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CRITIC'S CHOICE / HAWAII

How lost can you get?

Searching for the deserted-island fantasy of a hit TV show, a visitor finds an even better escape -- Oahu's North Shore.

By Paul Brownfield
Times Staff Writer

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When I say I sneaked onto the set of the popular ABC drama "Lost," trudging along a deserted beach and cutting through a bit of jungle to find the cast and crew, it sounds more intrepid than it actually was. In truth, I wasn't anywhere near lost; in fact, I knew exactly where I was: the North Shore of Oahu, the most commercial of the Hawaiian Islands, which only confirmed my suspicions as an avid "Lost" viewer that if the camera panned too far to the left of the deserted beach and the banyan trees, one would see a home, perhaps, or even a Starbucks.

This isn't quite true, because the North Shore is a sleepy place, a world away from Waikiki. I didn't have to hike through jungle to find the set; basically, I parked and walked about a mile, stepping through some brush. It was no more or less arduous than a hike through the base of the Santa Monica Mountains. And then I was among the people of "Lost." They were eating and chatting. I had some hummus and read the sports pages of the Honolulu Advertiser.

By then I had been tooling around the North Shore for several days earlier this month, trying to fall into the dream world of a show that has captivated millions, including me. "Lost" is about a jumbo jetliner that crashes en route from Australia to Los Angeles, stranding a group of survivors, a Rorschach of pop-culture types, on a creepy tropical island that is not only remote but also inhabited by polar bears, wild boar and a crazy Frenchwoman marooned there 16 years earlier who thinks she's Kurtz in "Apocalypse Now."

It's all supposed to be a nightmare, but there is something tantalizing about being involuntarily yanked out of this complicated world and plopped onto some strange island where the resources — food, sex partners, potential employment — are finite and where, by virtue of surviving and sitting on a beach indefinitely, all past sins are forgiven and defects resolved.

Kate was a bank robber, Sayid was a conflicted interrogator in Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard. Locke was an office drone who was disabled but magically walked after the crash. They all have their gestalt moments, and it starts with being lost.

So I went, went to get lost.

On the show, the characters are beyond lost; in reality, it is possible to stumble across them. As beautiful and pristine as it can be, the North Shore is also a kind of natural movie set, with good access to its nooks and crannies.

One day, for instance, I found one of the "Lost" jungles (it said "base camp" on the side of the road, so I figured) and was about to head in when a guy on a bulldozer said the boars were about. I kept going, but he shooed me away, more vociferously this time; apparently, these boars weren't extras. Twenty minutes later, I was at a Macy's buying underwear.

Was I lost? At that point, only in a 50% off sale. It is one thing to imagine escaping into a TV show, another to try to do it. You have to stay away from Waikiki. You have to decide whether you want to deal with wild boars and publicists. The one at ABC, after several weeks of negotiations, said a set visit wouldn't be possible; the show, hot as it heads into the climax of its first season, was under lock and key to deter spoilers on the Internet, where "Lost" fanatics trade theories about the characters' back stories and even whether they're actually alive or in some kind of sci-fi, existential limbo state.

To watch the show, you really wouldn't know that the bedraggled cast has to wait between takes for jets to fly overhead or that the cave sequences are shot indoors on a soundstage in Honolulu or that an actor might take a break from being stranded and hungry and broken to get a massage or facial at the Turtle Bay Resort.

Without traffic, a newcomer in a rental car will need an hour and a half to get from Honolulu International Airport to the North Shore, Interstate H1 north to Interstate H2 north to Hawaii 99 northwest to Hawaii 83 north. After all this north, you're on the Kamehameha Highway, two lanes that circumnavigate much of Oahu and yield consistently awe-inspiring views — ocean to your left and lush, green foothills and mountains to your right.

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Surfers' world

In March, it is still winter on the North Shore. Getting dinner is near impossible after 9. It is a sleepy place with a *frisson* of decadence but also, if you drive the length of it, a Mormon community, giant sea turtles you can pet and local fishermen standing next to beat-up vans, their poles cast into the sea in the black of night.

Not to mention mainland burnouts and mainlanders buying up what local real estate there is for sale. Not to mention the biggest subculture: "surfers and the girlfriends who support them," in the words of one islander.

