

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Winter guests have swell time in Oahu

Daring surfers delight visitors to Hawaii

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SUMMER ON the North Shore of Oahu. Yachts bobbing in Waimea Bay. Kids splashing in the shallows of Sunset Beach. The Pacific living up to its placid name.

But winter brings the monster. Spiraling storms near the Arctic Circle throw off epic swells that roar unimpeded thousands of miles across the Pacific to slam onto North Shore's famous beaches.

Liquid mountains drive all but the bravest or most foolish from the water. Hundreds line the shore to watch the few test the steel in their soul, paddling out on extra-long boards called "rhinochasers" or simply "guns" to challenge waves that can top 30 feet.

It's surfing's version of drag racing, all speed and survival. A controlled fall down the face of a watery slope with hopes of slashing to the side at the last minute before tons of water close out the exit.

I've never surfed anything, from ankle slappers to the big boomers of the North Shore. But for more than a decade, I've traveled off and on to the North Shore as a surfing voyeur, watching many master the monster, and not a few get chewed up in its wet maw.

"You're like a rag doll in a washing machine getting torn apart," pro surfer Matt Archbold told me on my first visit in 1991. It hasn't changed in a dozen years.

Chasing the big waves

To get to the North Shore, you drive west out of Honolulu, past Pearl Harbor and up over the hill to Schofield Barracks, until the four-lane highway becomes a two-lane road as it drops through the pineapple fields south of Haleiwa.

The urban traffic gives way to an oddball collection of vehicles heading to the beaches. Suburban Honolulu surfers in battered old Toyota pickups with boards in the back. Locals in rusty heaps or new SUVs. Tourists in shiny Windstars and PT Cruisers up from Waikiki on day trips. Muddy camouflage-painted U.S. Army trucks on the way to any one of the dozens of military stations. The ubiquitous long, white stretch limousines popular with Japanese tourists on rum-fueled island tours.

The road north forks at Haleiwa. To the uninitiated, it looks like an almost unbroken oceanfront from Kaena Point in the west to Kahuku Point in the east. But to the surf world, the North Shore is a series of breaks and beaches, each with its own quirks and nickname.

Turn left at Haleiwa and you hit Avalanche, Hammer Heads, Pyramids, Changes, Fujis, Glass Doors, Roger's Rights, Silva's Channels, Beach Park, Day Star, Army Beach and Quarrys.

But nearly everyone turns to the right and the epic wave beaches of the east end of the North Shore: Puaena Point, Himalayas, Laniakea, Jocko's, Chun's Reef, Left-Overs, Log Cabins, Pupukea, Rocky Point, Kammie Land, Backyards and Velzyland.

Banzai Pipeline

Above all are three beaches among the most famous in the world.

Farthest west among them is Waimea Bay, an oceanic cul-de-sac rimmed by hills with a church set on a high point overlooking the beach. Some of the biggest waves in the world slam home here. One end features a rock outcropping

where, during calmer seasons, hordes of thrill-seekers jump or dive into the surf.

Near the beach is a memorial to Eddie Aikau, the famed North Shore surfer and lifeguard who died at sea in 1978. Aikau was trying to paddle five hours through the stormy Molokai Channel to get help for a disabled traditional Hawaiian double-hulled canoe. Locals took up the motto "Eddie Would Go" to bolster themselves for tough tasks. An annual big-wave surfing contest is held in his memory at Waimea Bay each winter.

Farthest east of the three is Sunset Beach, with what surfers say is an elevatorlike takeoff on undulating, over-the-head swells.

Between is the most famous of all -- Pipeline, or Pipe for short -- the perfect curl of tubular water that only nonsurfers call by its 1960s moniker, the Banzai Pipeline. In winter, waves turn big and mean, forming huge, curling, hollow breakers -- hence the name Pipeline -- that threaten to slam even the best surfer onto the sharp coral below. To find Pipeline, park at Ehukai Beach Park and walk to your left toward the beach.

The big three beaches have often played a role in the North Shore's big event of the year, the Triple Crown of Surfing, held in November and December. The venues and times change each year.

Long-stroll beaches

Visitors who don't want to inhale a wall of water can simply stroll miles of white sand beaches, watch sea life amid the tide pools or simply find a shady spot under the ironwood trees and read a good book.

The North Shore is the beach bum capital of Hawaii. For those looking for nothing to do but hang out at the beach, it's perfection. There's one resort at Turtle Bay. The only sizable town is Haleiwa, a collection of early 20th century shop fronts alongside strip malls that has turned from hippie to yuppie over the past generation.

The rest of the North Shore is a laid-back world pockmarked with snorkel shops, roadside hamburger stands and tiny bungalows. How funky does the North Shore get? One of the biggest landmarks is the burned-out shell of a former convalescent home.

