

Misadventures on the Island Hopper

In the second of a two-part series, **Chris Sloan** experiences the Island Hopper, the lifeline operation from Honolulu to Guam connecting remote Pacific island communities



BELOW: *Already running an hour late, United Airlines Boeing 737-824, N33262 (c/n 32402), waits at Gate D1 of Terminal 2 at Honolulu/Daniel K Inouye Airport* ALL IMAGES CHRIS SLOAN UNLESS STATED

Arriving at Honolulu/Daniel K Inouye Airport just after 5.30am, the terminal was still and quiet, a reflective moment of calm before a marathon flight across the Pacific. United Airlines Flight 154, the famed Island Hopper, was scheduled to depart at 7.25am and arrive in Guam – after six flights, five island stops and 3,500 miles – at 6.25pm, some 15 hours later.

I had booked business class for \$2,475 – not at an extreme premium over economy, but enough to make me pause. But after doing the maths and anticipating 15 hours in a narrowbody, I had decided to splurge. The alternative option of a seven hour nonstop from Honolulu

to Guam on United's 777-300ER with lie-flat Polaris seats was actually cheaper, but that wasn't the point. While many passengers were travelling just one or two sectors, to the best of my knowledge I was the only passenger flying the entire route in one go. I had considered stopping over en route, but the pricing was prohibitive – the first leg from Honolulu to Majuro, the capital of the Marshall Islands, cost nearly \$1,000 more than going all the way.

I used United's check-in app, but still printed all six boarding passes as a souvenir. At the gate, while the aircraft was busy being loaded with everything from coolers to parcels and checked bags, the Island Hopper's role as a regional lifeline was immediately

apparent. Twelve wheelchair passengers were waiting to board, many of them elderly, with some coming from Hawaiian medical care.

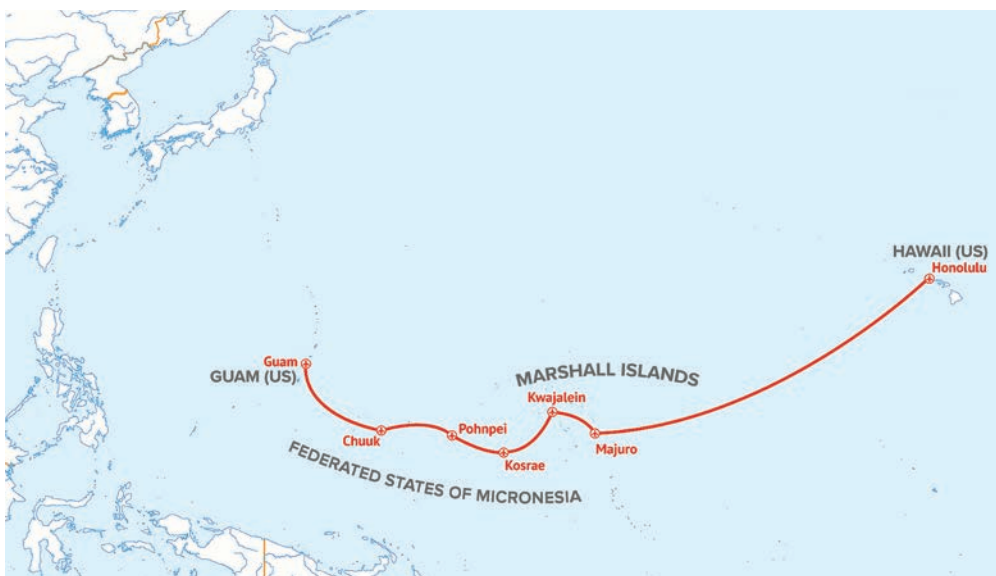
Our aircraft, N33262 (c/n 32402), is a 24-year-old Boeing 737-824, originally delivered to Continental in July 2001. It still bore the comfortable, cushy throwback seats of the 2010s, before de-padded slimlines became all the rage. The Honolulu-based crew of four welcomed passengers with an upbeat, casual energy. United's business class cabin has 16 seats, but 1A and 1B are blocked off for pilot crew rest, along with 2A and 2B to allow them to fully recline. The second set of Guam-based pilots, who would take over after Majuro, were already seated. The onboard mechanic sat in the first >>





