Did the Wright brothers soar in the sky first? Was Leonardo da Vinci the first to describe “machines of the future”?

Centuries before Orville and Wilbur Wright took flight; Abbas ibn Farnas was soaring over the hilly Spanish countryside in a one-man glider - a thousand years before the famed Wright flight in North Carolina.

Al-Jazari busied himself laying the foundations of modern engineering and writing the Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices in 1206, where he described fifty mechanical devices along with instructions on how to build them, more than 200 years before Leonardo da Vinci became revered for his technological ingenuity.

Challenge your perspective.
Undercover Concierge!

The undercover concierge recently walked up to cashier checkout station to pay for items in a store. I tried to get the attention of the person who was on the phone with their back to me because I wanted to verify which station to go to and get ready. They never did turn around, not even a nod and point to a station, until they finished the telephone call. Suggestion: Position yourself to be able to see people and use a smile, eye contact or nod of head to acknowledge your customer.

I walked up to a staff behind a conference registration area (4-5 people) and they all were looking down and reading emails with their “smart phones”. When I asked a question, I was told to wait; because they had to finish their emails. Huh? I thought I was the guest? How do you feel when you are ignored by someone who is reading an email on a smart phone in situations like networking, getting information, or being greeted at the registration desk? I love my smart phone; I do put it aside at times.

What would you do in these customer service situations?

(LET US KNOW YOUR "GUEST SERVICES" EXPERIENCES GOOD AND BAD: SEND TO SVCONCIERGE@MINDSPRING.COM)
¡Viva!

Romantic and lively Mexican ballads play center stage at ¡VivaFest! The San Jose Mexican Heritage & Mariachi Festival (Sept 23-27), this celebration of music, film, art and dance. This year’s festival highlights include the premiere of “Once Upon a Time,” a mariachi musical created by Vikki Carr and Cesar Rosas of Los Lobos fame (pictured above), in addition to a fantastic lineup of musical and dance talent, including Mariachi Nuevo Tecatitlan, Mariachi Sol de México de José Hernandez, Mariachi Reyna de Los Angeles, Mariachi Cobre and the award-winning Los Lupenos de San José. Also don’t miss “The Sound of East LA Meet the Kings of Latin Swing,” a concert with The Orchestra of Spanish Harlem featuring Tito Puente, Jr., and “mystery artists” from East LA. Rounding out the event is the Northern California premiere of Eva Longoria’s film “The Harvest,” a documentary about children farm workers, directed by Roberto Romano; a full schedule of music and dance workshops, including the Festival’s first “mariachi college bowl;” special events; outdoor celebrations and much more. See website for full schedule of events. (San Jose: various locations; 877/MHC-VIVA; www.vivafest.org)

A Romp Through the ‘60s

Through Sept 18, The Retro Dome presents SHOUT! The Mod Musical. This is the hit musical that took audiences by surprise and brought them to their feet for a standing ovation at every performance in 2010. Now, the girls of Shout! return for a limited engagement to celebrate The Retro Dome’s second anniversary. Celebrating the sights and sounds of 1960s England, this musical follows five fab gals on a high-energy, hip-shaking, non-stop vibrant trip through the decade that made household names of stars like Petula Clark, Dusty Springfield and Lulu. It’s “Sex and The City” meets “Laugh-In” and brings back the beautiful birds and smashing sounds that made England “swing” in the 60s. Fri, 8pm; Sat, 2 & 8pm; Sun, 2pm. (San Jose: The Retro Dome, 1694 Saratoga Ave.; 408/404-7711. www.theretrodome.com)

The Elizabethan Era Revived

Head south of San Jose for the annual Northern California Renaissance Faire (Sept 17-Oct 16). This lively recreation of a Renaissance-era harvest fair delivers the essence of both adventure and romance—from gallant knights and fair maidens to regal queens, strolling musicians and jousting matches. The venue is the Casa de Fruta roadside fruit stand-turned-visitor attraction, which transforms itself into Willington, a Renaissance village complete with costumed denizens. Visit the marketplace to browse the vast array of artisanal wares—from chain mail and swords to leather goods, jewelry and blown glass. Try your hand at one of the many fun games such as archery, axe throwing and darts. Stop by any of the stages to catch a performance—from the zany Manly Men in Tights, who keep the audience laughing with their swordplay and hilarious banter, to Suspended Reality, whose Midsummer Night’s Dream-inspired aerial acrobatics are sure to leave you breathless. Catch the pomp and circumstance of the Queen’s Royal Reception, where the queen reunites with renowned privateer and explorer Sir Francis Drake. And don’t miss the Tournament of Champions, where gallant knights engage in full-contact jousting. Adding to this is a Celtic Music Series, Saturdays at 6pm; this year’s lineup includes Tempest (Sept 17); Molly’s Revenge (Sept 24); Culann’s Hounds (Oct 1); Brother (Oct 8); and Wicked Tinkers (Oct 15). And for satisfying the appetite, choose from a vast selection of tasty fare—from Greek, Italian, Mexican and American to period foods. To jump into the full Renaissance spirit, grab a giant roasted turkey leg with all the fixings, and wash it down with a fine English ale. Fair-goers are invited to attend in their own period costumes. Weekends, 10am-6pm. (Hollister: Casa de Fruta Country Park; 408/847-FAIR. www.norcalrenfaire.org)

Stephanie Soong
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INSIDER’S TRACK

Why the hospitality industry should not succumb to the current economic misery!

