

ALOHA!

The lack of direct flights may have cause the island paradise of Hawaii to fall off our holiday radar, but as **Rob Lovitt** discovers, there are enough new and worthwhile attractions there to justify the long journey.



SETTLING INTO THE BACK SEAT OF MY LINCOLN TOWN CAR AT

the Honolulu airport, I have to admit I'm somewhat dismayed to see rain on the windshield and a wall of gray clouds where the city's classic skyline should be.

"Has it been raining long?" I ask my driver.

"Oh, a couple of hours," he says with a shrug, "But don't worry. I'm sure it'll clear soon."

In fact, it does exactly that as we head west, away from the city and toward the island's drier, less developed Waianae Coast. With almost perfect timing, a rainbow appears up ahead and, as I reach for my sunglasses, any lingering dismay evaporates as we pull up to the brand-new Aulani Resort in Koolina.

"E komo mai, welcome home," says a young woman named Moli as she drapes a kukui-nut lei around my neck and explains that Native Hawaiians used to dip the nuts in wax to make candles. "It symbolises enlightenment and it is our makana – our gift – to you."

In Hawaii, I'm beginning to realise, enlightenment comes in many forms.

FAMILY FUN, HAWAIIAN-STYLE

As the main entry point for Hawaii, the island of Oahu has certainly earned its nickname of "The Gathering Place", drawing more than four million visitors a year. Oahu is one of the eight main islands in the archipelago, which is the northernmost island group in Polynesia in the Central Pacific Ocean.

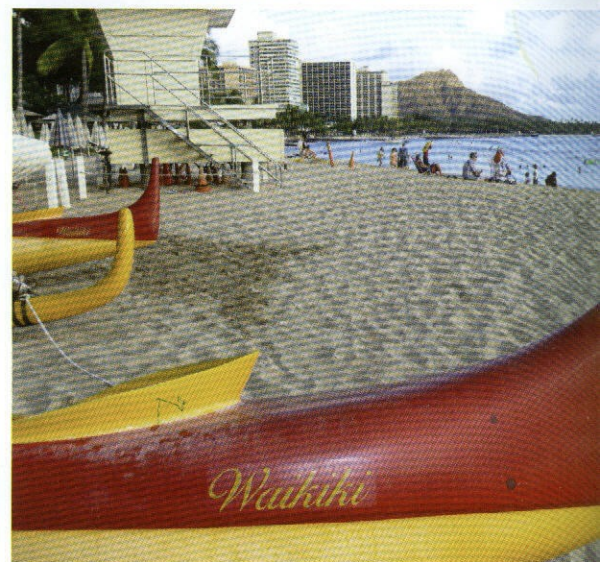
The vast majority of travellers stay in Honolulu, spending their days swimming and sunbathing on Waikiki Beach and their evenings crowding into the restaurants, boutiques and high-rise hotels along nearby Kalakaua Avenue. Undiscovered, it is not.

For that, you have to range farther afield, which is how I end up at Aulani, just 40 minutes, but worlds away, from the hustle and bustle of Waikiki. Opened in August, it's the newest resort in the Islands, an oasis of high style and first-class service that is also, strange as it sounds, the brainchild of the same folks who created Disneyland and a host of similar attractions around the world.

But Aulani is no mouse-infused theme park. Entering its spacious, open-air lobby, I'm welcomed by a cultural greeter who points out the murals on the walls, the sculptures by local artists, and the architectural details that echo traditional native designs. A warm floral-scented breeze underscores that I'm definitely in Hawaii, not Anaheim, Orlando or Hong Kong.

New in Hawaii

The Aulani resort, which opened just this August, is a great option for a luxury family getaway.







Nevertheless, Aulani is clearly a Disney resort, a self-contained complex with 840 rooms and legions of smiling employees who offer a welcoming “Aloha!” at every turn. There isn’t a princess or castle in sight, although Mickey and Minnie do put in the occasional appearance, hugging delighted kids, high-fiving their parents and posing for photos.

The heart of the resort is a lushly landscaped plaza with lounge chairs, open-air restaurants and the largest water-play area I’ve ever seen. While I watch, laughing families splash in several pools, race down a pair of waterslides and float along a 900-foot-long lazy river in bright-yellow innertubes. Beyond them, palm-lined paths lead to a man-made snorkelling lagoon – basically a 165,000-gallon, 1,100-fish aquarium that you can swim in – and beyond that, a gold-sand beach overlooking the ocean.

Add in a large spa, daily excursions and a full menu of family-friendly activities and it’s not surprising that things get quiet fast once the sun goes down. I, for one, am happy to retire early as I know there’s a big island out there just waiting to be explored.

Culture Meets Fun

Where else in the world can you find a fascinating indigenous culture, a family-friendly environment, and Mother Nature’s best altogether?





