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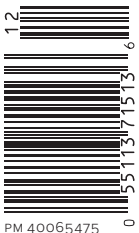
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NOV/DEC 2019

West Side Story

What if we told you that on Hawaii's most populous island there existed a glorious slice of paradise unencumbered by the tourist hordes?

by NEAL McLENNAN

Sand Solo

This isn't Photoshop trickery: West Oahu's Makua Beach really is this empty most of the time. Incredible.

Think Pink

The Puu O Hulu hike finishes with a vibrant pink pillbox leftover from the Second World War that offers a perfect vantage of the West Side.



“Are you sure you really want a pick-up?” asks the guy at the car rental counter at the Honolulu Airport. Normally this is when they try to slide you into the convertible Mustang for *just* \$23 more a day, but there’s a panic note in his voice, betraying that the pick-up truck I reserved is nowhere to be found. He keeps showing us non-pick-up alternatives (Impala, pass; minivan, hard pass) until finally I relent; I’m tired, it’s getting dark, so I agree to a fully kitted-out Jeep Grand Cherokee. But what would normally be a rare consumer-versus-rental company victory doesn’t feel like it. If our destination had been the tony Halekulani maybe the SUV would work, but we’re headed in the exact opposite direction: West Oahu, perhaps the last vestige of underdeveloped beachfront on the island (heck, on any of the major islands) and long the rumoured stomping grounds of locals enjoying at least one slice of beach paradise that’s not overrun with tourists.

Ironically, our base camp for this western expedition is the new Four Seasons Ko Olina. The luxe chain has dominated the top end of the hospitality web on the other islands (Hawaii, Maui, Lanai) for decades, so when they finally moved onto Oahu it was huge news. But even bigger news was that they skipped the expected Waikiki address in favour of the more rugged, less crowded beachhead at the bottom of the west coast. In fact, the trip west from the airport is an exercise in gradual downsizing: leaving the airport on the H-1, we find ourselves in the middle of 12 lanes of traffic, but with each passing mile the road narrows, and the cars dwindle such that when I finally take the exit off the H-1 onto the old Farrington Highway we’re on a sauntering

single-lane road, transitioning into a zen state befitting a place that trades on chill. I pull the fancy SUV into its natural habitat—the Four Seasons bell desk—and amble up to my room to sleep.

I wake the next morning eager to head out and explore, but the hotel seems to have other plans. Greeting me as I look out is the perfectly massive lagoon that dominates the Ko Olina development. It’s a salt-water wonder that has the best of the ocean without pesky things like rip tides and bull sharks, so I indulge in a rare open-water swim before breakfast. And yes, I know a lagoon is by definition the opposite of open water, but it sounds way cooler, so for me they’re now synonyms.

After a quick shower and a bite I’m sitting in front of the concierge asking for advice. In truth, I expect a full court press of dissuasion against adventuring north. Google “West + Oahu” and the first few hits are Trip Advisor posts warning of rampant rental car break-ins and angry locals; also, most people who spend their money on swank Four Seasons digs want to luxuriate in said digs. But instead, she claps her hands together with glee at the possibilities. We go up and down a map of the west side, with her pointing out numerous “amazing” spots, each time adding, “And you’ll have it all to yourself.” We finally decide on the Pink Pillbox hike, because it’s only a short drive from the resort and it promises an 180-degree view of the entire coast.

One of the defining characteristics of West Oahu is that there’s only one road—the aforementioned Farrington Highway, both in and out. Historically, this keeps day-trippers and circle-routers out, as it doesn’t link up with anything else—you drive up, then you turn around

Point Taken

Ka'ena Point is on the northwestern tip of Oahu and to get there you need to walk for a few miles along an abandoned railway right of way. But it's worth it.

and drive back. Not far beyond the Four Seasons' manicured gates, West Oahu immediately starts showing its keeping-it-real differences; the road hugs the coast all the way up, but there's clearly some tent camps on one side and, on the other, a huge power plant that supplies much of the island with electricity. It's scene that would never be tolerated in Waikiki's idealized version of paradise.

