, items from other Pacific islands could also be displayed and sold there, along the lines of what used to be available in the Trade Winds shop, and is still available, to some extent, at Monika's Gallery. Some upper floor space could also be devoted to Pacific island merchandise displays and salesrooms - such as teak furniture, now carried by Monica's.

Weddings could be staged in the atrium, with the bride and groom and their parties making a dramatic entrance by coming down the two sets of escalators. Wedding service providers could have their offices on upper floors.

Space in the upper levels of the Nauru building could also be used to provide information needed by foreign investors - from maps of the island, water table data, and infrastructure system capacities to copies of building safety requirements and applicable laws and regulations - providing a centralized source of information to all who were interested.

The <I>piece de resistance</I> would be the rotating restaurant on the top floor. Its location offers the best overview of the entire island, and makes it a wonderful base from which to orient tourists and island newcomers to Saipan and its environs. There is no reason why other restaurants couldn't be located on other floors, however.

The entire project would have to be managed with firm guidelines to prevent the venture from deteriorating into another 'tourist-hype' sort of place, with cheap over-priced souvenirs made in the Philippines rather than a legitimate center for island information, arts and culture. The problem, of course, would be in deciding to whom to assign responsibility for taking on such a

venture. MVA appears far too pedestrian to do it justice, though funds MVA now uses to take its dog and pony show abroad could far more justifiably be used to develop the Nauru tourist center.

And the tourist center could, then, become a major added attraction to entice tourists - and investors - to come to the CNMI.

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Election babble? Well, it's all old news by now - except for the races awaiting count of the absentee ballots. Regardless of party or family affiliation, I imagine everyone was surprised at one result or another, as is usually the case - Agnes' defeat, the Judge's "defeat," the Covenant Party showing, to name a few of this year's. The intricacies - and variety - of the endless explanations are rich and gratifying all on their own!

Congratulations are surely in order for Kilili, for a smoothly-run election, for the education efforts in preparation therefore, for the professional manner throughout - but of course, that's what we've come to expect from the Election Board. His predecessor was equally professional.

We'd like to offer congratulations to Heinz Hofschneider, the new Speaker of the House as well - having been robbed of the position two years ago, he has more than earned it this time around.

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In the "best kept secret" department: the Falun Gong - Chinese dedicated to the value of contemplation and exercise for a healthy mind and body - have mounted a display at the Commonwealth Arts and Culture Center at Capitol Hill through the end of November. It is open five days a week, with a member in attendance to escort you around the exhibit. They do not appear to be soliciting funds, simply an audience and understanding. Exercises - open to public participation - are conducted at Micro Beach on Sundays from 7 a.m. - 11 a.m.