

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

## World on a Wave



By Coliena Rentmeester

**Oahu's fabled North Shore is where local and visiting pro and amateur surfers, TV and movie types, and tourists meet in an international pop-culture mecca. Tom Austin follows the characters who live the dream.**

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Hawaii's North Shore is floating CinemaScope, Beach Blanket Bingo crossed with The Truman Show, an eerie landscape where everyone is living out a curious life movie. For haole—vintage slang for visitors from the mainland—it's one big Surf Land dude ranch. At plush Turtle Bay Resort, guests take lessons at the Hans Hedemann Surf School, no doubt channeling an interior dreamscape that embraces hotdoggers and scrappy wahines from Gidget, The Endless Summer, Riding Giants, Step into Liquid, and Baywatch, with Lost and such reality TV fare as (what else?) Boarding House: North Shore the most recent additions to the psychic equation. Nothing on the North Shore feels quite real, as if Elvis Presley, whose old rental mansion remains a testament to his Blue Hawaii period, might appear at any moment and start warbling away to some moonstruck secretary.

Since the halcyon era of the fifties, when a handful of madcap California surfers drove north from Waikiki to stoke themselves silly on their quaint long boards, the world's coolest village has been in the business of myth, churning out visions of paradise. This 26-mile stretch of beach and the surrounding hills—called the country on Oahu—does have very real surf breaks: Hammerheads (named after a nearby shark breeding ground), Himalayas, Avalanche, Marijuana's, Banzai Pipeline, Gas Chambers. In season, from October through March, truly monstrous waves—with faces up to 25 feet tall—turn the North Shore into the mecca of surfing, which pretty much means it also becomes a stomping ground for international pop culture.

For all practical purposes, the North Shore extends from the Mormon Temple in Laie—most of Laie is owned by Mormons, an influence reflected in a video store with a sanitized version of *Sideways* ("Just a few swear words and a bit of nudity," says a clerk. "You hardly notice the difference")—to the wild vastness of Kaena Point. Haleiwa, a Christian outpost in the 1800's, is the official entertainment center of the North Shore. It's home to assorted surf stores; Celestial Natural Foods and Billy's Barber Shop; slaphappy teenage testosterone in SMILE UGLY T-shirts cruising aimlessly in jacked-up trucks; the down-home Café Haleiwa; and the forever packed Matsumoto Shave Ice, complete with day-tripping Japanese tour groups and glossies of Adam Sandler on the wall. At Haleiwa Joe's (immortalized in *The Big Bounce*, with Owen Wilson), middle-aged barflies watch competitive surfing on television and rail against the showboating of young surfers.

Haleiwa has one true Old Hawaii hangout, the Manu O Ke Kai Canoe Club, full of outrigger canoes and the feeling of being a long way from regular Joe America. Naturally, this unpretentious gem, an authentic hole in the wall, has been discovered by the fashion industry, and one afternoon, bikini and surf gear shoots were going on simultaneously. The 25-year-old "lifestyle surfer" Jamie Sterling was on the job, talking about the progression from grom (surfer kid) to cult star with the casual self-consciousness that comes from having been raised in America's grooviest beach town. On the North Shore, schools are filled with a bewildering array of students—white kids whose roots go back to the mainland, native Hawaiians, Portuguese, Chinese, Filipinos, Mormons, Buddhists, Samoans—who speak an impenetrable language, a cross between hip-hop and rhyming slang: brah for friend, da grinds for food. Boards are brought to school, and when the bell rings, the rainbow tribe heads out to the beach.

Since Sterling competes sporadically, he's free to travel the world in an endless quest for epic waves, sponsored by magazines, documentaries, and corporations. As with any other model, the more editorial pages he has in magazines, the more valuable a marketing commodity he becomes. For Sterling, life has taken a curious turn: "I started getting paid to surf in my junior year, but in high school, football players got all the girls—surfers are no big deal here," he says. In fact, surfing is just part of the landscape to natives, as ordinary as golf or tennis is in, say, Scarsdale, New York. Wholesome suburban families, from Grandma on down, will emerge from a minivan with their boards at Waimea Bay, updating the whole Beach Boys "Surfin' USA" number. Churches use surfboards as signs (LOVE GOD), and locals like real estate agent Don Darnell meet prospective clients while paddling out to waves.