Our directions to the hike—known as Puu O Hulu to the locals—are fantastically quaint. Drive to Kaukama Road, hang a right and park at the 12th street light. Find path. When we arrive, there are two other cars at the trailhead, but as we head up the first of the switchbacks we seem to have this part of the mountain to ourselves. We're on the leeward side of Oahu, which means everything is parchingly dry; throw in

highs in the mid-90s, and by the time you reach the top of the two-mile adventure you're feeling it. Well, *I'm* feeling it—the two twentysomething Japanese girls who are literally skipping along the ridgeline in their Vans seem to be handling both the hike and the height just fine. At the top is the eponymous Pillbox, a Second World War relic, built after the flight path above was used to bomb Pearl Harbor. Now it hangs eerily cantilevered over a 1,000-foot drop, its machine gun slots acting as a vertical frame for an expanse of coast and Pacific that would make artist James Turrell proud. Before heading down, we turn 90 degrees to the left to find (eyes don't fail me now) a slab of blue (ocean) meeting a solo white swath (beach) abutting a huge green slab (valley). I point toward it: *tomorrow*.



Four Seasons Resort Oahu at Ko Olina



WHERE TO STAY

There are a few condos up near Makaha, but you'd have to be intrepid to go that route. Take solace that, thanks to the stiff competition from Waikiki, Ko Olina is the generally the lowest-priced Four Seasons in Hawaii. And if you love open-water swimming...



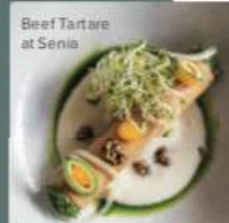
Musubi at L&L Barbecue



Mina's Fish House



Monkeypod Kitchen



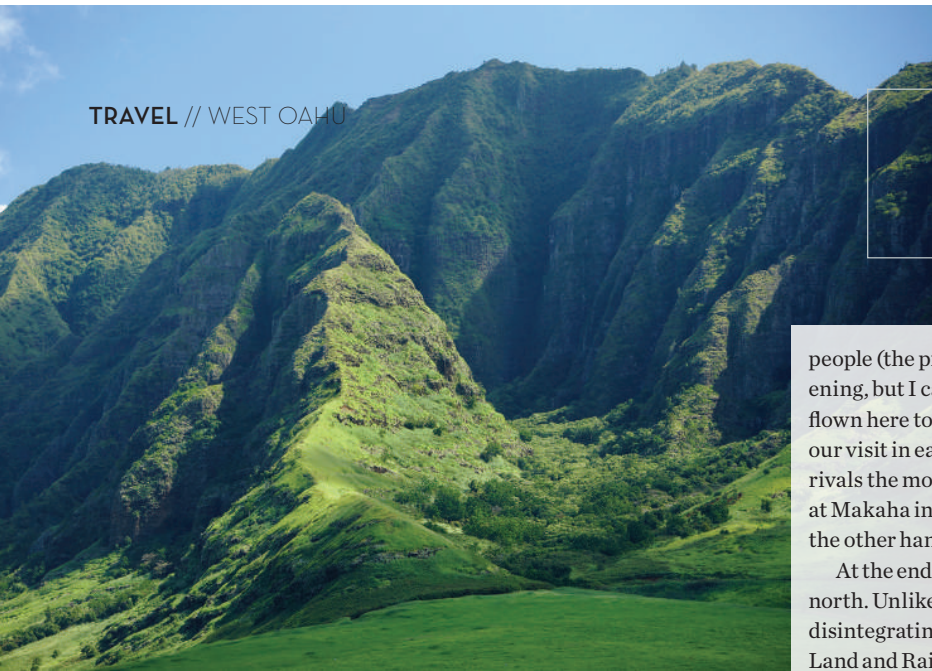
Beef Tartare at Senia

WHERE TO EAT

Again, not the most varied. There's an outpost of local chain L&L Barbecue, but truthfully it seems solidly locals-only. There are numerous roadside stands along the Farrington Highway selling smoked marlin, kalbi ribs and the like—these are basic but give a local flavour of the area. Michael Mina's Fish House at the Four Seasons is, all things considered, reasonably priced, as is the nearby Monkeypod Kitchen. If you're up for a drive then Senia, in Honolulu's equally edgy Chinatown, is the current cream of the fine-dining crop.

Four Seasons: Christian Horan; Monkeypod: Steve Czerniak

The following morning, after another "open water" swim, we again head north, but this time all the way to the end—Ka'ena Point. Once upon a time the road went all the way here, but decades ago it was abandoned as the area became a sanctuary for the endangered Laysan albatross. The drive up is a series of neck-snapping "wows." There's Ma'ili Beach, then Makaha and finally Makua, each one progressively nicer and less crowded as we go north. (And by "less crowded" I mean there might be 15 people at Ma'ili, 12 at Makaha and four at Makua—including the two of us.) While wonderfully unexpected, the lack of people is a bit disconcerting. As the crowd flies, we're only 30 miles from Waikiki, which no doubt is chock-a-block with tourists. What gives? Well, for starters, the first two beaches have a not-insignificant population of houseless



Lush Life

It's not just surf and sand in the West Oahu. The verdant Makaha Valley also defines the undervisted area.

