

AGENT Life

The Official Publication of NACTA | Fall 2018

LAND OF
LEGEND

CREATING
AUTHENTIC
CULTURAL
EXPERIENCES

OF TECHNOLOGY
AND TRAVEL

KEN KIMI

KAUA'I: ENJOY
THE SERENITY
OF HAWAI'I'S
GARDEN ISLAND

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Deb Knoske



KEN KIMI

OF TECHNOLOGY AND TRAVEL

By Amy L Charles

Ken Kimi was born in Hilo, Hawaii, and grew up in a family that built and managed a local hotel chain. He learned construction from his dad, worked at hotel front desks, and even delivered bags to rooms for groups of tourists checking into the hotels. His tourism industry insight was developed at an early age.

Early on, Ken's passion was engineering. He left Hawaii to attend school and received his bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering and computer science from University of the Pacific and MIT. He met his Hawaii-born wife, Wendy, in California, where they worked and started their family.

Because the couple valued the Hawaii culture they were raised in, they wanted their children surrounded by family and the Hawaiian culture; still, the scarcity of high-tech jobs made moving difficult. Ken started his single-person travel agency—with a Hawaii focus—while still in California, thinking it could be his second career. A Touch Above Travel Services, LLC has gone far beyond that.

"We moved back to Hawaii in 2000 with our twin girls and I kept growing my business to now include outbound travel from Hawaii." Ken benefits from the melding of his technology background and love of travel, which has helped in understanding and matching his customers' needs to the appropriate vendors.

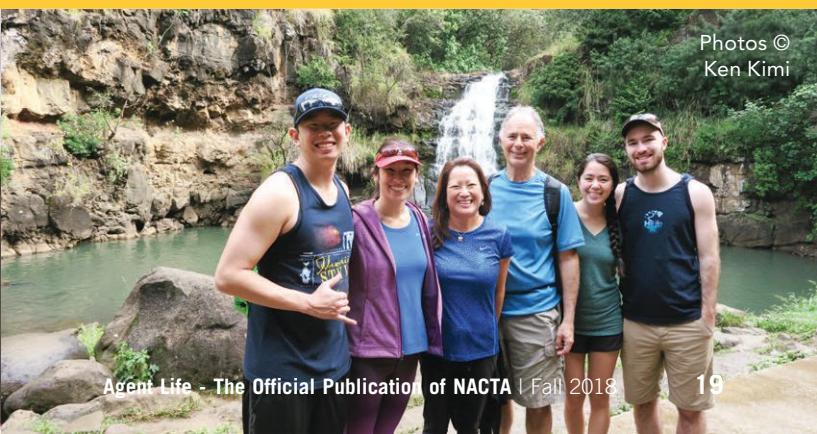
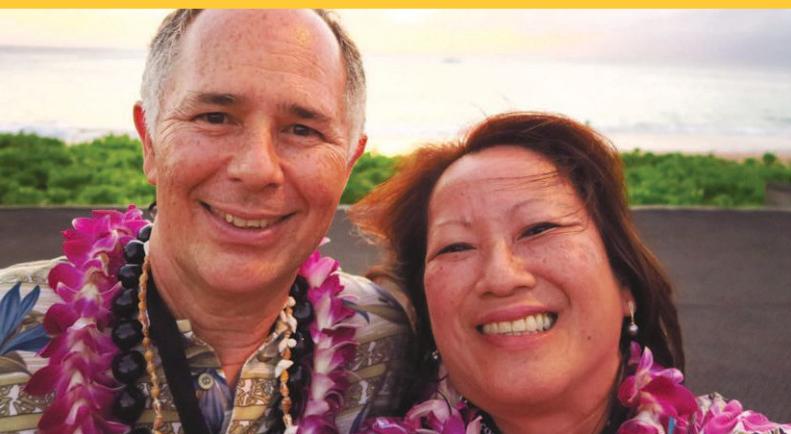
"When I started my travel business in 1997, tools weren't available to the independent agent to capture customer, vendor and travel segment details. I wrote my own database application to store this information and to create customer itineraries." He still uses this application today, making enhancements as necessary.

Ken enjoys using the Sabre GDS to book air travel, especially complicated itineraries—such as families originating in different cities and meeting up in a gateway city on their way to a final destination. "This would be difficult and too time-consuming using airline and/or large online booking engines. The best part is when I follow up with customers after they've taken their trip and they share how enjoyable it was—and the new referrals I get from a job well-done."

The biggest challenge in working out of Hawaii is the time difference from the United States mainland. There's five-to-six-hour difference between Hawaii and the East Coast—Hawaii doesn't observe daylight saving time—and many companies close at 11 a.m.

Hawaii time, so Ken must prioritize vendor discussions and phone bookings accordingly.

Other challenges come through Hawaii's unique layout as it pertains to Ken's role as NACTA Hawaii Chapter Director and SW Regional Director. The chapter has NACTA members



Photos ©
Ken Kimi

PROFILE

across the four major islands: Hawaii, Maui, Oahu and Kauai. Unlike in other states, many members cannot drive to meetings and events, typically on Oahu.

"Neighbor island members will fly to Oahu for ship inspections, tradeshows and specialty training, so I tend to schedule a NACTA meeting during those times. In many cases, I ask the neighbor island members to arrive at the airport around the same time and I pick them up and we all go to our meeting and event for the day. After the event, I take them back to the airport. This process has worked well for our chapter."

In addition to his director involvement with NACTA, Ken is an ASTA chapter board member.

"I have found that NACTA members typically are individual contractors or owners of very small agencies. Their needs tend to be more focused on training and sharing of best practices. I've noticed that many members in ASTA tend to be larger agencies where the needs and focuses are different. As a board member of the ASTA Hawaii chapter, I represent the interests of the ICs in our chapter that would normally not be considered and strive to ensure ASTA Hawaii benefits all Hawaii agents and agencies."

Ken also strives to ensure that his own business needs and focuses are met. Last December, during a time that's typically

slow for him, he decided to dedicate a two-week period to taking the course work for the ASTA Verified Travel Advisor program.

"I learned a great deal from the coursework, especially from the regulatory classes where I have since modified how I do business and my disclosures to customers." He's shared some key learnings with his NACTA and ASTA partners, in hopes they'll sign up to learn more. The disclosure of air pricing—base fare, taxes, service fee—on how it should be properly shared, and a customer three-day right to cancel—even on nonrefundable purchases—were extremely valuable.

As travel advisors, he notes, there's much more to the job than booking a trip: Travel advisors must understand their fiduciary duties to customers and the web of regulation. Ken has modified his business practices as he learned in the course work to minimize regulatory fines and risk.

Of course, what Ken is most grateful for in the fields of travel and travel planning remains unchanged.

"I enjoy helping friends and co-workers plan their Hawaii vacation, sharing my knowledge and creating a trip that would be memorable for them."

And making customers happy is memorable for this son of Hawaii. ☺

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