I just returned from a three-week, three-State drive through the Pacific Northwest. It was exhilarating, interesting, and took me to many very scenic places.

Most importantly, it confirmed for me, what I have felt for some time: The opportunities for the hospitality industry in all of its forms are as good or better as ever. What am I talking about?

Of course, my trip was during the peak vacation season. As you would expect, the roads were filled with families in their SUVs, RVs, and station wagons and so were the hotels, B & Bs, and campgrounds. Here is what I observed:

- The tourists did not skimp on their vacations. ‘Foodie-type’ restaurants – not just fast-food establishments - were busy. National parks (those that were accessible), although entry fees were not exactly low, had much traffic.
- I heard many tourists speak in foreign tongues. In one B & B a family of four from Normandy, France sat at the table next to me, and many times I heard conversations in languages I did not recognize.
- The accommodations and amenities were good. A reduced staff that often consisted of seasonal temporaries more often than I had expected, provided the service. Self-help (see my VAM August 2011 column) was often substituted with the help of new technologies.

These observations triggered many thoughts in my mind that I would like to share with you:

The USA is a wonderful country that, from Coast to Coast has much to offer and a very interesting history. Those facts alone attract many visitors from abroad. My relatives and friends from abroad have, many times, complained about the many obstacles they have to overcome in order to gain entry into the US. To the best of my knowledge, the President is making efforts to reduce this paranoia-inspired bureaucracy to encourage an increase in tourists from abroad. While many of them already have a passing or better knowledge of other language (Spanish, French or German, Japanese) to make them feel welcome.

The hospitality industry, with the possible exception of tourist Mecca’s who cater to them, should not skimp on services to the foreign businessmen or tourists. The self-service coffee makers in rooms are many times pitifully basic, the newspaper vending machines. Have seldom papers other than the local ‘rags’. Most importantly – knowledgeable staff (and I am not even suggesting concierges) is mostly non-existent. Case in point: At one motel, when I inquired where I could get a newspaper, the desk person referred me to a vending machine at the end of the block, not knowing what I may find there. He did not know that the Starbucks at the same end of the block sells the New York Times daily!

Gas stations – self-service of course – (except for Oregon) are equally basic. Foreigners appreciate the low price of gasoline, but little else is inviting. I am referring to restrooms and modes of payment (different depending on the type of gasoline sold) A friendly smile would also be a nice change of pace.

I am suggesting that we in the hospitality industry, gear up to investing in facilities, amenities, and staff to supplement and improve the many tourist attractions the USA have to offer. Do we need to close National Parks, reduce public transportation services, and reduce States’ and local tourist office staffs? Do we need to sell foreign-made cheap souvenirs, and let visitors navigate for themselves with GPS’, use hotel “Concierge-Substitute Terminals” to find restaurants, sightseeing attractions, event schedules etc.?

This is the time to restore and improve the reputation of the US hospitality industry.

Let’s make our contribution to reviving the US economy through investing and improving the many assets that the hospitality industry offers and by welcoming the many visitors and tourists that are eager to experience the country’s many attractions and willing to spend their money to do so.

Gus Holweger
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SVCA says “Thanks”!!

Kathleen Starrett, Catering Sales Manager at the Menlo Grill at the Stanford Park Hotel in Menlo Park, hosted the Silicon Valley Concierge Association to (to quote the Grill’s publicity memo): “The opening of this “New Neighborhood Grill” that offers American bistro-style food in an approachable, yet sophisticated atmosphere.”

The memo continues: “As described by General Manager Patrick Lane, “when we set out to define the direction for the Menlo Grill, it was clear that there was a shortage of classic, American-style bistro options in the area. There is an abundance of Italian, French and Japanese restaurants, but not a stylish, yet approachable place where one can come in for a healthy salad at lunch or an organic Prather Ranch filet dinner.”

Chef Juliene Brown, who studied at the California Culinary Academy, and who left behind a successful private catering business to join the Menlo Grill, made all this come to live with wonderful creations for SVCA members, supplemented by a fine sampling of wines.

SVCA thanks Kimberly Porter, Patrick Lane and Kathleen Starrett and their staff for the invitation, the hospitality, and a most enjoyable meeting.
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