These surfers live by nature's clock: They go where the wave is, when it is. In winter, the North Shore is renowned for them. Gliding along the Kamehameha in your rental car (tune the radio to KTUH-FM [91.3], the University of Hawaii's public radio station, with its eclectic blend of student-run music shows — thank you, deejay Nocturna), you see beach after beach whose names you learn: Sunset and Gas Chambers and Rocky Point and Banzai Pipeline.

According to a surfers' map I bought, Pipeline has "one of the world's great booming left breaks." These are waves in the distance, waves you have to paddle out to or be towed to on jet-powered skis. In winter, the North Shore is not a stand-in-the-water-holding-your-mai-tai beach; it's ocean-as-great-miracle-of-nature, at times majestic and at others angry, described as "messy."

The surfers and the girlfriends who support them rent ramshackle houses that used to go for cheap, or else they hole up in surfer youth hostels. (Backpackers, where I found myself one night, reminded me of a Swiss Family Robinson treehouse, only grungier, with less-than-Four-Seasons bedding.)

Until you live among surfers, even for just five days, you cannot begin to understand how great their life seems. For one thing, they never have to wear a shirt, not even to go into the Foodland in Haleiwa. They are good-looking, twentysomething, or so it seemed.

To surf professionally you have to get sponsorship, which involves being in magazines and placing high in

competitions. Probably some surfers have trust funds — they must — and yet they're all living this purposeful idyll: Get up, surf (or not, in which case you wait to surf, at which point you surf). Maybe between the time you aren't surfing and you are surfing you eat a Hawaiian plate lunch in Haleiwa (grilled ahi or the native ahi poke or chicken with mounds of rice or potato salad) or see your girlfriend, assuming she's not at her job. (Local joke: "What do you call a surfer without a girlfriend?" Punch line: "Homeless.")

I spotted a few older surfers, but most were young and deeply tanned. At an Internet cafe and surf shop, I tried a pair of size 34 surf shorts, which were way snug, leading me to conclude that my life has been a mainland, Banana Republic-inspired lie.

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Lost in 'Lost'

Lawrence had told me to buy the shorts. Lawrence said you never leave home without surf shorts under your regular shorts. Lawrence is 40. When I told him, several days after we met, that I didn't know his last name, he said, "It's probably better that way."

Lawrence grew up in San Diego, is barrel-chested and has fading sandy brown hair. When he moved to the North Shore 16 years ago, he lived in a shack on the beach for \$150 a month. Almost everywhere in the world I have traveled to stare at a medieval church or a baroque painting, he has traveled to surf. He met his wife on a surfing trip to Peru and now lives in a house in Diamond Head, near Waikiki. The Peruvian wife works for an accounting firm in Honolulu and dreams of Wall Street. Lawrence, who owns 20 surfboards, dreams of the next wave.

He drives a Toyota minivan that doubles as a taxi. I had learned that Lawrence was the unofficial "Lost" cabdriver. One night in Waikiki, he said, he picked up a bunch of "Lost" people, including series creator J.J. Abrams, and took them to a nightclub; since then he's become a kind of go-to guy.

"I can help you get lost," he said.

Instead, we got "Lost." I hired him for an afternoon, and we went to the Waimea Valley Audubon Center, formerly the privately owned, more-commercial Waimea Falls Park. The Audubon Society eliminated the Polynesian dancers and the cliff divers and reduced admission, making it a nature preserve, but you can still swim under the falls, in the same pool of water where, on "Lost," Kate and Sawyer found the briefcase with the guns and the cash.

Later we cruised over back roads, past the glider planes at Dillingham Airfield to Mokuleia Beach, where huge hunks of "Lost" jumbo jet fuselage used to reside on the shore and where the spot has resumed its previous existence as a good place to bring your binoculars and whale-watch.

I asked Lawrence to recommend a hike where I might get lost, as opposed to "Lost." The next day, I was winding into the hills opposite Pupukea Beach, past the turnoff for Puu o Mahuka Heiau State Monument (the ruins of an ancient Hawaiian temple that afford sweeping views of the coast), past large homes, past a farm with llamas and goats, until I came to a Boy Scout camp and a fence with a sign that read, "Warning: U.S. Army Installation. Authorized Entry Only."

