

July 13, 2003

Wilder Shores Of Oahu

By MINDY PENNYBACKER

NOW that they can fly direct from the mainland to the neighbor islands, many visitors to Hawaii are skipping Oahu altogether, according to the Oahu Visitors Bureau. And I have met mainlanders who said they were glad to bypass Honolulu's urban sprawl. Sadly, they are missing out on the attractions that earned this island the name of "gathering place." Oahu's natural areas and resort retreats, while easily accessible, feel far away from the bustle of Honolulu.

For instance, the drive to the North Shore that took two hours in my childhood is now only 40 minutes by freeway. To a Honolulu kid like me, the country seemed one of the wildest, loneliest places on earth. The beaches were long and empty, the air enlivened by sea spray and the energy of the waves. Instead of high-rises there were farms, beach cottages and shacks with tin roofs, some with a horse or cow out back among the papaya and banana trees. At night, there were so many more stars than in town.

It's still much the same, as I learned on a quick trip to Oahu in April to see my mother and brothers. I also wanted to try some surfing on the North Shore, whose giant winter waves start to calm down in the spring. Although I am an experienced surfer, I was nervous about going out alone in a new place and thought it would be prudent to take a class. On the Internet I found Stan Van Voorhis, of North Shore Eco-Surf Tours, who offered only a beginner class, but I thought it would refresh my rusty skills. And since I had never stayed at the Turtle Bay Resort at Kuilima, the North Shore's only luxury hotel, I thought it was time I tried it. The surf hotline was predicting a small north swell. "I'll check into Turtle Bay today, and come to your class tomorrow morning," I told Stan.

I enjoyed the scenic drive on Kamehameha Highway north from Haleiwa, the first town one reaches on the North Shore. At Waimea Bay, where in winter the Duke Kahanamoku Classic contest is held in waves upward of 25 feet, the water was calm and flat, with snorkelers kicking across. There is history here too; in 1794, three men from Capt. George Vancouver's crew were captured by Hawaiian warriors and sacrificed to the war god Ku at Pu'u o Mahuka Heiau. To get to the site, turn right onto Pupukea Road, which rises steeply to where the heiau, or temple, lies in a historic state park, on a bluff overlooking the sea. Pu'u o Mahuka's black volcanic rock walls surround an upper and a lower terrace, roughly the length of two football fields. The air is cool and the stones have a quiet power.

Next I stopped at Ehukai Beach Park to bodysurf in the small waves. Standing at the water's edge, holding my fins, I was waiting for a pause in the shorebreak -- the waves breaking right at the water's edge -- when a wave grabbed my ankles and neatly flipped me face down. While it only made me look foolish, it was a reminder of the North Shore's perils, even in this calm season. In winter, when 15-foot-plus waves regularly crash here, the shorebreak has dragged waders out to sea. Best always to check with lifeguards before going in and best to avoid beaches without lifeguards.

About a 15-minute drive northeast, the Turtle Bay Resort's sandstone-colored hotel spreads its three wings over the point at Kuilima, which means "walking arm in arm." On both sides there's a sweeping view of blue ocean, black lava-rock reefs and points, and paper-white beaches lined with sea grape and ironwood trees. My spacious top-floor room overlooked the swimming pool and the ocean. It was prettily decorated, with colorful abstract prints and a soft white duvet on the bed. The hotel, I learned, had recently been renovated.

At the Hang Ten Pool Bar, I had a grilled ahi sandwich and asked the bartender, Dennis, if it was safe to surf off the rocky point. "It is shallow, but it's safe when it's small like this. And uncrowded!" Dennis pointed toward the horizon and announced, "Whale to port." I saw the spout and a splash as the humpback breached. I got my board, and Dennis gave me a fresh cake of surfboard wax. "I've been holding onto this for about 10 years. You keep it," he said.

I paddled out and sat near the other half-dozen surfers. A hotel instructor was teaching a student on the long boards, made of the same soft foam as bodyboards, that have made learning to surf so much less hazardous. I watched a couple of local girls navigate the steep takeoff by the rocks, and gave it a try. The waves were smooth. Later I swam in the heated swimming pool and then stood beneath a man-made waterfall, letting it pound my weary shoulders and back.

An early dinner from room service was delicious, a basin of creamy chowder with shrimp, lobster and fish, and a pear, blue cheese and walnut salad on local greens. I walked north toward Kahuku Point along Bay View Beach, its inshore waters sheltered by a lava reef that made them safe for snorkeling. It was drizzling, and the beach was empty except for a couple of young Hawaiian men preparing to spread their fishing net. A rainbow appeared. The rain came down harder. One of the fishermen said to the other, "It's a blessing for the net."