There have been signs of change over the years. New mansions ringed with lava-rock walls are going up beside the Kamehameha Highway. There is a McDonald's and a Starbucks (though the Pizza Hut and Chart House went belly up). A new housing development at Velzyland offers lots for \$1.5 million and up.

Hanging out

The tourism folks will tell you there's lots to do. Shop in Haleiwa. Visit the new Audubon botanical garden that's taken the place of the old Waimea Falls Park. Drive up for the view from Puu O Mahuka Heiau, an ancient Hawaiian temple where spiritual offerings of stones and ti leaves are still made. Topped off by fine dining at Haleiwa Joe's, Jameson's By The Sea or the Turtle Bay resort.

My agenda usually stretches to snoozing in a hammock or taking a dip at Blue Lagoon, a cove near Chun's Reef that is one of the few places you can swim safely during the winter. Stop in Shark Cove or Chun's Reef for a quick snorkel if the surf isn't up.

Among the tourist attractions, you're likely to see me only at Liliuokalani Protestant Church in Haleiwa.

The church is named after Queen Lydia Liliuokalani, the last monarch of Hawaii, who was deposed in 1893 by forces favoring annexation by the United States. Through the lava-rock archway, you can see the burial plots of some of the earliest missionary settlers and a clock given by the queen to the congregation. The hours are represented by the 12 letters of her name.

As for dining, I usually am too blissed out to change out of swim trunks and a T-shirt. So mornings mean a pilgrimage to Ted's Bakery near Sunset Beach, where the butter buns, cinnamon rolls and other sugary confections are often sold out by 9 a.m. By late afternoon, I'll be mindlessly walking the aisles of the Foodland, my arms filled with packages of marinated kalbi ribs for the barbecue and a carton of POG (Passion-Orange-Guava juice) to wash it down. Or I'll go into Haleiwa for a hamburger at Kua Aina, followed by a shave ice at Matsumoto general store.

On days when I am feeling sparky, I'll drive over to Kahuku for a plate of garlic-soaked shrimp at Giovanni's Shrimp Truck, remembering to bring along a black Sharpie to add my name to the hundreds who've written theirs on the white panel truck that serves as the kitchen. Maybe pick up a bunch of stubby apple bananas at a roadside stand on the way

back.

Just as long as I am back on the beach by sunset, watching the sun set behind the white spray of the monster rolling in from the sea. Then snoozing the night away to the crash and boom of nature's awesome power just out my back door.

IF YOU GO

- **WHEN TO GO:** Oahu's North Shore is beautiful year-round, but the big waves crash onshore from November to February. Avoid weekends, when the highways are crowded with day-trippers escaping Honolulu.
- **GETTING THERE:** From Honolulu, take H-1 to Pearl Harbor, then H-2 toward Wahiawa, and finally Highway 99 north to Haleiwa. Most of the famous beaches are to the east along Kamehameha Highway.
- **WAVE RAVES:** The Triple Crown of Surfing is held every November and December.

Surfing competitions are held only on days when weather and waves are deemed appropriate. Admission is free. Bring binoculars because the surfers are sometimes hundreds of yards out from the shoreline. See www.triplecrownofsurfing.com.

- **HANG YOUR HAT:** My favorite rental is Blue Lagoon, a somewhat ramshackle two-bedroom beachfront house that can sleep up to six. Rates from \$350 per night, with a usual four-night stay. 808-988-7678, www.bluelagoonhawaii.com.

The top accommodations are at the Turtle Bay Resort, 57-091 Kamehameha Highway, Kahuku. 808-293-8811, www.turtlebayresort.com. Double rooms start at \$295 per night.

Ke Iki Beach Bungalows, 59-579 Ke Iki Road, Haleiwa. 866-638-8229, www.keikibeach.com/accommodations.htm. From \$65 to \$219 per night.

Sterman Realty in Haleiwa handles several nice beach rentals. 877-637-6200, www.sterman.com.

Several owner-rented accommodations are available at www.vrbo.com.

- **GOOD EATS:** Jameson's By The Sea, 62-540 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa. 808-637-4336.

Haleiwa Joe's, 66-011 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa. 808-637-8005.

Kua Aina Sandwich Shop, 66-214 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa. 808-637-6067.

Matsumoto's Shave Ice, 66-087 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa. 808-637-4827, www.matsumotoshaveice.com.

- **WORTH A LOOK:** The North Shore Surf and Cultural Museum, 66-250 Kamehameha Highway, Haleiwa. 808-637-8888, www.captainrick.com/surf_museum.htm. A small museum chronicling the history of surfing and its effect on the North Shore. In the North Shore Marketplace shopping center.

- **JUST ASK THEM, CLICK ON IT:** Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau. 800-464-2924, www.gohawaii.com.