Ultimately, the North Shore gestalt is about the great surf breaks of Sunset Beach—about eight miles north of Haleiwa—and the 15,000 or so year-round residents who cling to Kamehameha Highway, forming a community without a real name, town center, or anything to do after 9 p.m. (Surfers wake up early for the "dawn patrol," beating the crowds on prime surf days.) I traveled to the North Shore from my hometown of Miami—another tropical frontier that is part of America in only the broadest conceptual sense—and Sunset Beach came as a wistful lesson in what Miami Beach could have been if towering condominiums hadn't devoured the culture of the street. Sunset Beach is a miraculous place, the most organic, pedestrian-friendly, and resolutely democratic town imaginable. America has become a land of gated communities, but Sunset Beach proves that every socioeconomic class can play nicely with others, though many North Shore natives resent that they can't afford beach houses anymore. (A 1,166-square-foot beach house that went for

\$750,000 in 2000 would now, according to various brokers, sell for \$3 million or more.)

One of the North Shore's leading postmodern mythologists, Brian Grazer of Imagine Entertainment, happens to own a tastefully opulent spread on Sunset Beach, but he enjoys the fray of local street life. "The tone of the North Shore is still very sixties and not commercialized, which makes the town very seductive," he says. "We have one hotel, one supermarket, and one Starbucks—and that's it. But this is the epicenter of surfing on the planet." With partner Ron Howard as director, Grazer produced *The Da Vinci Code*, *A Beautiful Mind*, and *Apollo 13*; a detour into the let's-go-surfing-now genre, *Blue Crush*, brought him to the North Shore of Oahu. Grazer hired such hometown surfers as Megan Abubo for stunt-double work, took surfing lessons himself, and used some of the more atmospheric legends—Kai Garcia and a massive fixture of a man named Hawaiian—for the punch of reality. "Kai is one of the most physically tough guys I've ever met," Grazer says, "and his society, the surfing world of the North Shore, is stratified in a way that is just so male: it's purely about the power of your body—not guns like South Central, but all that testosterone can be scary. I'm only connected because I used these guys in the movie." On the North Shore, true watermen are honored—even by Hollywood moguls—with the reverence accorded to samurai warriors.

The sport of Hawaiian kings has evolved into a multibillion-dollar global phenomenon. Naturally, monolithic corporations are also chasing the youthquake edge of surfing, that mystical yet eminently marketable chimera of sun, fun, freedom, and unemployment. Like hired gunslingers, young North Shore surfers—many of whom were taught the sport by their hippie-dippie parents—will say they ride for Roxy or some other outfit. The teen icons of surf world, who can make a quarter-million dollars a year, are compelled by contract to be walking billboards of surf leisure clothes, though they barely process the sixties notion of selling out.

Some North Shore locals claim that tourists hijack street signs that point to the more fabled surf turf, which might be why Banzai Pipeline, a surf-movie staple and the fountainhead of North Shore mythology, is not marked: it's just off Ehukai Beach Park, across Kam Highway from Sunset Beach Elementary School. During the season, Quiksilver, Billabong, and the like spend a fortune renting modest beach houses, useful for hosting their star surfers and searing the company brand into the heart of hip. The Rip Curl Pro Pipeline Masters is the summit of the Vans Triple Crown, a series of competitions that frames the North Shore social season: thousands of fans, groupies, tourists, and groms clog the beaches and Kam Highway, an invasion that doesn't always sit well with locals, who lose treasured surfing days and their small-town, Mayberry-gone-trendy ambience. Pipeline, which breaks close to the beach with 10-foot waves, can be a terrifying spectacle. One midnight at a throbbing youth barbecue in an old-line family's beach house, which had been rented by Red Bull, the portraits on the wall literally shook when a big swell came up.

Jack Johnson, the noted art-surf star—he's gone platinum with such albums as *In Between Dreams*, a long way from Jan & Dean but still free and easy, the aural equivalent of a lazy day at the beach—grew up in a house at Pipeline, making the finals of the Pipe Trials at the age of 17. Shortly before last year's Pipeline Masters, a kind of People's Choice Awards of the sport held every December since 1971, Johnson and surf celebs Kelly Slater, Mark Cunningham, and Rob Machado co-hosted a benefit to keep the lush Pupukea-Paumalu bluffs above Pipeline a recreational preserve. The 1,129-acre tract, once intended to become an upscale housing

development, is now being sold by the Obayashi Corporation; a consortium of environmental groups has raised \$7 million and—according to Josh Stanbro, project manager of the Trust for Public Land—has a letter of intent from Obayashi for the sale. Recently, the same groups kept Waimea Valley from being developed; the next battle is a fight against the inevitable specter of condominium development. To natives, the North Shore is all about using money as a force of cool, and in recent years, the falling yen has allowed locals to save much of the undeveloped land.