The squall blew over and, back at the hotel, I watched the sunset. On the bare lava-rock end of Kuilima Point stands a small heiau where fishermen once offered a portion of their catch to the gods. Perhaps some still do. There was a blowhole in the rocks, and spray rose from it with a whoosh, hanging wraithlike in the air. I sat for a while on my balcony and listened to the roar of wind and waves, feeling the soft, warm air and gazing out at the stars, still so much more visible than in town.

At breakfast the other guests seemed to be local and mainland couples and families with children of all ages. Nearly everyone could be kept busy with the choice of activities: tennis or golf; walking, running or riding horses on the trails; swimming in the pools or the natural "keiki (children's) bath" in a lagoon; snorkeling, bodyboarding, surf and scuba lessons or spa treatments.

From my table I could see that the waves were shaping up. I loved this place. I phoned Stan to cancel my lesson. "I think I'll just stay here and surf," I said.

"I don't blame you," Stan replied.

Another North Shore stop was at a higher elevation. The road between Haleiwa and Wahiawa runs parallel to the long, cloud-dappled back of the Waianae Range, where I had signed up for a Nature Conservancy hike into the Honouliuli Reserve. Before our group of 10 headed out on the Palikea Ridge trail, in the reserve, our guides said that the early Hawaiians used to ask permission from the forest before entering. Carol Silva, a writer who teaches Hawaiian culture, offered a chant of protection in Hawaiian and English: "The crescent-shaped island of Kaula is wreathing the sea, the bright shining sea off the island of Ni'ihau is becalmed."

After climbing for a while we had a splendid view of Pearl Harbor's three lochs, looking primeval in the morning mist. Honolulu was obscured by a trick of the light, blending into the dark backdrop of the Koolaus and Diamond Head, and for a moment we seemed to be looking back in time.

"The Hawaiian ali'i -- the royalty and chiefs -- used to vacation down there at Ewa. It was rich in fish and shellfish -- the oysters of Pearl Harbor," said Gil Mendelson, one of our guides, pointing to the flat coral plain by the sea. In recent times, Ewa languished as an industrial outpost where no one but surfers went to play. Today the cachet it held for the Old Hawaiians has been revived by the Ihilani Resort, where Oahuans go for a dose of luxury and a sheltered place for children to swim along the cleaned-up shore.

As the four-mile round-trip hike continued north, we learned to identify native rain-forest koa and ohia lehua trees and a rare iliahi, or sandalwood, most of which was logged by 1826 for the China trade. We saw endemic lobelia, ferns, lilies, white hibiscus, mistletoe and fragrant maile vines. "Ten percent of all endangered native plants can be found here, even though it's so near major populated areas," said Lori Lloyd, our second guide. Across a meadow flitted pale-orange Kamehameha butterflies and a yellow 'amakihi songbird. On the underside of a leaf the silver spiral of an endangered Hawaiian tree snail glowed. We frowned upon the invasive aliens: Australian silvery oak, ironwood, Norfolk pine and eucalyptus trees.

The last day of my jaunt, I met up with North Shore Eco-Tours at 9:30 a.m. for my delayed surfing lesson. In the parking lot of Pua'ena Point, at the end of Haleiwa Beach Park, Stan distributed liability release forms and we paid with credit cards. Both of the others in the group -- middle-aged Ron and 20-something Kevin -- said they were total beginners.

We carried our soft-topped longboards to the beach. On our right, the rocky point jutted out. The waves formed at its tip and peeled across. Stan pointed out channels and reefs. A river of whitewater running out from shore signified a rip current. We were to follow a counterclockwise pattern, paddling out in the channel alongside the point, then cutting to our left into the shallower reef area where the waves broke, catching a wave toward the shore, and paddling back to the channel and out. We were to follow surfing courtesy, trying not to get in the way or "drop in" on another surfer.

We were to practice, now, lying down on the boards on the sand. This was too basic for me. "Can I go out now, Stan?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, and turned to Kevin and Ron. "Your goal should be to surf better than Mindy by the end of your lesson."

I paddled out in the channel. The waves were breaking from one to three feet. There were surfers of all ages and ethnicities. They smiled at me. I looked inland at the gorgeous green mountainous shore, curving west to Kaena Point. A green sea turtle stuck up its round head and looked at me.

Stan and his students finally hit the water, joined by three latecomers to the class -- a teenage sister and two brothers. Into the middle of the bay, where the waves reformed in a smaller inside break, they paddled one by one. "When you get up, remember to bend at the knees, not the waist," Stan told Kevin. Unlike many surfing teachers, Stan is not a shouter. He worked energetically but silently, rather like a combination sheepdog and shark, gliding back and forth between his students. Kevin was energetic, but Ron looked slumped-shouldered and discouraged. Still, before the end of the class I saw them all catch waves on their own and stand up -- very rare for a first lesson.