LEFT: *Pre-departure beverage choices were limited to water or orange juice as no alcohol is served on departures from Hawaii*

BELOW: *The Island Hopper route connects Honolulu with Guam via Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei and Chuuk*
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THOMAS HAYNES



row of economy and while airborne he was along for the ride, but on the ground, he'd be busy with fuelling, walk arounds and resolving any mechanical snags that cropped up along the way. I took window seat 4D, which offers the best views westbound and couldn't

hide my excitement – even with a long day ahead. Pre-departure beverage choices were limited to water or orange juice as no alcohol is served on departures from Hawaii.

But we wouldn't be pushing back on time. Just as the door was about

BELOW: *After nearly five hours in the air, Majuro came into view – long slivers of land floating in a vast, endless sea*

to close, the captain declared a medical emergency for one of the flight attendants. Thankfully, she survived, but it was touch and go while waiting 45 minutes for the ambulance. Securing a reserve flight attendant delayed us by 3.5 hours. Compounding things, additional time was required to rebalance the aircraft because it was overweight due to baggage held over from the previous day's flight, which had been cancelled due to a broken pilot rest seat. Once we finally pushed back, shifting Kona winds forced a runway change, diverting us to 08R/26L, the reef runway, and adding another hour to the delay.

Let the hopping begin

At 12.10pm, nearly five hours behind schedule, we departed on a 2,291-mile southwesterly heading towards Majuro. About three hours in and cruising at 34,000ft on the longest leg of the day, we crossed the International Date Line and Thursday instantly became Friday. Somewhere between breakfast bites and sips of a celebratory Mai Tai, time travel had occurred. Breakfast was pancakes or a tomato and kale egg dish, but not keen on either I was kindly given a hot egg and sausage sandwich from economy, which turned out to be the only full meal I'd have in 12 hours. Catering on the Island Hopper is a logistical challenge as Sam Shinohara, United's managing director of airport operations Asia/Pacific, later explained – catering is only loaded in Guam or Honolulu and space constraints make it very limited.

The in-flight entertainment was charmingly dated, offering eight channels with looping movies in English, Korean and Japanese on a small seatback screen. Onboard Wi-Fi in the form of Starlink will be welcome once it's installed, because internet connectivity is very spotty at island airports along the way. The moving

“The delays didn't define the trip, they shaped it and, if anything, made it more of an adventure – revealing the resilience and resourcefulness it takes to fly through some of the most remote parts of the world”





map felt like a relic from 1998: just a low-res outline of the Pacific and our aircraft imperceptibly inching forward, devoid of flight information. But I was living in the moment and too much in awe to miss modern technology or even the physical copy of *Hemispheres* magazine that United used to carry in the seatback pocket.

After nearly five hours in the air, the Marshall Islands came into view – long slivers of land floating in a vast, endless sea. From the air, Majuro Atoll looked like a ribbon of delicate thread barely wide enough in places for the runway and a road to co-exist. The turquoise reef glowed beneath the wing as we lined up for final approach to runway 25 at Majuro/Amata Kabua. The landing was firm and fast, followed by a 30-second taxi that seemed comically short after such a long flight. The terminal, a cluster of low-slung, single-storey buildings built in 1971, had the utilitarian feel of a Pacific outpost: part hangar, part community hub. The airport serves Majuro, home to roughly half the country's population of 42,400 people.

