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Fantasy islands

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For nighttime entertainment, from traditional Hawaiian music and hula to jazz and late-night DJs, the perfect spot is Waikiki.



GALLERY: [Fantasy islands](#)

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ALONG WITH its storied beaches, surf-worthy waves and first-class resorts, Hawaii boasts a vibrant local culture unlike anything else in America. It had taken me years to make the long trek from the East Coast - why bother, I reasoned, when the sunny Caribbean is just a few hours away?

But the first time I visited this string of volcanic isles, I got it. Safe, super friendly, jam-packed with as much (or as little) action as you choose and geographically stunning, these islands have the power to awaken the romantic in even the most jaded of souls.



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I returned recently to take a footloose "hola hola" approach to visiting the islands of Maui and Oahu - local speak for wandering just for the fun of it. Along the way I discovered the most scenic road trip ever, had a tasty reunion with a celebrated Philadelphia chef, made friends in Paia, a town where old hippies go to tan, and learned the value of the okina, the little upside-down apostrophe distinctive to the Hawaiian language.

Whether you've visited before or want to discover the 50th state for the first time, the pleasures of this tropical paradise will tickle your sense of adventure and deliver so much more than pineapples, mai tais and macadamia nuts.

Connecting with the culture

The spirit of *aloha* isn't just a tourist gimmick. It's real, a sense of graciousness that stems from doing something for someone else without any thought of them returning the favor.

For a visitor, this can be as simple as experiencing a feeling of genuine welcome, or as in-depth as learning about the history, language and music of the native Hawaiians.

Resorts like the luxe Fairmont Kea Lani on Maui's Kohala Coast strive to make that cultural connection easy for guests by offering ceremonial rituals and lessons in language, hula and other Hawaiian particulars.

Over breakfast with Jonelle Kamai, the resort's wonderful cultural ambassador, I learned that every letter is pronounced in Hawaiian, and that the okina - the little upside-down apostrophe found in most words - indicates a pause that changes the meaning of a word, sometimes dramatically.

Her example: *a'i* means "to eat," but if you forget this unique bit of punctuation, and say or write *ai*, it means "to &*\$%" - a street word for having sex. In the spirit of aloha, that bit of good advice might really come in handy.

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Follow up with a trek above the clouds in Haleakala National Park, home to Maui's highest peak, rising 10,023 feet above the azure sea.

At sunset, find yourself on powdery Kaanapali Beach sipping a fruity cocktail while you take in the evening cliff-diving ceremony. If you're ambitious, that's just day one.

I also couldn't resist dipping into Paia, a hippie-dippie coastal town with a surprising array of tony shops, restaurants and pubs. Once a booming sugar cane plantation town, Paia is a haven of locally owned businesses, from surf shops and antique stores to a coffee shop and old-fashioned tattoo parlor - there are 39 shops and 14 restaurants in all, all within steps of the white sands of Baldwin Beach Park.

While in Paia, I had to pop into the incongruously named Beverly Hills Salon, where I met owner Carl Incerto, who had worked with Vidal Sassoon and Jose Eber before dropping out for paradise. His art-filled trendy salon would fit right in on Rittenhouse Square.

And here's another taste of Philly: Chef Philippe Chin, whose restaurant Chanterelles was a game-changer on the Philly dining scene in the '80s, is now chef/owner at Sugar Cane Maui on Front Street in Lahaina, an artsy enclave that was the kingdom's capital in the early 19th century.

How's he liking Maui? Chin says he's in paradise, and judging from his flavorful sesame-crust ed ahi tataki, his mojo is spot on.

Thanks to Facebook, I also connected with the vacationing Charlotte Ann and Ann Michelle Albertson, who run Albertson's Cooking School on the Main Line. We met at Chin's restaurant for lunch.

Foodies in paradise

Fresh is everywhere in these islands: fresh ingredients, fresh ideas and fresh menus. Forward thinking chefs like Alan Wong, Roy Yamaguchi and George Mavrothalassitis are incorporating the local bounty to take traditional cuisine to new levels.

Hawaiian preparations including laulau (pork, chicken or fish steamed in leaves), kalua pork (cooked in an imu, an underground oven), lomi salmon and poke (chunks of marinated raw fish) can be found on plate lunch specials - both at mom-and-pop eateries, and gussied up on the white

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linen-covered tables dotting Waikiki Bay on the island of Oahu.

From what I tasted, Maui seems to be leading the island-to-table revolution. You can harvest your own lunch at O'o Farm, near Kula Botanical Gardens in the region known as Upcountry Maui.

O'o is a scenic 8-acre swath devoted to biodynamic sustainable farming and planted with Hawaiian coffee and fruit trees, rows of lettuce and garden vegetables that supply many of the upscale restaurants on the island.