Knowing that a character on "Lost" couldn't get on his cellphone and call Lawrence, I got on my cellphone and called Lawrence to ask him whether the sign was meant to be taken literally. A few minutes later, I was walking along a dirt road past a guy who said he'd just seen a mongoose. Then I made a hard left onto the Kaunala Trail, traversing a jungle path unlike any I'd ever seen before, except on "Lost."

It was 80 degrees on the highway; it was cooler in here, the world beyond the forest cut off by what likely were large ironwood trees. I was staring at plants whose names I wish I knew, climbing on rocks, down a steep slope and into a valley and across a stream, until I decided to turn back. Lawrence had said that if I stayed out too long, I'd probably need a flashlight to get back.

I emerged from the jungle two hours later, sweaty and dirty and disheveled. I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt and black Timberlands. I looked like a grip on a location shoot, which was probably why it was so easy, a short time later, to blend into the craft services line and have lunch with everybody who works on "Lost."

It was a fortuitous discovery: Coming out of the hike and back on the Kamehameha, I saw a sign that said "base camp" near Police Beach and parked a mile south of the sign, then walked past the Police Beach graffiti and some sketchy older beachcombers drinking out of 2-liter Pepsi bottles. I hiked back up the beach and cut through some thick brush.

Then, like a mirage out of the foliage, I came upon a gravel clearing and a row of huge trucks. The second thing I saw was the cast of "Lost." The actors were walking single file, at spaced intervals, to their trailers, led by the show's star, Matthew Fox, who plays Jack, a heroic doctor with an unresolved relationship with his alcoholic doctor father.

In the buffet line, the radiant Evangeline Lilly, who plays Kate, bumped into me and apologized; briefly, in the 2 1/2 seconds it took to remember she's an actress, I fell in love. Everybody seemed congenial. Finally, they all took a van to the location, maybe half a mile from the base camp. I walked.

In the scene they were shooting, Jack ran at another cast member, screaming the profanity-laced question, "Where ... were you, you ... !" and tackled him on the beach, at which point Jack was tackled by several other cast members. They did the scene; I thought it went well. Then they did the scene again. Because this is television, they did it still again. Equipment came and went. Between takes, somebody spritzed Fox's face with a spray bottle. He paced, away from the others, and I admired his focus.

In front of me, on a golf cart, was a memo from legal affairs at Touchstone Television, the Disney-owned studio that produces "Lost," reminding the cast and crew not to discuss aspects of the production with anyone, including family members, as they had initially agreed.

They did the Jack tackling scene again. A caterer arrived with a lovely tray of sliced melon, and I had a minor epiphany: I was staying at the Turtle Bay Resort. Which is on a bluff. Where at dusk you can watch the sun set while feeling the mist from the waves crashing beneath you into rock.

I could be doing that, or I could be watching this, what I had schlepped to see. Acting, with melon breaks.

There are countless great reasons to be at a fabulous resort, by yourself during the off-season, when the place feels empty. There is the fact that "Austin Powers in Goldmember" is on in your room, and you can watch it with impunity. There is the bliss of going to a nearby deserted cove, called Kawela Bay. You park along Kamehameha Highway near a fruit stand and cut through the woods, past a huge banyan tree (otherwise known as a "strangler tree" for its creepy overgrown limbs, like the one Ethan hung Charlie from in "Lost"), and then come upon this empty beach, where the aqua water feels like 70 degrees and the ocean laps at your feet as you doze in the late morning sun.

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The perks of resort life

After this you slip into flip-flops and go back to Turtle Bay, where you take a dip in the pool, come out, wrap a

towel around your waist and get a drink at the Hang Ten. At this point, the only impending plan is a stroll to Lei Lei's Bar and Grill for dinner. Feels like an herb-crust-ed-fish night.

Turtle Bay Resort was opened as the Kuilima Hotel in 1972 by real estate developer Del Webb and is now run by Oaktree Capital Management, which has poured \$60 million into renovations. It is the only high-end hotel property on the North Shore, where slow growth competes with local sentiment ("No Mall at Shark's Cove" signs dotted the highway) and the island's indigenous history.