Disembarking via airstairs, I was met with a wall of humidity, salt-scented air and palm trees swaying gently in

ABOVE: Fire trucks are readied for aircraft arrivals, because every touchdown is treated as high stakes

RIGHT: After an unscheduled overnight stop in Majuro, United Airlines staff did their best to process passengers through the manual check-in, working with limited resources

BELOW: The Majuro terminal is a cluster of low-slung, single-storey buildings and has the utilitarian feel of a Pacific outpost – part hangar, part community hub

the breeze. A scattering of homes and low buildings lined the thin strip of land beyond the perimeter fence, a reminder that this atoll rests just a few feet above sea level. Fire trucks are readied for aircraft arrivals, because every touchdown is treated as high

stakes. As well as emergencies, they are on hand to cool aircraft brakes that might have overheated during the short-field landing.

Across the warm tarmac at the terminal there was little time to linger, with only 45 minutes of allocated ground time. The snack bar was a humble affair, but it delivered a spam musubi and a cold beer. Outside and under the awning, savouring the humid air and surveying the surroundings, a fleet of plastic luggage carts caught my eye – in a place where corrosion is a constant battle, the detail stood out. A large group of locals wearing matching lanyards had assembled, along with several Mormon missionaries who were en route to a funeral in Micronesia.

When the hopper stops hopping

The gate hold room was filling up, then things began to unravel and time dragged – 30 minutes, 60, then 90 – ➤



“Disembarking via airstairs, I was met with a wall of humidity, salt-scented air and palm trees swaying gently in the breeze”





LEFT: *Elvis may have left the building but, in Kwajalein, Captain Ranger Miller casually plucked his guitar from the overhead bin and launched into an impromptu set*

BELOW: *Boarding in Kosrae for the fourth hop to Pohnpei*



Compared to mainland cancellations, passengers remained relatively calm and understanding – it's not like there was a plethora of options anyway. The details, as I came to learn from candid conversations with the crew and United insiders, were as tangled as the route itself.

The Island Hopper operates under a fatigue risk management system (FRMS), which works in conjunction with FAA Part 117 flight and duty limitations and rest requirements. The original flight plan accounted for specific breaks and island stops, adhering to strict time and rest windows. When the delays lengthened, operations considered switching the flight to standard rules and flying nonstop to Guam or overflying an island, but eliminating one or more stops also risked timing out the crew mid-route and stranding us somewhere even more remote. "We tried to salvage it," said Captain Sean Murry, "but everything started to collapse. The plane was fuelled for the original plan and there's no defuelling capability here." As Errol Lee, chief pilot, later explained: "Once you initiate the FRMS, you're locked into it. You can't switch midstream, that's the rule." Overnight suspensions, though not unheard of, are rare occurrences.

The resourceful ground staff – clearly exhausted but impressively composed – jumped into action and, over the next three hours, they found lodgings in a patchwork of hotels, condos and private homes. Transportation was arranged, meal vouchers were printed and the airport bar and restaurant reopened for hapless passengers. At 9pm, almost 21 hours after arriving at Honolulu, I finally headed to my hotel. I hadn't planned to overnight in Majuro, but I got my stopover after all.

Day two reset

After a surprisingly restful night, I returned to the airport just after 9am,

and the mood shifted. It was visible on the crew's faces before any official announcement. Something was up and the late Jim Lovell sprang to mind: "Houston, we've had a problem." Due to several operational issues we were told the flight might need to skip a stop, but because of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations and flight numbering tied to crew rest rules, it had to be renumbered. Everyone would need a new boarding pass. Manually. Cue chaos.

What followed was a painstaking process of reissuing boarding passes for around 150 passengers on a system not designed for rapid mid-itinerary rebooking on a dateline-crossing, multi-stop route. Two hours slipped by, then three, and at five the cancellation came: the Island Hopper would not be hopping again today.



With a farewell wave from the Kosrae ramp crew, we headed for runway 23 and throttled up for Pohnpei



2.5 hours before the new scheduled departure time and found a mob collected. The open air check-in hall was packed wall to wall with a sea of humanity carrying an array of plastic tubs, shrink-wrapped boxes and duct-taped luggage. United staff were doing their best to process passengers through the manual check-in, but they were working with limited resources and were space restricted. The security line was a single, 30-minute snaking queue and we were clearly behind the curve.