ADVENTURE FOR EVERYONE

Fifteen kilometres up the coast from Aulani, the sleepy town of Waianae feels even farther away from Waikiki. It's a feeling that only grows stronger when I step aboard the Alikai, a 34-foot catamaran operated by Wild Side Specialty Tours. Leaving the dock, we head for open water and, if we're lucky, the chance to swim with dolphins in the warm, turquoise waters of the Pacific Ocean.

This is no "canned" adventure, says owner Tori Cullen, but rather an opportunity to snorkel alongside spinner dolphins and other sea creatures in their natural environment. "Leave only bubbles, touch only hearts", she likes to say, a philosophy that reflects both her background in marine biology and her passion for sharing what she considers a life-affirming, if not life-changing, experience.

It's certainly an eye-opening one. Donning masks and flippers, we slip into the water and float quietly just as a pod of 10 or 12 dolphins swims into view just below us. Unconcerned by our presence, they glide through the water, so close we can hear them "talk" in a series of clicks and chirps as we follow along. To my left, a baby nuzzles its mother; to my right, a pair of adults engage in what I assume is courtship. All glide seemingly effortlessly through the water, leaving us to marvel at their grace and beauty until they eventually disappear in the distance.

Over the next few days, I come to realise that such adventures are available all over the island if you take the time to venture beyond the usual tourist attractions. Kayaking to secluded islands in Kaneohe Bay. Hiking to hidden waterfalls in the Koolau Mountains. Riding horses along an empty beach near the tiny town of Mokuleia on Oahu's sleepy north shore.





BEYOND OAHU

Once you've settled into Aulani, the Moana Surfrider or one of the other handful of luxury hotels on Oahu, it can be admittedly hard to leave. However, Hawaii's other islands also offer pristine beaches, stunning scenery and, of course, their own luxe lodging options. Here are a few to consider:

HAWAII (AKA THE BIG ISLAND)

Set amid the coves and lava flows of the island's Kona-Kohala Coast, the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai is a serene oasis with an open-air spa, 18-hole Jack Nicklaus golf course and bungalow-style accommodation with traditional Hawaiian decor. The island's only Five Star and Five Diamond resort, it is a popular hideaway for celebrities and the Hollywood crowd.

KAUAI

From yoga classes to poolside massages, the St. Regis Princeville, on Kauai's north shore is a bastion of refined relaxation. Spend your day floating in a 5,000-square-foot infinity pool, strolling the beach on Hanalei Bay or simply soaking up the stunning views of "Bali Hai", the famous mountain peak from the movie South Pacific.

MAUI

The Kanaapali Coast, north of Lahaina, is dotted with four-star hotels but no visit to the Valley Isle is complete without a trip to Hana, the blissfully secluded town at the east end of the island. Once there, check into the new Travaasa Hana resort (formerly the Hotel Hana-Maui), which features 70 cottage-style rooms, a restaurant noted for its fresh organic fare, and a variety of packages that include meals, spa services and local excursions. Be forewarned, though: after a day or two, you won't want to leave.

