

“The More Things Change...”

The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel in 2011

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While the phrase did not originate with her, the always insightful Mary Chapin Carpenter sings the words powerfully enough for me to hear her voice in the winds of the Big Island’s Kohala Coast. “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

With respect to the present-day Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, change and sameness face off with one another in what proves again and again to be a delicate balance. After all, some change is indeed very good and necessary; other change, while likely a sensible and carefully considered business decision, does not necessarily equate to guest approval or satisfaction. For those who have vacationed at Mauna Kea for decades, like myself, sameness is most often preferable to change. The end desire: As much “unchange” as possible.

Thankfully, to stand on the beach and gaze at the hotel as a whole, it looks the same as it did in 1981, the year of my first stay. This I say with a deep and happy sigh of relief. Following a major earthquake on the Island in October 2006 that caused significant structural damage, the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel was forced to close its doors. From here various rumors began circulating: The entire main building would be torn down; the structure would stay but be turned into condos; something much grander and unrecognizable would emerge, even under a name other than Mauna Kea. Fortunately all of this proved false, resulting in many sighs of relief for hundreds of longtime returning guests who call the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel home.

While good change coexists with bad, I gladly lead with the positive. The earthquake brought sudden and unplanned though necessary change to the hotel, in the form of a two-year, multi-million-dollar renovation that drastically enhanced many rooms while dropping the total room count from 310 to 258. Mauna Kea’s original renovation of 1994-95, while a commendable polish, was in hindsight not enough. The small rooms of 1965 grand opening specification still called out for modernization (change), though not TOO much (sameness).

The new rooms of today present good change, proving the delicate balance between change and sameness can be handled successfully. Since the hotel’s reopening in December 2008, guests in the main building’s “deluxe ocean” and “golf vista” rooms have enjoyed magnificent new features, space and layout. The biggest and most impressive change comes in the bathrooms, where window-front showers open onto private lanais. This happened architecturally by taking every third room from the center to south end of the building and literally cutting it in two, creating out of this space two new bathrooms for the rooms on either side. North side rooms remain of original configuration, though some have given up their original closets to a second basin and separate-from-shower toilet space. Beach front rooms remain largely unchanged,

though every room in the hotel received the same boost in décor and modern amenities. As for those new bathrooms, the widow curtains that do exist in the showers for those with modesty concerns might be more useful on the “golf vista,” as I can’t imagine anyone concealing their own personal shower view of the ocean!

Large flatscreen televisions greet those who wish to turn them on, while they quickly disappear behind built-in cabinetry for those who do not. I of course stand firmly in the latter group. Walk-in closets, created from the original bathrooms, will comfortably hold steamer trunks full of clothes. Then again, as dress codes of the yester-decades no longer exist, this enhanced space may not be needed. What is still needed in all bathrooms, of both original design and new, are perpendicular mirrors to the main ones, so as for guests to see themselves from the side and behind when dressing for dinner or for any other reason.

The “new” Mauna Kea has been opened now for 2.5 years, long enough to iron out kinks and respond positively to the most recurring matters of criticism from guests. There is always, of course, the validity of the complaint to consider. To hear that “no employee is friendly” is a sweeping and inaccurate generalization, but to say some workers come across better than others is certainly a fair statement. The bell, concierge and front desk staff remain, as they always have, exemplary in service and professionalism. In other areas of the resort however, the same cannot be said, sadly enough. Bad change, to say again, comes with the good.

The distinction here is that, unlike the old days, some workers on the property are not employees of the hotel. The post-renovation restaurant Monettes entered as a tenant basically, inhabiting the disappointingly altered space of the beloved and now bygone Batik Room, staffed by hosts and servers of “different” caliber than all those trained in the original aloha spirit born 45 years ago. In other words, these non-hotel employees have struck me as short, tentative and cold. Perhaps I’m not the only one who feels this way, because Mauna Kea’s food and beverage director is now said to be working in conjunction with Monettes restaurant manager, on matters of both employee performance and food presentation. While I have yet to see improvement to the former, the latter has already made positive strides. The entree portions I observed during my most recent stay looked much more appetizing and substantial than some of the meager and pricey offerings I was meant to enjoy on my last stay two years ago.

