

WaiKIKI

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BY BILL HARBY

The brash, the bold and the beautiful

MANY OF US WHO'VE LIVED IN Honolulu have a somewhat complicated relationship with a certain world-famous strip of jam-packed, high-rise, retail-rabid beachfront: Ask whether we love or hate Waikīkī and you'll get the same answer: Yes. Waikīkī is like our loud, crazy aunt who wears schlocky seashell jewelry and too much perfume, yet nevertheless endears herself to us precisely because she is so brash and without pretensions. Even as we shrink from her boozy embrace, we can't help but feel affection for her.

My relationship with Waikīkī began in 1962 when I was 10. Our family had just moved to Hawai'i from Ohio. We were in the Army, stationed at Fort Shafter, a million miles from the beach. Being a good military family, we dutifully went to Fort DeRussy Beach for our ocean R&R. I loved swimming out to the float and eating sloppy hotdogs from the snack bar, but even then I knew there was something suspect about that beach. It wasn't all the sun-burned white people like us. It wasn't even the handball court against a World War II shore-gun bunker. It was the sand. The sand had an odd, powdery consistency that stuck to you like flour on fish. I later learned this sand was made mostly from coral that had been mechanically pulverized, no doubt by tank treads, and trucked in. Surviving chunks of coral always seemed to be in the wrong place under your towel, and if you threw one of them into the water near your sister, you invited a swift court martial.

After three years in Hawai'i, my family was redeployed to Ohio, but 18 years later I gave in to the Islands' Siren song and returned to Hawai'i to make my home. Now I headed to Waikīkī not for sand and sea, but for rock 'n' roll.

During the 1980s, the Wave Waikīkī nightclub was the touchstone for modern pop music culture in Hawai'i. Local

New Wave bands offered up irresistibly *du jour* dance tunes and attitude, and provided the soundscape for gyrating girls and boys wearing glittery leg warmers, treader pants and other ridiculous fashions that somehow seemed cool. I loved the Wave, and not just because an anonymous girl pinched my butt one time (I hope it was a girl). Up until last year, when the club finally shuttered its doors to make way for another high-rise condo, the Wave attracted a colorful mix of hip local kids, military boys and young tourists who knew right away they'd hit the jackpot. The Wave's tagline—"on the edge of Waikīkī"—was no lie.

On the other geographical and philosophical edge of Waikīkī is a laidback beach officially named Kaimana (Diamond), but mostly known as Sans Souci (Without Care). After I began teaching freshman writing at the University of Hawai'i, I started going to Sans Souci a lot to grade papers. Basking in the sun, inhaling the perfume of salty sea, broiled skin and the icy beer I had cleverly wrapped in a T-shirt, I'd mark up three or four earnest essays, then dive in for a swim, desperate to re-rasa my *tabula*. Gliding along in the calm, milky waters of Sans Souci, I'd observe the fashionable local crowd—trim women with shameless tans wearing teeny bikinis and big gold-hoop earrings, buff guys glistening like bronze statues. I was too timid to chat up girls there ("Hi! I couldn't help noticing that you're almost completely naked, and so I was wondering what book you're reading!"), but other guys weren't, and it was clearly a good place to hook up. I know of at least one couple who made invisible love right there in the neck-deep water during the middle of the day.

In the middle of the night, Waikīkī, of course, offers less discreet sexual opportunities. While researching a magazine story in Honolulu, I spent several nights strolling there—up Kalākaua Avenue and down Kūhiō, threading the side streets where you'd see, ahem, a working girl and her client on their way to some little room. One night, I sat

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After-hours Waikīkī has always been a philosophical experience.

in a Wendy's talking with two teenage prostitutes and a social worker. The girls ate fries while telling me that they hated having to stand on spike heels all night, but that they could hardly imagine going back to "the square life."

The weirdest experience I've had in Waikīkī was when I was a hotel spy for Expedia a couple of years ago. Under deep cover, wearing dark glasses and shabby cargo shorts, I got rooms in several Waikīkī hotels, sniffed around, checked the thread count of the sheets and the dust on the windowsill. I'd been directed by Expedia to do annoying things like order room service and time how long it took to arrive, and to call and ask for someone to come show me how to open the sliding door. At first, I felt terrible being such a jerk, especially since all the staff were so nice, but when I thought of asking if they had a map of the ocean, I realized that I had a natural flare for this type of work.

The most ridiculous experience I've ever had in Waikīkī was going "scuba diving" in five feet of soupy ocean. This was part of a PR promotion the tourist bureau had cooked up to get jaded travel writers re-interested in Waikīkī. All I became interested in were the bruises on my knees from bonking them on coral. (Note to divers staying in Waikīkī: You're better off throwing a few lobsters in your hotel hot tub and hunting down there.)

The most sublime experience I've ever had in Waikīkī

began after midnight and ended at sunrise. My girlfriend, our best friend and I had decided for reasons best left unsaid to stay out partying in Waikīkī all night. We began with drinks and *pūpū* atop a Waikīkī hotel in a classy restaurant owned by a robust man with very white false teeth. From our window table, the shimmering lights across Waikīkī looked like a connect-the-dots puzzle. Later we went to the Wave, another bar, then a coffee shop. We drifted down to the dark beach, digging our toes into the wet sand as the froth washed over our ankles. We walked and walked on bright Kalākaua Avenue with the last of the couples arm-in-arm, glowing with shared sunburn; the cops zipping by on their scooters, leaving a trail of radio static; an occasional sketchy character looking for the night's last scam or just a place to bed down.

By the time dawn began to turn the sky pink, we'd moved down to Sans Souci. With the beach all to ourselves, we sat on the cold, silky sand and talked quietly as the sun rose. Then my girlfriend jumped up and turned a cartwheel in silhouette. Everything was quiet.

Welcome to Waikīkī.

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