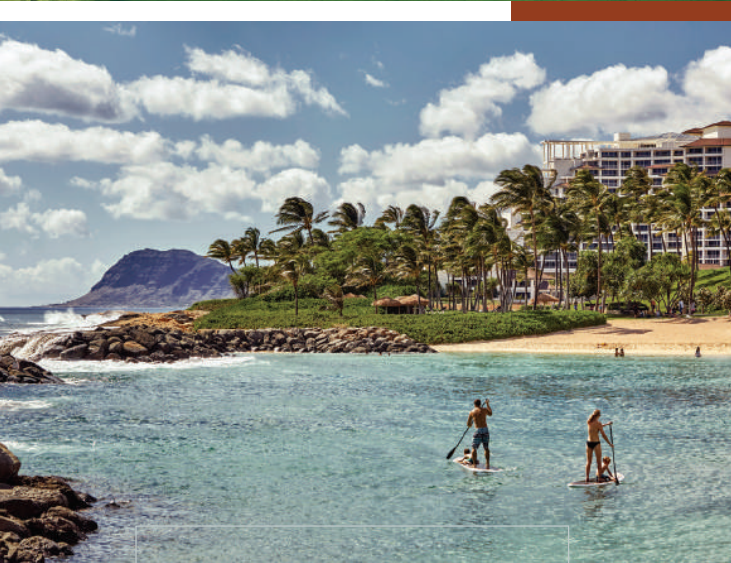
people (the preferred term in these parts) living in tents. It's not threatening, but I can see how it might hit the wrong note for someone who's flown here to get away from it all. The surf can also be quite gnarly; on our visit in early fall it's pretty calm, but come winter, West Oahu easily rivals the more famous North Shore for monster waves. (It was actually at Makaha in 1969 that Greg Noll popularized Big Wave surfing.) But, on the other hand—miles of empty beach.

At the end of the highway we pull the Jeep over and start hoofing it north. Unlike the Pillbox hike, this is fairly flat—it actually follows the disintegrating right of way for a railway constructed in 1899 by the Oahu Land and Rail Company to haul sugarcane. And, like the day before, we have the trail to ourselves (on a two-and-a-half hour journey, we see a grand total of six other people). With each few hundred metres the craggy coast morphs just a bit; there are small sandy beaches, then tide pools, then waves crashing into cliffs. It's as dramatic as any stretch on any of the islands, but there's no one here. When we reach the point, we spread out a small picnic and eat some malasadas picked up en route. It's magic.

About a quarter-kilometre before the parking lot I feel a pang of fear about the car. I had refused the rental company's insurance and am relying on my Visa for coverage, but my mind drifts back to the stories of break-ins, and the parking lot likewise is peppered with signs warning about theft—the last thing I need is a smashed window marring an otherwise perfect day. But at the lot, we're greeted only by a solitary family of locals setting up a tent for a day at the beach. They throw us a friendly wave as we pass by.

The drive back is long—even going against traffic on the Farrington is not fun, but it gives me a chance to look inland at the wonder that is the Makaha Valley, a huge, luscious scoop of green that defines this part of the island. A Canadian company—Pacific Links—has taken over the abandoned Makaha Valley Resort and has hired Tiger Woods to redesign the golf courses. If it happens, it will radically change this part of the island, but most locals seem unfussed. “We've heard this story before—four years ago it was Greg Norman who was going to save us,” says a chap at the gas station who's firmly in the “I'll believe it when I see it” camp. But there's no doubt that the solitude of West Oahu is endangered as a generation of travellers hell-bent on unique experiences discover this rarely visited stretch of wonder.

Back at the Four Seasons, we grab a beer and stroll the grounds. A resort, even a Four Seasons, has a tough time competing with empty beaches, but as we round the corner from the adult pool we see a now-familiar site: past a wire gate marking the property line is a smallish slice of solitary white sand. It takes some ginger flip-flop walking, but in two minutes we're on a secret beach, cleverly named Secret Beach, that lies in the shadow of the hotel. The land is still owned by the Campbell family (one of the historically famous landowners on Oahu) and right now it's all ours. It somehow feels fitting. In fact, the view, due west, to Kauai—then across open sea to Japan—now feels like something that should be enjoyed like this: absolutely to yourself. For now, at least. *///*



Base Camp

The calm lagoon in front of the Four Seasons Ko Olina (top) and a more rugged view from the Pacific (bottom) via outrigger canoe.