I was missing my son, who was in New York with my husband, so I decided to go snorkeling at a place he liked. I had a sandwich and carrot juice at the counter in the Paradise Found Cafe at the Celestial Health Food Store and drove to Three Tables Beach on Shark's Cove at Pupukea. Through the clear shallows darted many of my son's favorites: raccoon butterfly fish; Moorish Idols trailing flamboyant dorsal spines; long-nosed bird wrasses; parrotfish and the cleaner wrasse, a tiny blue-and-gold entity that eats the parasites

off bigger fish. They seemed like old friends.

Before driving back to Honolulu, I popped into Ted's Bakery at Sunset Beach and bought a fresh haupia (coconut pudding) pie for the family. In Haleiwa, I stopped at Mat-sumoto's for a liliko'i and a coffee shave ice with vanilla ice cream, and ate it outside on a wooden bench. I felt salty and mindlessly content.

Retreats and refuges on the North Shore

Getting There

To get to the North Shore from Honolulu, take the H-1 freeway west to the Wahiawa-Mililani exit onto the H-2 freeway. When the freeway ends, it's simplest to turn right and go through the town of Wahiawa. At Haleiwa turn right on Kamehameha for beaches; a mile past Sunset Beach, look left for the entrance to Turtle Bay.

Where to Stay

Turtle Bay Resort, 57-091 Kamehameha Highway, Kahuku, (808) 293-8811; fax (808) 293-1286; www.turtlebayresort.com. Luxury resort. Rooms from \$295 to \$400 double occupancy; suites and beach cottages also available. The Hans Hedemann Surf School is at the resort as well.

JW Marriott Ihilani Resort & Spa at Ko Olina, 92-1001 Olani Street, Kapolei, (808) (679) 0079; fax (808) 679-0080, www.ijilani.com. High-end luxury. Double rooms (sleep four, two children under 17 free) from \$354 for a mountain view to \$549 for an ocean view; \$269 to \$399 for packages including room and either car, food or spa credit. Five restaurants, from casual poolside to elegant.

What to Do

North Shore Eco-Surf Tours with Stan Van Voorhis III, Box 1174, Haleiwa, Hawaii 96712, (808) 638-9503; www.ecosurf-hawaii.com; \$65 a person for a two- to three-hour group lesson.

The Nature Conservancy, Post Office Box 971665, Waipahu, Hawaii 96797, (808) 621-2008, www.nature.org/hawaii, leads hikes in the Honouliuli Preserve in the Waianae Mountains twice a month for a \$5 refundable deposit. For information about guided hikes to Palikea or Kaluaa, call (808) 587-6220.

The Sierra Club, Post Office Box 2577, Honolulu 96803, (808) 538-6616, www.hi.sierraclub.org, leads hikes every Saturday and Sunday for a \$2 fee. Recommended: Kaena Point Natural Area Reserve, known for its native species and coastal views; swimming in Opaecula Stream, Haleiwa; Moanalua Valley's Hawaiian petroglyphs.

Where to Eat

At Turtle Bay Resort: The Hang Ten Pool Bar's grilled ahi sandwiches are \$10. The Palm Terrace has buffet breakfasts for \$15, and shrimp and crab hash and eggs for \$13; hearty fish chowder for \$10 and salads for \$8. The Bay Club's sushi entrees are \$12 and up.

In Haleiwa, the Paradise Found Cafe at the Celestial Health Food Store, 66-443 Kamehameha Highway, (808) 637-4540. Vegetarian sandwiches, \$6 and up.

At Giovanni's Shrimp Truck, to the right just as you enter town from Wahiawa, \$14 buys a plate of grilled local prawns from lunch to sundown. There's also a truck off Kamehameha Highway between Sunset Beach and Turtle Bay.

Ted's Bakery, (808) 638-8207, 59-024, on Kamehameha Highway across from Sunset Beach, has chocolate, mocha or regular haupia pies for \$8.75.

Matsumoto's Shave Ice, 66-087 Kamehameha Highway, (808) 637-4827, in Haleiwa. The ices cost from \$1.20 to \$2. MINDY PENNYBACKER

Correction: July 27, 2003, Sunday An article on July 13 about the Hawaiian island of Oahu misidentified a surfing contest held at Waimea Bay. It is the Eddie Aikau Big Wave Invitational. (The Duke Kahanamoku Classic was held at Sunset Beach, also on Oahu.)

A picture caption with the article misidentified a surfer. He was a student, Basil Steele; Stan Van Voorhis is his surfing instructor.

Correction: August 3, 2003, Sunday A capsule guide on July 13 with an article about surfing on the North Shore of Oahu misstated the Web address for the JW Marriott Ihilani Resort and Spa. It is www.ihilani.com.

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