

# The Aloha Spirit



*Lee Suckling travels to Oahu, Hawaii, and gets away from the tourist traps to experience the real heart of the island.*



It's perfect weather – 29 degrees and low humidity in July – when I arrive at Honolulu International Airport to rent a Jeep Wrangler.

Though I've been given a hard-top Jeep instead of a convertible, I remove two roof panels, roll the windows down, and drive straight through the tourist trap of Waikiki (which might as well be coined 'Vegas-by-the-beach').

Venturing just 20 minutes east of the main strip, I arrive at my accommodation in suburban Hawaii Kai. I've rented a studio below a private house on Airbnb to get a real taste of the island of Oahu.

Just a few hours into my trip, I have a mishap that turns out, unexpectedly, to be my first taste of true Hawaiian kindness. En route to a snorkelling cove, I turn right onto a highway in my Jeep and – naturally – drive straight into the left-hand lane. Right in front of a police car.

"Where are you trying to get to?" the policeman says as he pulls me over and approaches my vehicle. "Hanauma Bay. Snorkelling with the turtles," I sheepishly reply. "This is my first time driving in the US. We drive on the left side of the road back home!"

"Just follow this road a couple of miles," he tells me, as I sit in shock. "And stay on the right side of traffic. Be careful... and welcome to Hawaii." Yes, they don't call it the Aloha spirit for nothing.

My snorkelling adventure turns out loads of colourful fish, but no turtles. The following day, I head further up the eastern coast to Kailua, an uncrowded white-sand beach (are there any other kind on a weekday outside of Waikiki?).

Lunch is at the kitsch beachside grill Buzz's Original Steak House. I sit at the bar and order a poke bowl (local Ahi tuna, served raw and tossed with green onions, chilli, soy, and sesame oil). Two

local blondes start chatting to me, and – recognising my accent as uniquely Antipodean – they ask of my afternoon plans.

When I confess I have nothing on my itinerary, they invite me to their yacht club for drinks. "That's awfully trusting!" I say to them. One replies, "You don't have to have Hawaiian skin to have the Aloha spirit."

The Kaneohe Yacht Club – open only to members and their guests – offers not a hoity-toity affair but a family-friendly barbecue atmosphere, complete with wine in plastic cups and a pool filled with kids.

The backdrop is unmistakably Hawaiian: pick-up trucks in the parking lot, yacht sails lining the seafront, and the remarkable craters of Oahu further afield. It's the kind of place you meet regulars who have been coming here their whole life. In fact, my host tells me in jest, "I was probably conceived right here on a lawn chair!"

The following day, I do a quick hike around Makapuu Point Lighthouse Trail before jumping back into my Jeep and heading to the North Shore. Another Airbnb rental sees me arrive at a cottage shared with an engagement party.

Before I've even dropped my bags I'm handed a beer and invited onto the beach to celebrate with them in what feels like a Corona commercial: buff American guys playing beach football, countless eskies, and beautiful girls in frangipani-themed bikinis. We end up watching the sunset go down whilst they share their Sailor Jerry's spiced rum with me. Once again, the Aloha spirit prevails.

My final full day on the island sees my Jeep venture to the historic North Shore town of Haleiwa. A colourful surf village close to the famous Banzai Pipeline, Haleiwa is famous for its food truck scene – where you'll find coconut

shrimp served the same way (deep fried and sweet) as it has been for decades.

In order to get the most out of my car rental, I head to the north westernmost point of Oahu – Mokuleia – where I stop by a deserted beach to bathe in the bright sun before I head back to Down Under winter the following day.

Within minutes, I see a small head bob up and down out of the water, before a giant shell emerges. I've finally sighted a turtle, and he's almost one metre in diameter. He, too, has the Aloha spirit: happy to share his space. He swims by me for a good 30 minutes before heading back out to sea.

I have time for a quick stand-up paddleboard at Haleiwa beach on my final morning before returning my Jeep at the airport. "I'm so sorry, I just realised you requested a soft-top when you booked online," the attendant says. "So I won't charge you for your gas. Mahalo (thank you) for coming to Hawaii."

Indeed, they don't call it the Aloha spirit for nothing.