An hour before the scheduled departure, the public address system crackled into life: "The aircraft is currently overweight due to fuel loaded for the full run to Guam." United was offering \$2,500 in

ABOVE: *Descending into Pohnpei felt like entering the set of Jurassic Park*
ANDRE SEALE/VW PICS/
UNIVERSAL IMAGES
GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

RIGHT: *Each Hopper stop had its own rhythm, but Pohnpei left a particular impression*

BELOW: *Chuuk is known for its vast lagoon, once a World War Two fortified Japanese naval base*



compensation and meal vouchers to anyone willing to be bumped. There were audible gasps, but it got worse: "We may not be able to load all checked bags." The place buzzed with disbelief. Most passengers had been remarkably composed until now, but the waiting around and the weight of it all was starting to show. Ultimately, the bag announcement was unnecessary because a chartered Dash 8 was dispatched from Kwajalein, the next island, to ferry military personnel and contractors and therefore lighten our load. Boarding was called under new flight number, 3020.

With our aircraft located less than 100ft from the runway, Majuro ramp operations are gloriously simple. There's no pushback here, just a forward roll off the stand, then taxiing under our own power for all of ten seconds before backtracking at the end of the runway. At 2.10pm and

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ABOVE: *On the ground in Guam with thanks to the United Airlines Micronesia flight crew*

after a 40-second full power roll, the aircraft climbed quickly into the overcast sky. We levelled off at 26,000ft to stay below the worst of the tropical turbulence on what was the shortest leg of the day at 268 miles or 58 minutes of flying time. The time at cruise altitude was minimal, but just enough for the cabin crew to offer some Shiraz and two packets of crisps.

Guitars on a missile range

We touched down on Kwajalein Atoll at 2.55pm with a very firm landing – autobrakes maxed out and full reverse thrust deployed. My Kindle, which had been passively tucked into the seatback pocket, was ejected as if launched by the US Army. It seemed fitting because Kwajalein is no ordinary stop: it is one of the most secretive and secure military installations in the Pacific, home to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, operated by the US Army Space and Missile Defense Command. Cameras

and phones are strictly forbidden, no photos or video are allowed during approach or while on the ground – even the aircraft lavatories are locked after landing.

Despite the high-security setting, the surroundings were oddly serene, as towering coconut palms swayed over a well-manicured golf course adjacent to the airfield. The terminal was more extensive than Majuro, with an ATC tower and sprawling infrastructure. Even so, I spotted no aircraft other than the one I was on. Many passengers disembarked, but for those of us continuing on the flight, stepping off the plane wasn't an option. We remained onboard while a security officer passed through the cabin to check IDs and perform a visual bag inspection. A cleaning crew implemented a quick sweep, then suddenly things got a lot more entertaining.

Our pilot, Captain Ranger Miller, casually plucked his guitar from the

overhead bin and launched into an impromptu set, serenading passengers with a few Elvis numbers. This wasn't a one-off, Ranger is the front man of a Denver-based band called The Duke Street Kings and also plays with another group in Guam. Kwajalein had officially tracked from missile range to music venue.

Chicken katsu in the clouds

After about 45 minutes on the ground, we were airborne again, climbing to 28,000ft for the 402-mile southwest hop to Kosrae in the Federated States of Micronesia. We departed with minimal taxi time, once again backtracking on the runway before a swift take-off as the crew tried to make up for lost time. After the issues of the previous day, United had arranged a specially catered hot lunch for the passengers – chicken katsu with rice and pasta salad, sourced from an airport restaurant in Majuro.

