

February 2002

Aloha Ohana!!

It's now been 2 weeks since I landed in the middle of the vast, anything but "pacific" ocean. Sometimes, when I'm sitting in the lunch room at the lab, I glance over at the world map on the wall in disbelief of where I'm at.

Having slept almost the entire flight over (you won't be surprised to hear that I was up the whole night before, packing and readying my apartment for my subletter, energized by a late night visit from Ed, gracias señor, and leaving my apartment in an unprecedentedly clean state...and yes, Nancy, I cleaned the bathroom) probably added to this sense that I really can't grasp my physical location. I believe, but don't really understand the vastness of the distance that Hawai'i is from any other land mass. I guess it's gonna take sailing the divide before that realization finally hits...

So I landed in Honolulu on a pleasant, sunny, 80 degree afternoon, and caught a city bus into town. On the bus-ride in, I got an immediate good vibe from the place: there were almost no flags flying on cars. I think I counted 120 non-flagged cars before we passed one with one of those tattered deals flapping from the antenna. Part of this has to do with the sheer distance. Hawai'i is definitely part of the USA, but there is a palpable sense of disconnect from the mainland. But there's more to it than that. Certainly, there are still a lot of bitter feelings from many native Hawaiians over the way in which their land was basically ripped out from under them, and probably a severe sense of regret about what it has become. But here in Honolulu, native Hawaiians are definitely a minority, so I think there's a third factor preventing the knee-jerk patriotism that characterizes the rest of our fair land. This place is just a lot more international flavored. It's not just the mix of ethnic groups - that's true in just about every mainland urban center, too. But this place seems to have a lot more in common with Asia (and certainly Polynesia) than it does with North America. In the Honolulu newspapers, regional news talks about Tahiti. I don't know about where you all are at, but the fact that we've now got "military advisors" in ~~Vietnam~~ the Phillipines is a big story here (of course, that's also due to the major military presence on Oahu...). And Honolulu has really fabulous pockets of Asian culture: Chinatown is a trip, especially the marketplace; there's a "little Korea" section of town with restaurants serving Sundubu all night; and there's even one of those sushi bars with the automatic carousel in Waikiki, not to mention heaps of noodle stands. Plus Buddhist temples seemingly on every corner, and there is this ENORMOUS three story pagoda-style temple that I pass on the bus everyday

heading into town. Looking at that thing, it's hard to believe that you're in the USA. All of this has really whet my whistle for a trip back to my homeland (Japan).

(speaking of flags, here's a great G.B.Shaw quote that I just came across: "You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race.")

...of course, as you might expect, a lot of the visible influences of the mainland that you do see around here are the most banal, if not hateful elements of americana: blind consumerism, lack of respect for the environment, wasteful use of resources, and the like.

So, anyway, the bus from the airport, it turns out, passes like 4 blocks from the marine lab (that will indicate to you how right in the center of town this lab is located), which was good, cuz I was lugging a lot of crap: my computer, dive gear, books, and full camping set up.

The deal with camping on the island is that county and state beach parks are FREE, 5 days a week, and closed on Wednesday and Thursday nights). But you have to get a permit, and they check! So I heard that the park in Honolulu itself is sketchy, and most of the other parks were booked for the week, so I got one of the last spots at a county beach park in a town on the windward side called Hau'ula.

This was not the most picturesque locale, being only about 50 yards from the circle-island rural highway, and right across the street were the bright lights of the establishment that was the inspiration for the following poem:

Monday night at the 7-eleven  
In Hau'ula that's the place to be  
It ain't exactly a slice of heaven  
But it don't ever close and the food is fatty

A constant stream of cars in and out of the 7-eleven parking lot at night alternated with the sounds of the waves lapping up on the beach, and the wind whistling through the palm trees.

Hau'ula is on the #55 circle island bus line, a little over an hour commute (the #55 bus also, fortuitously, passes 4 blocks from the lab), and the bus rides there and back have been a veritable freak show: people mumbling to themselves, chicks from BYU (a Mormon school right up the road) gossiping about boys & crinkling

plastic from their huge booty from the Windward Mall, guys wearing bucketloads of heinous cologne, a woman whose smile automatically made me think "two options: either she digs me, or she's a Jesus freak," - just my luck, it was option B (after she got discouraged by me, she finally found a receptive listener, and talked his ear off the whole way to town). But also the good kind of freaks: Jimi Hendrix of the ukelele jammed for like half an hour one Saturday night; lots of cool, laid back locals; and best of all was Issaac, who's studying alternative medicine and acupuncture at a Taoist temple outside of Honolulu. Actually, there's another Taoist temple in Chinatown which I'm gonna check out soon. So people are exploring stuff here, which is a commonality that I've found in islands as diverse as Timor, Hawai'i and the San Juans.

Back in Honolulu, I noticed something else while walking the streets and riding the buses: the only other place in the US where I've seen so many mixed-race couples is Berkeley, CA. So in some ways, Honolulu is Berkeley with surfers instead of hippies.

