



Paradise Found in the Aloha State

Text and photos by Dr Oh Jen Jen

"I went to Maui to stay a week and remained five. I never spent so pleasant a month before, or bade any place goodbye so regretfully. I have not once thought of business, or care or human toil or trouble or sorrow or weariness, and the memory of it will remain with me always." – Mark Twain

MOST PEOPLE are drawn to Hawaii because of their love for sand, surf and sun – all of which are in abundance here, and enjoyed to the fullest by locals and tourists alike. Although the arduous journey to the island archipelago – a long flight to Los Angeles, followed by a night at an airport hotel and another six hours on the plane – nearly wore me out, it turned out to be well worth the effort!

Upon arrival, I was greeted with warm Hawaiian hospitality when a tour coordinator placed a beautiful lei around my neck and flashed the first of many dazzling smiles

the entire tour group would encounter on the rest of our journey.

Located on the island of Oahu, the state capital, Honolulu, is probably the most famous and commercialised district in Hawaii. Our beachfront hotel offered panoramic views of Waikiki and the Pacific Ocean, and I spent many hours strolling barefoot along the pristine white sand beach, sipping cocktails, listening to the constant stream of soothing traditional music wafting from nearby cafes, and of course, taking a dip in the cool, clear water.



Clockwise from left
Rolling green hills and sparkling blue waters – aerial view of Kauai from the helicopter
Sun, sea and surf at bustling Waikiki Beach
Entertaining dance performance that we watched during the luau

Sightseeing options included visits to Iolani Palace (the only official royal residence within the US), downtown Honolulu and Pearl Harbor. The last is especially memorable, featuring an extensive archive of news articles, photographs and video footage, as well as elaborate scale models of aircraft carriers and actual artefacts from the December 1941 Japanese military attack.

A short flight took us to our next stop – the island of Maui. It is significantly less crowded compared to Honolulu, so I finally began to appreciate the tropical paradise atmosphere. The tour itinerary comprised visits to lavender and goat dairy farms located high in the mountains. The farm tour provided a relaxing countryside getaway with a guided walk through floral gardens and the chance to sample surprisingly delicious goat cheese in a dozen creative flavours.

We also attended a Hawaiian luau – a two-hour event featuring folk song and hula dance performances, as well as an eye-popping buffet spread that included roast pig and poi (a creamy dessert made from the taro plant's root, which tastes like yam). Sadly, luaus are no longer intimate affairs conducted on beaches with meat cooked underground. Instead, they are now held nightly for groups of 500 guests at resort hotels, and food is prepared in bulk in modern kitchens.

In my opinion, Maui's crown jewel is its spectacular sunsets, the likes of which I have never seen before. Aside from the vibrant colours, the entire scene before my eyes was so magical that I stood transfixed on the beach, almost forgetting to capture the moment on camera.

Kauai, also known as the Garden Isle, was the highlight of our trip. Living up to its name, Kauai offers lush greenery, numerous streams and rivers, and kampong-like neighbourhoods, which I soaked up during the scenic coach ride to the hotel. The large number of feral chickens on the island did not escape our attention either! Apparently, these birds flourish here because none of their natural predators exists on the island, and even the locals don't eat them because their meat is rumoured to be tougher than boiled lava rock.

Although helicopter rides are available on all the major Hawaiian islands, we heeded the tour director's advice to wait till arriving in Kauai, as its rides offered the longest flight duration for the same price. The pilot, Chris, a former Black Hawk pilot, easily won us over with his enthusiasm and warmth. Soaring over the Waimea Canyon – also called the Grand Canyon of the Pacific – we were treated to awe-inspiring views of cascading waterfalls, majestic cliffs and untouched coastline while listening to Chris' commentary



Clockwise from top

Stunning sunset in Maui

Magnificent vista of the Waimea Canyon

Visited the naval base at Pearl Harbor, which is located on Oahu

of its history and landmarks. Though inaccessible to the public, many famous movies such as *South Pacific*, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* and others were filmed on the island. Coincidentally, during our stay in Kauai, the cast and crew of *Jurassic World* were also in the vicinity!

After ten glorious days, I bade a sad farewell to Hawaii and members of the tour group, which included a fun-loving Canadian couple in their 80s. While the islands' incomparable beauty is undeniable, the image that will always epitomise this trip is that of a young man in Kauai, whom I spotted from the coach one sunny morning. While cruising along the road on his bicycle, he suddenly let go of the handlebars, stretched out both arms, tilted his head back and closed his eyes, a jubilant smile on his face. That was a moment of pure contentment and joy, and I found myself grinning in response.

It's unlikely that I will return to Hawaii because of the distance, but the wonderful memories will last forever. For the first time in my life, I ignored all my email accounts while on holiday. It was a liberating experience, and I hope to duplicate it in the not-too-distant future! ■



Dr Oh Jen Jen is a consultant at the Department of Emergency Medicine, Singapore General Hospital. When not battling endless patient queues at the hospital, she spends way too much time in front of the TV. An avid blogger since 2002, she also hopes to write a screenplay or novel someday – if she manages to survive her three-monthly episodes of job burnout.

Aside from the activities mentioned, there are whale-watching cruises and helicopter rides to dormant volcanoes, while most beach resorts provide surfing, paddleboarding, snorkelling and scuba diving opportunities. For the less adventurous, there are lei-making, ukulele and mixology lessons, or one can simply spend an entire day lounging in the sun, relaxing at the spa or reading a book on a balcony facing the ocean.

Readers can contact Jen Jen at ojj75@yahoo.com for further information.