As landing neared, the lush green mountains of the volcanic island of Kosrae broke through the afternoon haze. We touched down with another firm landing and were met – again – by a lone fire truck at the edge of the runway. The tiny airport comprises a small terminal and a few outbuildings, and the ground crew greeted us with warm waves, while several locals had gathered to watch the arrival. Naturally, Ranger got out his guitar and performed a few more songs on the ramp for the crew and the small crowd gathered outside the fence. Back on board, we received a snack basket of Biscoff cookies and almonds, although United's signature stroopwafel 'sugar death cookie' was missing. With a farewell wave from the ramp crew, we began our backtrack on runway 23 and throttled up for Pohnpei.

Muwar Muwar hats

We cruised at 36,000ft, covering 412 miles in 55 minutes in readiness for the most visually stunning approach of the entire trip. Descending into the island-atoll of Pohnpei felt like

BELOW: *Disembarking N33262 in Chuuk at 6.30pm, 24 hours behind schedule with the final leg still to fly*



entering the set of *Jurassic Park*, with its towering green mountains cloaked in mist and waterfalls tumbling into brilliant turquoise lagoons. Pohnpei's welcome was personal and warm, and I was presented with a traditional Muwar hat – a vibrant, hand-crafted gift symbolising the spirit of the island. Each Hopper stop had its own rhythm, but this one left a particular mark and it's a Micronesian island I want to revisit.

It's a tradition for pilots to treat cabin crew here and, on this occasion, the generosity extended to me as well, as a crew member kindly offered me chicken and rice from Special Joy Lunch Restaurant, a local favourite. As the onboard mechanic fuelled the aircraft and a fresh set of pilots stepped into the flight deck, the sun slipped towards the horizon. The ramp crew waved us off and at 6.15pm we rocketed down runway 09 with two more stops to go – each leg feeling more meaningful than the last.

Chuuk

We levelled off at 36,000ft for the 443-mile leg to Chuuk and just over an hour in the air. Chuuk is known for its vast lagoon, once a fortified Japanese naval base in World War Two

BELOW : *Journey's end: Gate 12 at the East Concourse of Guam/Antonio B Won Pat Airport*

and now a world famous diving site populated by sunken warships and aircraft. Final descent was carefully threaded through storm clouds, with a windshear alert on the flare. Despite these ominous conditions, the crew touched down firmly and precisely on a rain-soaked runway. In the cabin, two passengers high-fived and hugged, clearly overjoyed to be home – their emotion said it all.

Chuuk is the busiest stop on the Island Hopper and United had two sets of airstairs in place to speed up the process. As Sam Shinohara put it: "Chuuk is where we have the most people get off and on... soon we'll have the same set-up at every station."

On arrival I was presented with a handmade souvenir and treated like a visiting VIP. I've never felt this level of heartfelt hospitality on any flight – photos, smiles, even people greeting me by name. It was humbling. Nightfall was setting in and one leg remained: Guam.

