

WE'D ALREADY SNORKELLED SO CLOSE TO

a pod of pantropical spotted dolphins that we could almost count their spots. Next stop, the green sea turtle spa, an underwater oasis where turtles congregate so tiny fish can feast on the algae and parasites that stick to their shells and flippers.

I adjusted my mask, stepped off the boat and swam after Elizabeth, our Wild Side Specialty Tour guide. Sure enough, about 100 feet away, five sea turtles were suspended in water, legs and heads gracefully extended while tropical fish busied themselves feasting and polishing. We marvelled a respectful distance away until Elizabeth motioned us back to the boat.

As we made our way along Oahu's rugged green coastline to the dock, we learned more about the creatures that inhabit the waters and the people who settled on these lush volcanic islands centuries ago. Elizabeth's explanation of 'canoe crops' — plants like coconut, taro, sweet potato and sugarcane that were brought to the islands by Polynesian explorers — was particularly intriguing since we were on Oahu to check out its extraordinarily dynamic culinary scene.

Sugarcane, as we soon found out, is experiencing an intoxicating revival at Kō Hana rum distillery and tasting room on Oahu's west side. The distillery has worked with Honolulu's Bishop Museum to identify and breed 30 different heirloom sugarcane plants, many of which we saw in their demonstration garden. As we sampled five rums made from five different sugarcane varietals, we noted that they all shared a sweetly grassy flavour (sugarcane is a grass, after all) but each one was unique in its own right.

We made a note to look for establishments that serve Kō Hana rum, and that night at Mahina and Sun's Restaurant in our Waikiki hotel — the retro-hip»

PHOTO THIS SPREAD
Oahu sunset.