

# OFF THE MAP

## OAHU'S WILD WEST

Words :: Jeff Smith

Image :: Courtesy of Wild Side Eco-Adventures

Seldom visited, Oahu's West coast offers adventurous travelers a chance to experience the authentic, local flavor of Hawai'i. A trip out West allows one to touch the hand of Mother Nature, invoke ancient Hawaiian customs, and relax on a beach so idyllic that Hawaiians still believe in its eternal power.

Rising before the sun on vacation might seem an absurd notion, yet within these precious pre-dawn hours nature is stirring in anticipation. We arrive at the Wai'anae Boat Harbor before the sun, but not before Captain Gary and the crew of the *Island Spirit*. They graciously welcome us aboard the 42' catamaran, one of two vessels operated by Wild Side Eco-Adventures. Known for being one of the most decorated eco-friendly companies in Hawaii, this aquatic adventure has been ranked as one of Hawaii's top ten things to do for over 14 years.

The *Island Spirit* shoves off from the harbor with 16 passengers from around the globe and a three-person crew of local marine experts striving for education, conservation, and protection of marine mammals. As the sun clears the Wai'anae Mountain Range and pushes through the morning clouds, humpback whales are spotted 50 yards from the boat just twenty minutes into our adventure. A newborn and her mother delight in the morning currents, playing on the surface of the sea, eliciting simultaneous "Ohh's" and "Whoah's" from our fellow passengers. We follow the mother and calf for a bit before departing for the shallows of Makaha Beach to snorkel.

As a child, I had been to this beach countless times and have the scars to prove it. Not once had I ever thought to snorkel there. Not once had I ever seen the blue and orange phosphorescent flecks that permeate the crystal clear waters of the west. Stepping from the catamaran into the glassy blue of the Pacific warrants comparison to Alice stepping through the looking glass. Thousands of fish in kaleidoscope formation

encircle one another, dancing with the reef and mingling with turtles.

Making our way back onboard from the exotic fish tank, we begin to hear whales taking blowing breaths in the near distance. A male, female, and calf surface to breathe, and we are close enough to see the texture of their skin reflecting in the sunshine. As they glide underneath the *Island Spirit* we witness the jaw-dropping strength of these mammoths. The crew remains unfazed while all passengers are stunned into speechless amazement.

The spectacle of nature is not over as we set our course for Pokai Bay and are happily greeted by 100+ spinner dolphins. From the boat we watch these rambunctious acrobats of every age jump and spin, both in and out of the water. We cannot file into the water fast enough as we descend on the spinner dolphins in aggravated excitement. Despite our swim fins, it takes a monumental effort to keep up with wild dolphins. We chase them collectively, swimming as fast as we can to prolong the moment. Swim-