...though there is a bit of hippie culture out there. I found this really good snorkeling beach near Waikiki, and met some cool folks who hang there daily. They smoke cannabis and hack open coconuts, and they're psyched to check out my bucket o' urchins that I retrieve from the reef. This little corner of what is otherwise tourist hell is actually not very well known, and the hippie locals keep a pair of hedge trimmers to maintain the adjacent gardens and the good will of the parks department.

On Wednesdays and Thursdays, I stay at the youth hostel in the University area (Manoa valley), which is pretty nice, and always has a stream of interesting folks rolling through. Perhaps the most memorable was this kid named Todd from Amherst, studying leper colonies for his undergraduate thesis. He spent 6 months in Nepal at the leper colony there, and he wanted to compare what he found to a leper colony on Molokai. From what he said, it sounds like leper colonies are one of the last bastions of true social equality in the world. I think there's a few good lessons there...

The second week, I moved to a park a bit closer to town - and much nicer, though Hau'ula had its charm - called Kualoa Beach Park, with a stunning mountain range behind and a trippy island offshore known as "Chinaman's Hat." This is a seriously wind-swept locale, though, and I almost lost my tent the other day. They don't call it the "windward side" for nuthin...

So I think it was Mark who told me that you either love Hawai'i or you hate it. I

guess I can see that, but I've gotta say, I both love it AND hate it. I love the beach camping, the fact that Hawaiians have names for every common sea urchin, the general laid-back attitude, the wind rain sun and mountains are stunning, the warm water and amazing snorkeling that I could do for ever, lots of pedestrian space downtown (in stark contrast to our fair city, Seattle), the awesome public transport system, Magoo's bar near the University, where a typical microbrew sells for \$1.25 a glass and \$6 a pitcher (I'm not kidding - it must be a front), the Honolulu weekly which makes the Stranger look like the fashion rag that it is, Chinatown's cheap food (I like mispronouncing my order for "Fukin Tofu" at the Glowing Dragon) and ridiculously cheap produce [I finally have affordable papayas (75 cents) and avocados (50 cent, big ones) in my life again], KTUH - a real old-school college radio station, the Down to Earth food market for organics, the amazing temples and the late night restaurants. Oh. and there are some attractive women here too.

BUT...I HATE Hawaiian music. It totally sucks ass. I tried, but I can't stand that crap. They simply were far too far away from anyone else for far too long who would tell it like it is, and they got confused. Problem is, they're still confused. They also eat spam here, and they like it. And speaking of fatty meat products, there are few things less appealing than passing some of these families of beached whales lounging about on the sand. For some reason, this place is a mecca for some of the most grotesquely overweight people on the planet. And they sweat a lot. And then there's the old people whose skin is so wrinkled and spotted from sun overexposure that you can almost see their cells dividing out of control... Oh yeh, Pearl City. I had to go there to get some lab supplies. Total friggin suburban nightmare, cars everywhere, strip malls, seems to go on for ever. I got off at the wrong bus-stop, so I had to walk for like 20 minutes in Pearl City, and I truly felt like I was passing through the valley of the shadow of death. I mentioned the cologne. Also generally the men dress in totally ridiculous clothing, especially but not by any means exclusively the tourists. This stands out cuz the women are usually pretty fashionable (of course, some of you may not agree with my contention that wearing microscopic amounts of clothing is, indeed, good fashion...). People love their cars here too much, there's tons of traffic, and I actually hear people "peeling out" in their camaros several times a night. There's a lot of frat mentality around here as well. This island is basically a temple to introduced species. All of the plants look pretty and cool until you find out that you won't see a native anything unless you go up into the rainy cold mountains. Oahu is basically a giant zoo for invasive species of the tropical world. And, finally, Hawai'i is too dependent on the mainland. They should really try to be more self-sustaining. And they prostitute themselves to the military (highways built through one of the last remaining untouched inland ecosystems

to service military bases, and so on). And they use way too much styrofoam here (and garbage in general) when there's nothing to do with it.

So you make your choice. I still have yet to find a locale in the world, though, that doesn't have certain unappealing features...

OH. maybe you're wondering about my research? Actually, I've mostly been out collecting, and it's been a blast and the critters here are totally incredible. With the warm water, though, comes some costs. I've experienced the venom of several representatives of the local fauna, including a couple of urchins, some coral and some friggin fish that got me with its barbs the other night that stung like all get out. No sharks or portuguese man o war yet, though, so I count myself lucky. As for babies, I just brought a batch of about 1 million paddle urchin embryos into the world yesterday, so things are moving in the right direction.

In the next couple o weeks, we're gonna have Charlotte and Manyan in the house, so all I can say is I hope that trend continues. Plenty o' room on the beach...

peace y'all  
bug

p.s. US mail to Hawai'i is a total joke right now (post 911). All mail goes through ONE post office in Ontario, California. Imagine trying to cram a million things into one giant funnel every day. If you happen to pass through Ontario, I'd stay away from the postal workers. Right now it takes about 3 weeks for a letter, and over a month for a package. It'd be faster, I'm sure, to go up to Vancouver and send mail from there...