

Waikiki Beach

Jeannette and I are not "Beach People." We don't particularly care to lie in the sun, slathered with suntan oil, itching from sand clinging to our skin and clothing. We occasionally visit beaches to remind ourselves how little we enjoy broiling in the sun and viewing naked bodies, but if we succumb to the temptation, we will generally only scan the scene from a pullout, along a road nearby, or briefly sit in a beach chair.

We have numerous beaches we like to visit in California, Florida, Texas, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. But, we have one beach we have returned to numerous times and have even "Laid out in the sun" for hours. I'm speaking of Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Jeannette and I have visited one or more of the islands of Hawaii many times, and when we do, we make it our practice to spend several days at the Outrigger Reef on the Beach Hotel, directly on Waikiki Beach. We love the open, airy lobby of the hotel, with access to the beach within feet of the oceanside entrance, the breakfast and dinner restaurants with open windows to the beach, and a hotel pool surrounded by palm trees and ready access to tropical drinks decorated with paper umbrellas.

Waikiki Beach is unique to any other beach we've ever experienced. It's located on a large, shallow lagoon on the South side of Oahu in Honolulu, the capitol of Hawaii. It's almost always sunny there, with consistent, shallow waves that come from deep water far off shore. It's possible to wade out nearly half a mile with water only up to your waist.

The view around the crescent beach includes Diamond Head to the East, an extinct volcano fortified with anti-aircraft guns during WWII; the old, pink Royal Hawaiian Hotel, used by soldiers for R&R during the war; numerous luxurious high-rise, four and five-star hotels, along the main beach; and the colorful Hilton Hawaiian Village Hotel on the West.

Typically scattered along the beach are colorful beach umbrellas and chairs placed carefully for the tourists, by beachboys from individual hotels; beach

equipment rental huts; and outrigger canoes and gaily-colored catamarans available for rental by the hour. Filling the scene from mid-morning to late afternoon are thousands of sun worshipers broiling in the sun, beach walkers strolling the water line, and children building sand castles with moats and flags.

The main activity on the beach is "people watching." There are people from all cultures and socio-economic strata, mixed together in one large melting pot. For example, the beach bums constitute the bottom rung. They are human flotsam that live on or near the beach with no visible means of support. They can literally "live on the beach" because it's warm and they can panhandle when no police are watching, or they can get paid to do simple tasks, such as emptying trash cans.

One of my favorite memories on Waikiki Beach is watching beach bums make a game of pulling the full plastic bags of trash from hundreds of barrels lined along the beach and replacing them with empty bags. One worker I remember who was either highly dedicated, or high, would walk up to a barrel, lean over the rim, yell into it, as if someone were inside, and hold a conversation with his mythical friend. When he had completed his conversation, that may sometimes last for several minutes, he would then hoist out the old bag, tie a knot in it, and drop it on the ground for pickup later that day by a city garbage truck. I watched one happy trash can worker work his way up the beach toward me, for over an hour, repeating this routine, over and over, until he passed me, continuing down the entire line of barrels.

The next socio-economic rung is occupied by beachboys, who have permanent jobs setting up umbrellas and chairs for the tourists. They appear to be native Hawaiians from a mixture of Polynesian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean extraction. These hotel workers probably live nearby and are paid minimum wage to come to the beach each day and earn tips for their service. Almost all of them are tanned to a mahogany brown by living continually in the sun.

When requests to provide an umbrella and chair are made at a concession stand near a hotel, a beachboy will scurry to a location at the end of a line of umbrellas and dig a hole in the sand, drive the pointy end of the umbrella as far down as possible, mound sand up around the pole, and anchor it with a brick and rope. He then brings beach chairs and ensures your umbrella is tilted just so, to

most effectively shade you and your chairs, and that your umbrella is spaced perfectly, relative to all the others he has installed. Finally, he will stand patiently for a tip, with his hand out.

The third layer on the rung are the concessioners. They either own or manage concessions to rent beach equipment from mats for laying on the sand, to boogie boards, inflatable rafts, surf boards, outrigger canoes, and catamarans.

And, the final rung of personalities on the beach are the tourists. They're also stratified by economic status evidenced by their nearness to the sand. The wealthier tourists will generally rent chairs and umbrellas, the middle-class bamboo mats, and the poorer classes will sit on towels directly on the sand.

It's generally hard to make fine distinctions about economic status among tourists at the beach because most of them wear little clothing. The primary means for separating people into casts is by the clothing they wear. However, during one of our trips to Waikiki Beach, Jeannette and I were treated to a rare exhibition of cultural evolution within a single Japanese family. We observed three generations in the same family "Sun bathing" on the beach at our hotel.

In the 1980's when the Japanese economy was booming and many hotels, resorts, and golf courses in Hawaii, and along the West Coast of the US, had been purchased by Japanese companies, many of their executives were provided paid vacations for their entire families to Hawaii. One of those families was grouped under a couple of umbrellas near ours on the beach. We were astounded to watch the differences in generations and personalities of this family emerge before our eyes.