Along with a mixed group of tourists, I walked rows fragrant with herbs and flowers, picked lettuces and veggies and then sat down to a gorgeous lunch of salad and local fish - well worth the \$50 price tag.

Up the road on the slopes of Haleakala Crater in lower Kula, I tasted a flight of creamy chevre made from goats milk at Surfing Goat Dairy, where you can spy just-born kids and see the ladies trot in for their twice-daily milking.

For something a little more potent, there's Organic Ocean Vodka, small batch spirits made by a local family from heirloom sugar cane. Its crisp flavor has really caught on with Maui bartenders, inspiring the company to branch out into making rum and other spirits in the coming year.

And, oddly enough, I had to come to Maui to taste the best pork buns I've ever had - in my life - at Star Noodle. Opened by "Top Chef: Seattle" standout Sheldon Simeon (who recently left to pursue other opportunities), this gem of a restaurant tucked away on a back street in Lahaina is spectacular.

Road trippin'

What better way to explore paradise than by joyriding on a ribbon of island road, adventure ahead and everyday hubbub receding in the rearview mirror?

That was the plan when I headed east from Lahaina toward Maui's famed road to Hana, with its 620 curves and 59 bridges, a scenic highway punctuated by lush jungle and waterfalls. I was psyched - until traffic came to a complete standstill.

Construction on the two-lane road out of town assured that my carefree ride would be sheer torture. What else to do but turn around and head into the unknown? As is so often the

case in life, it was a good thing I didn't know what I was getting myself into.

Picture this: you are on a narrow winding road, a mountain of rock on one side, and a sheer drop over gorgeous cliffs into the sea on the other. Guardrails are in short supply.

The road snakes along, contracting to a single lane. Suddenly, another driver approaches around a curve from the opposite direction. He tucks as far into the rock as he can, and I inch past with a death grip on the steering wheel, trying to ignore the suicide drop into the rocky coast below.

Welcome to North Loop Coastline Route 30, a hair-raising - and super exciting - stretch of highway. Not for the faint of heart, this drive is an unforgettable experience that includes the microscopic town of Kahakuloa, where a small shoulder allowed me to pull over and buy some fresh coconut and a slab of Julia's "best in the world" Banana Bread to calm my nerves.

On to Oahu

I left Maui behind and took a quick puddle jumper to Oahu for a dose of glitz and glamour along Honolulu's famous Waikiki Beach, with its endless array of boutiques and fab hotels and restaurants.

Put the James Beard Foundation Award-winning restaurant Chef Mavro on the top of your list. A 20-minute walk from Waikiki, it's where French-born chef George Mavrothalassitis plies his culinary wizardry - whether he's riffing with truffles or salt-crusting a day boat snapper recently swimming in the Pacific.

Waikiki is also the spot for nightlife and entertainment, from traditional Hawaiian music and hula to jazz and late night DJs. Situated at the intersection of cosmopolitan and paradise, it's all tourists, all the time, at fun spots like Duke's Waikiki, a busy bar and restaurant named for the godfather of surfing.

Walk along the main drag and you'll find a statue of the big man and his board, a favorite photo opp for visitors.

I couldn't resist that high-tourist opportunity, but I also enjoyed a chance to mingle with locals, visitors and artists during First Friday in downtown Honolulu and Chinatown, a festive *pau hana* (after-work party) that brings buzzing energy to galleries, restaurants and nightspots.

View finder

Leaving the city behind, I headed to Windward Oahu for a visit to the dramatic Nu'uano Pali Lookout. Another popular tourist stop, this is a must-see - not just for the staggering panoramas a thousand feet above the jagged coastline but also for the site's historic significance. It was here that the first monarch, Kamehameha the Great, conquered Oahu in 1794, sparking a centurylong dynasty that lasted until the islands became a U.S. territory.

For another dose of gorgeous, I traversed the island via Highways 1 and 2 to arrive at the jaw-dropping Waimea Valley on the legendary North Shore.

Also known as the "Valley of the Priests," this 1,875-acre garden oasis has been a sacred place for more than 700 years of native Hawaiian history. It's the last traditional Hawaiian *ahupua'a* on Oahu (a place where the mountains meet the sea).

On the way, it's a must to stop in eclectic Haleiwa for shave ice, a fine ice sno-cone flavored with the likes of coconut, mango and key lime. It's no John's Water Ice, but you can't beat the views.

Food and travel writer Beth D'Addono writes regularly for the Daily News. From your armchair, you can follow her travels at the website unchainedtravel.com. For more information about travel to Hawaii, visit www.gohawaii.com.

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How could you forget to mention Philadelphia native transplanted on Maui James McDonald of Pacific O restaurant on Front Street in Lahaina. Some of the finest food in the world is served there!

— big.minghia

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