The North Shore has the capital of Malibu, but somehow it has kept the raw funk of early Venice Beach. In the modern age, money never needs to go to the office anymore, and software designers and financial types like trader Fred Parr ("I surf in the mornings, and do business with Japan from noon on") might live next door to a garage apartment occupied by some terminally 1968 boho character who gets along by selling macramé hangings at the flea market. On Sunset Beach, the narrow access path between Kam Highway and a string of beach houses is a lush wonderland of hibiscus flowers, banana trees, and enormous Pritchardi palm fronds. But it's also plastered with surf company decals, the local equivalent of graffiti, and serves as a dumping ground for abandoned cars: gypsy surfers—who sleep in hostels, rented rooms, their girlfriends' apartments, or on the beach itself during the season—buy old junkers for cheap transportation and just leave the rusting hulks on the side of the road in the spring. Memorials to youth, beauty, and the perils of surfing are everywhere, carved into trees: IN MEMORY OF AN AUSTRALIAN WHO LIVED AND SURFED HIS DREAMS: 18 FOREVER.

On the other side of Kam Highway, in an even more eclectic neighborhood that winds its way up to the Pupukea ridge and a motocross track, Hawaiian hillbillies operate welding shops out of improbable plywood huts; cows, horses, and goats graze along the road, with roosters scratching for leverage in the dirt. Way up in the hills, James Michener wrote Hawaii. Years later, a middle-class neighborhood is still talking about the renter who covered his windows with tinfoil, knocked holes through the second floor of his house, and grew 15-foot-tall marijuana plants. Recently, at Happy Trails Hawaii, where tourists take trail rides, general manager and polo player Mark Becker was contemplating dinner, his staff having speared a wild boar after their dogs chased it down. Oahu is not for wimps.

At places like Foodland supermarket, Ted's Bakery, and Sunset Pizza, all on Kam Highway, young surfers—baked by the sun and dressed in board shorts and slippers (local slang for flip-flops)—loungue about with the self-assurance of pop idols. They never get old, or fat, despite living on malasadas (Portuguese doughnuts) and breakfasts of fried rice, gravy, potatoes, and slabs of Spam, a delicacy in Oahu. Fame and fortune are as close as 13-year-old John John, a Sunset Beach boy who now models for Vans. He has the look down: the feral child in Road Warrior made camera-ready with the kind of amped-up, sun-bleached hair Dyan Cannon would die for. As with the trappings of punk, another phenomenon of youth and rebellion that lends itself to commercial exploitation, the ineffable cool of surfing defies commerce and the outside world.

On the North Shore, heroes and mortals alike confront the limits of paradise day after day, the uneasiness that comes with finally reaching the island that dreams are made of and discovering that Valhalla can be as confining as it is freeing. There's always an itch of alienation at the end of the road. Crystal meth burnout cases on a jag occasionally stumble into breakfast joints, and placards that read NO ICE IN PARADISE are sprouting up.

Paradise also has a few other troubles. Billboards are—thank God—banned in Oahu, but native Hawaiians wage wars against tourist shops and general mainland imperialism with huge signs in their front yards: GOVERNMENT OF AMERICA...SELLING OUT THE KANAKA MAOLI INHERENT SOVEREIGNTY FOR A T-SHIRT. The Da Hui, born-and-bred North Shore boys who sometimes thrash mainlanders trying to snake in on choice waves, guarantee respect for local surfers.

In the end, the bohemian heart of the North Shore beats strong—even the smallest aesthetic misstep in the public realm is fought tooth and nail—but it's always under siege. And so, pioneer surfer Darrick Doerner can be forgiven a note of where-have-all-the-good-times-gone exasperation: "This was a fresh and clean place once for watermen, but now it's full of money and aggression, too crowded and hostile. But I guess the North Shore has always been the Wild, Wild West." Tom Austin is a T+L contributing editor. <http://www.travelandleisure.com/articles/world-on-a-wave>