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MAUI - A FEW IMPRESSIONS OF PARADISE

"Why would anyone prefer the Caribbean to this"?

- gentleman seated on a chaise lounge next to the Hyatt Regency swimming pool , Kaanapali Beach, Maui

(Wailea, Maui)

It is exceedingly difficult to write about Hawaii without using the cliché "paradise". But how else to describe the scene before me at the moment.

I'm sitting on the terrace of our suite at the Four Seasons looking out over a torchlit beachfront. The terrace is half the size of Delaware and I'm sitting here with my laptop awaiting a mango chicken salad. I'm too tired to go out to dinner as a result of one of Angela's patented Bataan Death March hikes early this morning. We've just watched a red orange ball more vivid than a Dennis Rodman bad hair day set out over the ocean. You could hear oohhs and aahhs from the well traveled visitors who stand in awe at the edge of the sand water far down below, awaiting dusk in the land of perpetual sun laced with cooling showers..

This isn't travel. This is something more. And while I have not become a Zen Buddhist on this trip, I am eating more rice than usual and I am less prone to conversation. We haven't been to the Don Ho show but we have watched the sun set each evening in some drop-dead gorgeous place. I noticed that the rain is clean here - no residue is left on your car after a rainfall. Everywhere you hear the lapping of the waves. The young kids serving burgers in the local restaurants and the well coifed hotel execs who work the marble corridors, all have that same self-confident look, that gentle assurance that they took the plunge and came up geographic winners. And gee, Mr. and Mrs. Turen, it's really too bad that you have to return to Chicago but we'll be ready to tell the folks who replace you all about the joys of living here.

The folks in Hawaii all have that same laid-back attitude that is a reflection of their belief that, in the game of life, they have won because they are here and we are just visitors. And at this very moment, I think that, perhaps they are right.

There are still several days remaining to this eleven-day trip. I have been invited to visit several of the resorts that finished in the top ten among the Conde Nast Magazine 1996 ratings. It has been several years since I was last in Hawaii and, thus far, all of the changes I have seen appear to be for the better. I have already seen enough to know that I will be spending more time trying to convince whoever will listen that, all things being equal, the islands of Hawaii offer a generally more satisfying vacation experience, free of crime, pollution, crowds, and hostile locals, than the Caribbean.

We started off last Thursday, flying United non-stop Honolulu and connecting for the short "twenty minute" Aloha airlines flight to Maui.. Here's our "flightcheck" scorecard:

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Flight: United # 43 - 747 non-stop Chicago - Honolulu
Crew/On-Board Service: Surprisingly professional and friendly. Crew rarely relaxed.
Seating: Coach class seat pitch has been improved by elimination of Business Class.
Food: Dinner quite good, beef and chicken choices. First class included choice of entrees such as filet mignon, shrimp and scallops, marinated breast of chicken. Excellent salad tossed seatside. Custom-designed sundaes made with Ben and Jerry's ice cream, Champagne and mid-range wines poured freely. Coffee by Starbuck's.
Flying Time: Eight hours and twenty-five minutes. Arrival was four minutes ahead of schedule.

On arrival, after realizing that they had forgotten to build a customs booth in the Honolulu arrivals hall for inbound mainland flights (I'm still not convinced that Hawaii is really a state. It has far too little in common with New Jersey), we checked in with Hertz and were quickly on our way in a red convertible. The sun was shining, temperatures were hovering in the mid-eighties and every one of the Hawaiian radio stations played nothing recorded after 1975. The Beach Boys were actually singing surfer girl as we slid past Lahaina.

Angela and I didn't speak much on the way from the airport to Kaanapali. She was deep in thought. It was the next day before I realized why. She was seriously thinking about how we might make the move here with the least amount of hassle.

We spent the next two nights in the Kaanapali Alii, one of the better condominium buildings along Maui's prime shoreline, next door to the Westin, the Marriott and the Hyatt Regency hotels.

Condominiums in Hawaii are generally a wise choice, offering full living rooms, terraces, and completely equipped kitchens. Of course, people who actually want to cook a meal during their vacation in Hawaii are looking at some rather false savings. I volunteered to visit the Lahaina Safeway one evening and came home with about forty dollars worth of groceries for a simple dinner.

There is a walkway that connects the hotels and condos along Kaanapali beach. The Marriott and the Hyatt had outdoor massage tables set up on the grass overlooking the water. We ate dinner on the beach at an informal restaurant. I wanted to have my feet in the sand while dining on mahi mahi and a good, rich, Caesar salad. Our first sunset was nearly perfect.

We met John, a friendly fellow and Loyola graduate, who recognized that we were from Chicago. He told us that we had a midwest pallor and that we weren't feisty enough to be from New York or LA. So I kicked him in the shins - just to show that I could be aggressive. By this time, Angela had already secured

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a copy of the local newspaper and was carefully reviewing the real estate ads. We had been on Hawaiian soil for eleven hours.

John joined us and talked a bit about settling down on Maui as a restaurant manager.

"I just came here immediately after graduation", he told us. "Sure real estate is a fortune, I pay \$1200 a month to share a small apartment. But what they never tell you is that salaries on the islands are 20 to 30% higher than the mainland. I'm 23 years old and I'm being paid \$40,000 a year to manage this place."

We heard this many times from fresh-faced youngsters who had started out with mom and dad's skepticism and were now fending off requests from relatives who wanted to visit.

I told Angela that we ought to start a company that offers real estate tours and seminars for those who might consider moving or retiring to the islands.

Angela suggested that I wait until at least my second day in Hawaii before designing the seminar.

The night never crept up on shore. Instead, it hovered out there somewhere, put off by the brightness of the moon and the closeness of the stars. The hotels had all lit their lamps along the walkway.

We went for an evening stroll, passing the elegant outdoor seafood buffet at the Westin and the luau at the Marriott. They were lifting the pig up out of the pit as we passed. In the background, I could see a woman in a lawn chair whose husband was gingerly spoon-feeding her a memorable taste of poi. I remembered my first, and last, encounter with this delicacy.

Couples in Hawaii hold hands or link arms instinctively. Perhaps its the honeymooners who inspire us. They are easy to spot. They spend even more time looking at the stars than the rest of us. For many of the men, the unexpected comfort of a Hawaiian shirt is liberating. A noticed more arm swinging than is usual.

Angela looks up. Jed Clampett, the Beverly Hillbilly, is walking past us. He's not a youngster anymore his steps are slow. A youngster, at the prompting of his mother, goes up to him and asks why he's standing on the sand looking out across the water.

"Because this is Paradise" says the actor. "And this is where I want to be".

How many of us are where we want to be? Good for him. I'm glad that at least one of the Clampetts actually made it to Paradise.

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