The loss of the Batik has been by far the most difficult change for some to accept, especially myself. If it were up to me, the Batik dining room, bar and terrace would be restored immediately to their original glory. Monettes marks the biggest loss of “sameness” at post-renovation Mauna Kea, for which I’m not through mourning. At the same time, current enhancements to the overall Monettes experience embrace that good kind of change that is most needed right now. The change-sameness balance continues, and in this particular instance it need not be delicate.

The beach is another area with a noticeable difference in staff quality. While some lifeguards and towel attendants are employees, others are not. Altogether, what appears to be missing is that old spirit and love of the land that once translated into warmth and happiness toward the guest. Now comes a new generation of young beach guys and gals who seem largely to themselves and sometimes less than overjoyed to be there. They might say they're simply doing their job, monitoring weather and surf conditions while managing the towel process and keeping the beach equipment organized. As these elements have never changed, just "doing their job" today does not suffice by Mauna Kea standards.

Fortunately, plenty of outdoor good change abounds. The new beach furniture has significantly improved over what it was pre-renovation, including several comfortable two-person canopies. The chaise lounges around the pool are more inviting than ever, providing a clean, green and peaceful area to recline when one's sand limit has been reached. The Hau Tree Bar is still the Hau Tree Bar, thankfully so of course, and Mauna Kea's famous mai-tais and Fredricos continue to flow extensively, however more expensively like all else.

The Hau Tree menu needs some revision and enhancement, which already appears to be underway. While the club sandwich came through as one of the best I've ever had, I do miss the California sushi cones we enjoyed beachside for so many years. As cold food items are often preferable to hot while absorbing all that oceanfront midday heat, I hope to see a wider selection of the former on my next visit. Perhaps the Hau Tree will take some pointers from the post-renovation golfside restaurant Number Three, which most impressed me first two years ago and again on my most recent stay with its Neiman Marcus-style popovers, wide-ranging selections and delicious daily specials. Unlike the now-retired "19th Hole," Number Three is well worth a special trip off the beach, golfer or not. This, like the rooms, stands as another example of the kind of change to celebrate.

Some change comes not from the hotel itself, but from the law, security and social attitudes of today. The facts that louvered front doors can no longer be, that marginally aesthetic safety barriers must now appear in places that got by just fine for decades without, and that the gaps in all existing railings had to be narrowed with additional wires, come from vexing laws of the present, not necessarily to be blamed on the Mauna Kea itself. It's important to note that the many new and potentially offensive security cameras throughout the hotel are not meant to spy on guests' activities and whereabouts, but to protect the hotel's million dollars worth of original artwork from theft and vandalism. The cameras, I will say, could certainly be more subtle. In today's vacationer culture, people do not typically travel to Hawaii with suits, dinner jackets and ties anymore. As such, trying to enforce such "outdated" dinner dress codes would likely prove unpopular and impractical. Of course we're left to our own personal preference to dress up should we choose.

The shops throughout the resort offer more logo-based items and apparel than ever before. The golf and tennis accommodations stand superior, I'm told. The traditions of the Tuesday Luau

and the Saturday Clambake continue. The Manta Restaurant, even with its new wine bar, looks and feels like the Pavilion it always was, though it doesn't make me miss the Garden any less. The pool remains of original design, new deck notwithstanding. Most every work of art has been returned to the same spot in which it was first placed 45 years ago. Walkways and paths around the property guide us in the same directions they always have. Even the elevator doors remain the same color, on which some guests have apparently insisted. Details like this demonstrate that more often than not, it's the little things that matter most. Above all else, the famous and instantly recognizable orange plumeria thrives!

This is home, for me and so many. We want our home preserved and protected, while staying in step with the times. All things considered, this delicate balance has been achieved. Resort managers both new and not so new stand eager to hear feedback from everyone, on anything and everything. Now well into the third year of the "new" hotel, improvements have by no means ceased, while necessary changes continue. The end goal, of course, is for guests to have a perfect stay. This quest for perfection naturally requires constant revision. Fortunately for management, some complaints fade and even disappear, as it's just a matter of time for some changes to take hold and earn guest approval. Either way, managers certainly know what a magical and unmatched place with which they're trusted, and as such their ears are open.

All together, in spite of many little changes and even a couple big changes, the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel in 2011 stands as the same place it was 20, 30 and 40 years ago. While change and sameness will always remain a delicate balance, the Mauna Kea has proven, and will no doubt prove again, that this balance can succeed with careful and ongoing consideration.

"The more things change, the more they remain the same." And now I hear Mary re-singing her song with ukulele accompaniment.

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