All members of the family except the youngest children, two to five years of age, were fully clothed. Only the small children wore swim suits. The grandparents, husband and wife, wore traditional black robes. The grandmother wore wooden sandals with wedges that caused her to walk and stand stiffly, and her hair was done up in a traditional bun with large wooden needles and pearls.

The father and mother, obviously the executive and his wife, wore full western suits and dresses. They looked as if they should be at a fancy backyard barbeque, not at the beach. They exhibited an air of nonchalance, as if being fully

clothed at the beach was a common experience for them. The husband smoked one cigarette after another as he corralled his family, and his wife sat aristocratically in her beach chair with the back raised in a vertical position.

The teenage children of the executive and his wife were more casually dressed in western-style jeans and short skirts. The oldest son wore spiked hair and the daughters were tinted in multi colors. They exhibited a distinct air of teenage boredom and rebellion as they listened intently to radios and CD players through head phones.

The youngest children in the family, building castles in the sand, seemed to be the only ones enjoying themselves, and matched the proper dress code for the beach.

During our first visit to Hawaii in 1984 about 90% of the tourists we saw on the streets of Honolulu, were Japanese. When the light changed at an intersection and pedestrians crossed the street, you felt overwhelmed by the numbers of Asian and Japanese faces approaching you. I made a comment to Jeannette during one of our shopping excursions in downtown Honolulu that, "It appeared that the US must have lost the war with Japan, after all!"

I need to assure those of you who think I may be xenophobic, that I have many, good Japanese friends. They can testify that I am not expressing animosity to Japanese, but rather, a reaction to the overwhelming concentration of Japanese tourists in Honolulu that summer.

"People watching" in tourist locations continues to be one of Jeannette and my interests. Let me share just two during our visit to Waikiki in 1984. We were sitting on benches near the entrance to the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel. A series of young Japanese girls walked out of the hotel, from time to time, spotted a red, Maserati convertible parked near the entrance, and posed for pictures for each other draped over the car. One pair went so far as to open the driver's door and sit in the seat for pictures. And, they didn't snap just one or two shots, they'd fill rolls of film. And, they photographed dozens of images of one another in a phone booth nearby, as well. We never could figure out why Japanese teenagers are so motivated to document their presence near scenery, so thoroughly.

One other observation was also intriguing. The Sheraton Hotel hosts group wedding ceremonies weekly in one of their conference rooms. Young Japanese couples fly to Hawaii with up to a hundred other couples to repeat their marriage vows in tuxes and white wedding dresses before a Christian minister. In fact, one of the pastors who performs these ceremonies, is a friend of Dan Iles, a pastor and friend of mine from Redding, California.

His friend lives on Molokai and travels to Honolulu once each week to marry dozens of young Japanese couples. He says it's a good opportunity to explain the Christian view of marriage to them and to share the gospel.

While Jeannette and I sat watching the girls photographing each other with the Maserati, a long line of newlyweds emerged behind us from the Sheraton Conference Center headed for the reception hall. I was astounded by why they chose to get married in a group western ceremony. And, even more intriguing was the way they left the wedding venue for the reception hall. They all walked in a line, man on the right, woman on the left, holding hands, without deviation, out the door, along the sidewalk, and into the banquet hall. Obviously, I'm missing something in my understanding of the Japanese culture.

Let me share one other favorite memory on Waikiki Beach before turning to water sports, which is the real reason tourists flock there. If you ever plan to visit Honolulu or Waikiki, you should consider visiting Duke's Bar and Grill on the beach. It's located near the middle of the beach and is named after Duke Kahanamoku, an Olympic champion in the early 1900s and surfboarder who first introduced longboard surfing to the Summer Olympics.

A statue honoring Duke and his famous surfboard are located on the beach between Duke's and the surf line. If you don't want to travel to Waikiki to visit his statue, you can see it live online by searching for "duke, statue, Waikiki, cam." You know you've got the correct website when you hear Hawaiian guitar music playing repeatedly until you can't get it out of your head. It's like touring, "It's a small world after all, " at Disneyland. Because the website is live, you can wave to your friends back home when you visit Waikiki at a mutually agreed upon time by turning in the same direction as Duke, waving, and telling your friends how good a time you're having.

But, the reason you need to go to Duke's is to have tropical drinks and lunch. Sitting on the porch of Duke's with friends over lunch, must be one of the most delightful experiences in Honolulu. The food and drinks are good, the atmosphere is peaceful with grass shacks constructed around the perimeter of the restaurant, the sound of the surf booming nearby, and the crowd and waiters dressed in colorful Hawaiian clothing. This is as close as it gets to a tropical paradise.