I arrived after two professional golf tournaments had been held on the 880-acre grounds, including the Turtle Bay Championship. Hale Irwin won it this year. I know this because in the Bay Club, a too-cavernous, airport-like lounge off the lobby, there was a blown-up check over the bar that said: "PAY TO THE ORDER OF HALE IRWIN, \$250,000."

In-season rooms in the hotel go for \$399 a night; the beach cottages cost from \$500 to \$700. If you have Hale Irwin money, it's worth it.

As far as I know, nobody on "Lost" stays here, although in a related development, I was in my room one day when a memo came shooting under the door informing me that Fuji Television, a "highly popular television network in Japan," was on the premises shooting a soap opera called "Koi Ni Ochite" (Falling in Love).

Talk about your "Lost in Translation" moment. That evening, on TV, I would hear Dr. Evil tell a prison psychiatrist about his adoptive parents: "They raised me to be evil — you know, that old chestnut." Meanwhile, I decided to play tennis. The millions in Turtle Bay improvements haven't gone to the tennis center, where the courts are a little forlorn. The pro hit with me, at 60 bucks an hour, and I almost beat him, until I realized that as a pro he was probably throwing me the set to make me feel better, so I threw it back at him and lost.

Coming from tennis I no longer felt I was in a "Lost" episode but in a John Cheever short story; at Lei Lei's, I ordered a gin and tonic. It was Saturday afternoon. Lei Lei's is a comfortable spot off the Arnold Palmer course. At the bar, I met Vera Close, Turtle Bay's friendly hairstylist. She has lived on the North Shore since 1987, after — you guessed it — falling in love with a surfer. She married him, in fact, and had three kids; they are now divorced, and her two boys surf every day.

It was because of Close that, on my last night, I escaped resort food and had authentic steak tacos that cost me \$10.82 at a family-run Mexican restaurant called El Palenque, in the military town of Wahiawa. Back in the car, Nocturna was playing moody stuff on KTUH — Kate Bush and Sun Ra, which proved a nice accompaniment for the darkened drive — headlights coming at me on the two-lane road, pineapple fields I couldn't see.

By then I think I was lost. I met up with Vera and friends at Kainoa's Sports Bar. Ghost Band, a Hawaiian favorite, began tearing into cover songs, and finally, at 2 in the morning, the guy behind the bar got on a microphone and yelled at several people to pay up their tabs or go home.

I never did learn to surf.

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Finding your way on the North Shore

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, nonstop service to Honolulu is offered on American, United, Delta, Northwest, Continental,

Hawaiian and ATA. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$392.

THE SHOW:

"**Lost**" is broadcast at 8 p.m. Wednesdays on ABC.

FAVORITES:

Turtle Bay Resort, 57-091 Kamehameha Highway, Kahuku; (808) 293.6000, <http://www.turtlebayresort.com> . Sprawling oceanfront grounds, secluded, with good amenities and staff. Best spot for dinner is Lei Lei's Bar and Grill, where entrees are \$17-\$30. Must-see sunset off the Hang Ten Bar. Doubles begin at \$399.

Kainoa's Sports Bar, 66-197 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa; (808) 637-7787. Locals go for karaoke, but it also has live music, pool tables, etc. Good place to get a taste of the local beachcomber scene. Breakfast 7-11 a.m. daily except Tuesdays. \$3.50-\$8.

El Palenque, 177 S. Kamehameha Highway, Wahiawa; (808) 622-5829. Excellent Mexican food at reasonable prices. Try the steak tacos (\$8.50). Entrees \$5-\$10.50.

Kualoa Ranch & Activity Club, 49-560 Kamehameha Highway, Kaaawa; (808) 237-7321, <http://www.kualoa.com> . Sprawling family-owned ranch has been home to movie shoots ("Jurassic Park," "Pearl Harbor") and offers all-terrain-vehicle tours and horseback riding.

TO LEARN MORE:

Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau, 2270 Kalakaua Ave., Suite 801, Honolulu, HI 96815; (800) GO-HAWAII (464-2924), fax (808) 924-0290, <http://www.gohawaii.com> .

— Paul Brownfield

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