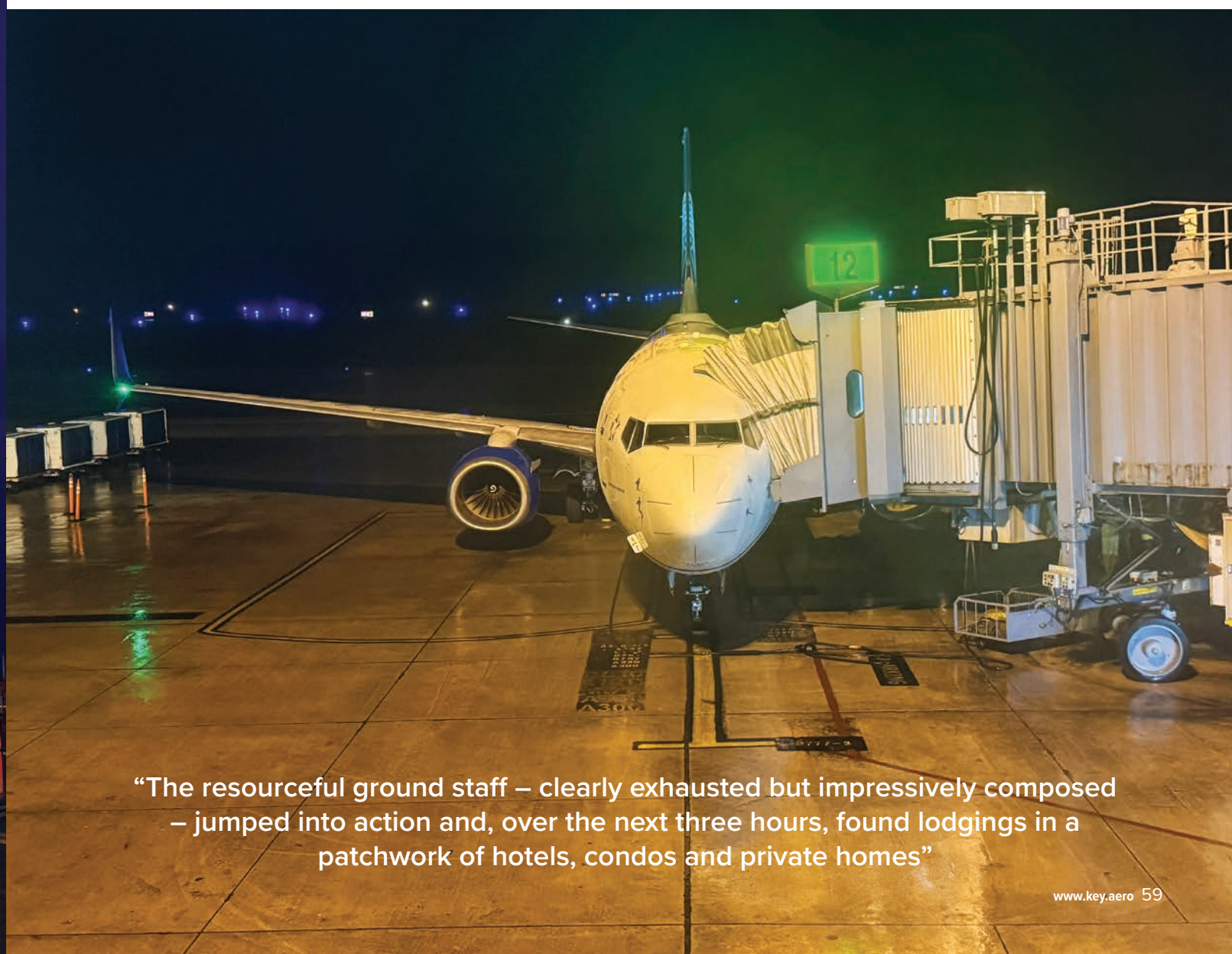
The last leg

We departed in darkness for the 87-minute flight to Guam, with the end of a long, remarkable journey finally approaching. Dinner was a surprise and a highlight, as a local

Chuuk restaurant stepped in with beef kalbi, chicken karaage, coleslaw and chicken sandwich – one final, flavourful reminder of how much this route depends on island resourcefulness. We landed at Guam/Antonio B Won Pat Airport 26 hours behind schedule, but after six flights, five island stops and more than 3,500 miles across the Pacific, I had finally made it.

The delays didn't define the trip, they shaped it and, if anything, made it more of an adventure, revealing the resilience and resourcefulness it takes to fly through some of the most remote parts of the world. I left with stories and a deep appreciation for the people who bring the Island Hopper to life. Now in its 57th year, it remains one of the world's great aviation adventures – in equal parts an endurance run, cultural bridge and logistical marvel. **AWW**

My sincere thanks to the United Airlines Micronesia flight crews and ground teams from Honolulu to Majuro, Kwajalein, Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk, and finally Guam. Your professionalism, patience and warmth turned a complex operation into something unforgettable. It was an honour to fly with you.



"The resourceful ground staff – clearly exhausted but impressively composed – jumped into action and, over the next three hours, found lodgings in a patchwork of hotels, condos and private homes"