But, I promised you some activity in the water. My two favorite two memories involve Jeannette at the beach. In the first she got so mad at me, I thought she was going to kill me if she could. We had been floating peacefully on inflatable rafts and circular tubes for a couple of hours, just allowing the six-inch swells to lift us up and down. Small fish would occasionally nibble at our legs and feet and the light breezes would alternately warm and cool us. Floating without a care in the world lulled us to sleep and we had to splash water over our faces to keep from falling completely asleep.

But, eventually, near noon, the sun began to become uncomfortable and we decided to head to shore for some shade. The only dangerous place at Waikiki Beach turned out to be the three-foot border between the sand at the edge of the beach and the calm water only three feet from shore. Jeannette discovered that the churning waves in that narrow boundary could be life threatening if you didn't time your leap properly across this natural washing machine.

Jeannette had an inflatable inner tube attached firmly around her waist, so she could just gently float in the calm water. However, as she attempted to step over the boundary where the water was slightly deeper due the churning action of the waves forming a curl right at the shoreline, she suddenly lost her balance and the wave turned her upside down, less than a foot from shore. She attempted to navigate the "gap" multiple times without success. She couldn't time her leap for the shore, so a wave wouldn't catch her. And, she couldn't grasp the ocean floor with her feet before she was tipped over again.

After a couple of these mishaps, I began to laugh hysterically at her predicament. She kept rolling over and over, like she was in a washing machine. And, she couldn't release herself from the inner tube because she had forced it over her hips to remain firmly in place.

Jeannette began to panic. She was afraid she was going to drown. And, there I was laughing at her misfortune. By the time I realized she was in trouble, it took me so much time to rescue her that two waves had rolled her over again twice more. A group of people sitting in beach chairs less than ten feet from the action, were also immobilized by laughter by the scene.

When I finally pulled Jeannette from the water, she was half drowned and filled with anger at my callousness. I hoisted her onto the sand, and when she caught her breath, began to pummel me. If she hadn't regained her composure quickly, the small group of onlookers would have been witnessed first-degree murder with no mitigating circumstances. I think she still believes, yet today, that I intentionally contributed to her near drowning.

The final episode of Jeannette and my misadventures on Waikiki Beach involved an oily Boogie board and bad vision. After Jeannette's near-death experience less than three feet from shore the previous day, she decided she preferred to remain on dry land and enjoy a little sun bathing. After sitting next to her on a towel for half an hour while watching boogie boarders and long boarders gently ride the small swells to shore, I grew bored and announced I was going to attempt riding a board myself. I removed my glasses for fear of losing them in the ocean and headed for a concession stand nearby to rent a boogie board.

I had successfully ridden regular foam boogie boards at home in San Diego. Unfortunately, the boards for rent that day were thick, plastic, ocean-going boards. I had also just applied a new coat of suntan lotion and was well oiled. I experienced great difficulty climbing onto the board because it and I were so slippery. When I could occasionally get up on the board, I couldn't steer it without sliding off again.

After trying to get onto the board multiple times, I finally gave up after about forty-five minutes and headed to shore. It took me awhile to locate the concession stand where I had rented the board because of my poor vision without glasses, but I was finally successful in finding it.

Then I had the task of relocating Jeannette in the sea of people sunbathing on towels. I knew the general direction I had left her earlier, when I made my way to rent my board, but that had been almost an hour ago, and people had come and

gone on the beach during that time, leaving a different pattern of bodies on the beach.

I remembered she was wearing her favorite black knit swimsuit with the white trim and my empty towel was on her left side. I decided to walk slowly and carefully through the crowd looking for that pattern. I felt confident that if I could get within about thirty feet of her, I would be successful.

After about ten minutes of looking, I thought I recognized a woman sitting alone on a blanket wearing a black swimsuit with white trim and an empty blanket on her left.

"Wow, that was easier than I expected," I thought. As I approached her, a romantic thought entered my head. "Her swimsuit exposes a fair amount of bare skin on her back and shoulders. Why don't I sneak up on her, and plant a juicy kiss on her back to apologize for yesterday's fowl-up and laughing at her while she nearly drowned?"

What I was unaware of was that the woman I was approaching was not my wife. And worse, Jeannette had caught sight of me about that time and guessed I had mistakenly identified this woman as her. She watched me move behind the woman and slowly begin to creep toward her. I didn't want her to catch a glimpse of me as I was about to plant a kiss on her back.

I got within about three feet of her when I suddenly realized, this was not Jeannette! Oh, my gosh! Let me out of here! Quickly, but quietly, I backed away, stood up, and headed in the opposite direction.

Jeannette had observed the entire episode. But, by the time I located her, she had recovered from her laughing spell and acted as if nothing strange had occurred. She didn't bother to tell me until later, she had seen the whole thing. What makes a woman so perverse?

Well, you can see from these many adventures and misadventures, that even in a place like Waikiki Beach, where peace and quiet reigns, life can be exciting. People can be fun to watch, and near-death experiences can be only feet away. Keep your eyes open when you visit Honolulu. And, don't forget to visit the beach!