

NO PRESSURE IN PARADISE

The secret to discovering the best of Hawaii is found in one simple phrase

Written and photographed by Susan Kraus

Extend your hand. Fold your middle three fingers toward your palm while extending the thumb and pinkie. Wiggle loosely.

This is “shaka.”

Shaka is the same hand motion that President Barack Obama made as his Hawaiian high school marching band passed him during his inaugural parade. It can mean “Thank you,” “It’s cool,” “Hang loose,” “See you,” “OK” or even “Lookin’ good.” Shaka is Hawaiian for “Don’t worry; be happy.”

Shaka is an important gesture to know when you drive on Hawaii’s main island of Oahu. It’s how drivers say thank you after merging in bumper-to-bumper traffic ... or how they indicate it’s OK to merge. You need shaka because traffic is a bear. But knowing shaka also helps you better understand Hawaii. It’s not just a hand gesture; it’s a way of life.

CONSIDER OAHU

There are many ways to explore Hawaii, but I recommend starting with Oahu, which is undoubtedly the busiest of the state’s islands. The largest city, Honolulu, and Hawaii’s most famous beach, Waikiki, are on Oahu. Purists often bypass Oahu as “too touristy” and head for more remote islands for “authenticity.” But Waikiki deserves its status as a tourist mecca, and Oahu offers much, in addition to beaches and nightlife, in understanding Hawaiian history and culture. Most “haole” (which roughly translates to foreigner, or white person, including those of us from the mainland) benefit from learning about Hawaii’s rich and complex history, and Oahu is ideal for this.

CHECK THE CALENDAR

There’s a reason Bing Crosby’s *Mele Kalikimaka* (or “Christmas in Hawaii”) has been such a big remake hit over the years.

Top: Beautiful beaches can be found across Oahu. This relatively isolated stretch of sand on the island’s south shore is perfect for surfing, snorkeling or simply relaxing.
Bottom: The friendly owners of the Honos Shrimp Wagon outside Haleiwa on Oahu’s north shore serve a fabulous garlic shrimp with a shaka attitude.

Bottom: The annual international Honolulu Festival brings in dozens of top-rate Polynesian and Asian dance troupes. Like many of the city’s festivals, this one is open and free to the public.



Hawaii takes traditional holiday celebrations and shakes them into outrageous fun. And perhaps this is best done in Oahu, in the Chinatown district of Honolulu.

Walk the markets of Honolulu’s Chinatown on a Saturday morning and you’ll hear Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Japanese—all before you hear English. It may be a melting pot, but here the flavors are each quite distinct.

It’s equal opportunity for ethnic celebrations in Chinatown. St. Patrick’s Day rates a bang-up parade, music, food and dancing in the streets. Mardi Gras rocks. The annual Honolulu Festival in March spills beyond Chinatown and becomes a citywide celebration of its cultural diversity. Music and entertainment venues feature top dancers, drummers, musicians and singers from a variety of countries and islands. It culminates with an amazing parade that lasts hours as it twists through the streets of Waikiki. And of course, Chinese New Year is a major event. Whatever the ethnic celebration, Chinatown is ready to host a party.

You don’t have to plan a trip to Hawaii around one particular festival, but you definitely should check the calendar before you make your final bookings to see if you can take advantage of the free music and fun that any festival will bring.

BEACHES

Waikiki is as famous as it is crowded and touristy. That doesn’t mean you should ignore it entirely, but it is also reason to go out and discover your own secluded sands. There are beautiful and less-crowded beaches all over Oahu, from Kailua to the North Shore. Downtown Honolulu has Moana Loa Park, with blocks of beach right in the middle of the city. If you drive throughout the island, you’ll find beaches and beach parks every few miles, along with scenic vistas and rocky cliffs. No matter how busy Oahu is, you can always find a romantic and private spot of sand.

Each beach has its own appeal. Snorkel at Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve for coral reef and fish. Swim, sun and watch the ever-present kiteboarders and sailboarders on Kailua Beach. Watch surfers along the North Shore (Pipeline and Sunset Beach are two favorites). Or snorkel and explore the tide pools at Pupukea Beach Park. Ocean kayaking is a possibility at several spots. But remember, your attitude and approach is as important as the activity you choose at each beach. No rush. Shaka.

GRINDING

In Hawaii, meals are also called “grinds.” Eating is “grinding,” and good grinds don’t correlate to ambiance (at least in the traditional sense). Kau kau wagons (converted delivery trucks) parked by the side of the road, with a few picnic tables in front, make some of the best stops for plate lunches or suppers. The shrimp trucks have loyal fans, although most offer similar choices (garlic shrimp is the most popular). Tourists who insist on mainland amenities, or restaurants with fixed schedules and locations, will miss out on good grinds in the open air.

Those who hang loose about eating can discover the excellent sushi sold at drugstore checkout counters, the Japanese Bento boxes from farmer’s markets and the supermarket snack aisle filled with such popular nibbles as arare (a glutinous dried rice cracker), shirayuki (dried cod), smoked tako (octopus) and ika (cuttlefish). My new favorite

snack is wasabi arare pea mix (peanuts wrapped in arare and dipped in wasabi).

CHANCE FRIENDSHIPS

My best discoveries in Hawaii have been entirely by chance. On the last Sunday of my most recent trip to Oahu, I signed on with Dolphin Excursions out of Waianae Harbor on the Leeward Coast, far from the tourist hot spots. On a yellow rubber boat, 15 of us set out to try to swim with dolphins—not trained dolphins in a swimming pool or lagoon, but wild spinner dolphins in the ocean. This was a no-guarantees excursion: if the captain can find the dolphins; if the dolphins cooperate; if the weather holds.

But it all came together. The day was sunny and warm. The captain and educator told us everything there is to know about spinner dolphins. After an hourlong search, we sighted a pod—a big pod of about 50 dolphins. We put on snorkel gear and slipped, one by one, into the sea. In an instant, I was surrounded by dolphins: twisting and turning, diving down in pairs. They showed their white bellies and slid past. The sea was turquoise and transparent. Everything felt magical.

When the dolphins swam off, we climbed back on the boat and headed off for a reef where turtles hang out. Snorkeling again, we saw colorful fish darting above the reef. I spotted a small turtle and paddled it its direction. Then I felt movement to my left. It was another turtle—a big, big turtle. Its neck extended as it swam, fluid and graceful. It twisted its head and stared at me, assessing. No rush. I felt like I was looking at an old soul.

That experience, like no other, taught me what I have begun to appreciate about Hawaii. Shaka. Live in the moment. Be flexible. Bend with the wind.

As a Type A overfunctioner, I find it is not an easy thing to absorb. But I'm getting there. It is what it is. •

Lawrence Magazine congratulates Susan Kraus in winning several top honors, including three articles published exclusively in Lawrence Magazine, at the Society of American Travel Writers' 2009 Central States conference.



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