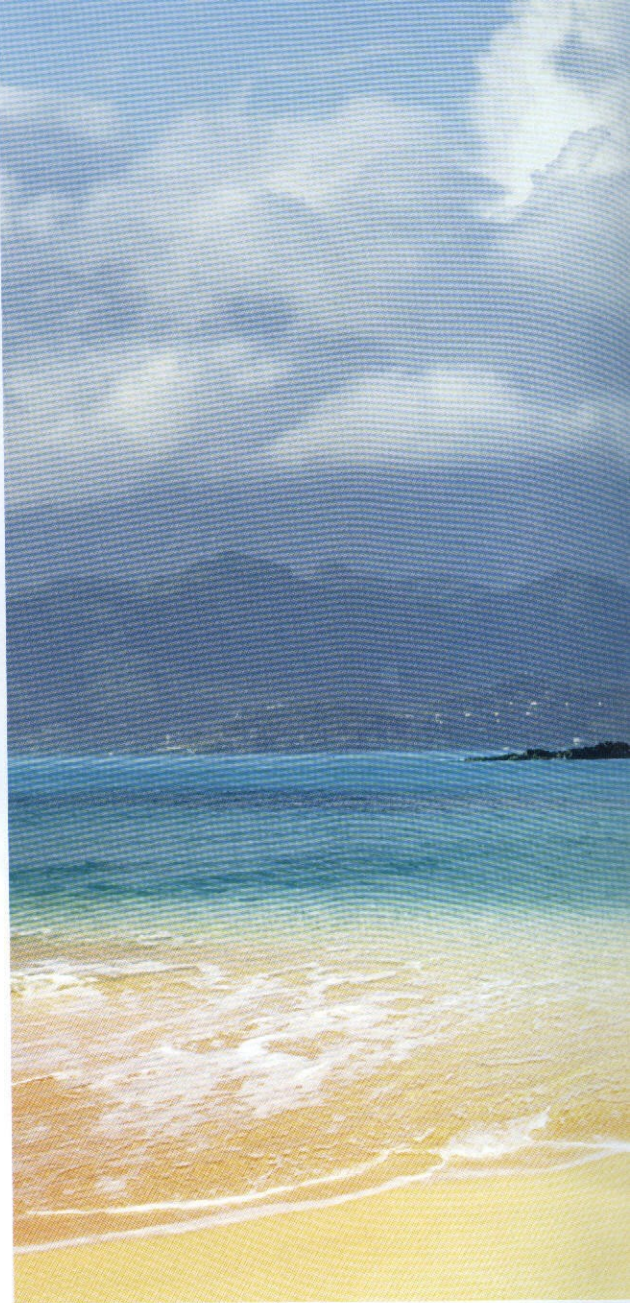


In fact, it's just outside Mokuleia that I find one of the best – and most scenic – ways to leave the tourist hordes behind. Operating from a tiny airfield overlooking the ocean, Mr. Bill's Original Glider Rides has been taking adventurous travellers soaring above the island and waters for 40 years. It never gets boring, says owner Bill Star, whom I don't doubt in the least as our tow plane pulls us up into the wild blue yonder.

And then, a moment later, my pilot releases the tow-hook and, just like that, we're soaring 3,000 feet above the ground on nothing but the wind. As we circle higher and higher, the scenery is an ever-changing panorama of sparkling water, sandy beaches and lush, green ridges that stretch to the horizon. With only the wind in my ears, it's as if we're completely untethered, not just from the island below but from the rest of the world.

That is, until we bank again and my pilot points out what appears to be a toy city, complete with miniature skyscrapers, on the southern horizon. Enchanted by Oahu yet again, I'm surprised to realise that it's Honolulu and it's only 40 kilometres away.

So close, yet seemingly so far away – it's an impression I get over and over again during my time in Hawaii. Just when you think you have the place figured out, it surprises you again in some new and unique way.



REDISCOVERING THE OLD

Set in the very heart of Waikiki, the Moana Surfrider hotel would seem an unlikely destination for those hoping to get away from it all. And yet, once you get past the camera-toting tourists in the lobby, it truly is an oasis of quiet elegance and style. If Aulani represents a new standard for Hawaiian hotels, then the Moana Surfrider set the original bar by which such things are measured.

It was, in fact, the very first hotel on Waikiki Beach, opening in 1901. Built in the style of a plantation manor house, it featured 75 guestrooms, furnishings of oak, mahogany and maple, and then-revolutionary amenities including private bathrooms and in-room telephones. A Westin hotel since 2007, it now boasts 793 rooms, a 17,000-square-foot oceanfront spa and, perhaps, the best steakhouse in town.

Some things, though, haven't changed. Valets still greet new arrivals with fresh orchid



leis; daily tea service is still offered on the veranda and, come sundown, guests still gather on the beachfront Banyan Courtyard to watch that glowing globe disappear beyond the horizon.

In fact, I'm doing just that, relaxing beneath the sheltering arms of the courtyard's 125-year-old banyan tree as the sky turns pink and sun-baked beachgoers gather up their belongings. As the last of them leave, it gets so quiet I'm surprised to realise I can actually hear the leaves clattering in the breeze and the soft splash of waves hitting the beach.

Of course, I know that come morning, Waikiki will once again be teeming with shoppers, strollers and sunbathers, although right now, tomorrow's tourist hordes don't even register on my consciousness. Hey, that may not constitute enlightenment, but I'd sure call it bliss. **T**



Getting Away Is Easy

Escape the crowds by booking yourself on adventures in the air and on the high seas.



SOCIETY TRAVEL TIP

Kelly Sia, the beautiful wife of Sukamto Sia, has been jetsetting to Hawaii for 25 years and counting. She shares her haunts.

"Hawaii is one of my most favourite places on the planet and I've visited all the islands. Oahu is at the top on my list for a variety of attractions and activities, but for a truly remote islandy getaway, I recommend any of the outer islands like Maui or Big Island. For first-timers visiting Oahu, I'd recommend La Mer, which is a beautiful upscale seaside restaurant located at the Halekulani Hotel in Honolulu. Go there and enjoy a romantic night for two. For loads of fun in the sun and some live marine action, visit The Kahala Hotel & Resort. You can swim with the dolphins or just watch the daily show. Hawaii's climate is great all year round. I think the winter months are particularly nice but I would avoid going in the summer to escape the hoards of people on their vacations."