

Hawaii, 2006

Memo to Vincent:

Re: Trip to Hawaii and San Diego.

December 8, 2006 to January 5, 2007

Flew to San Diego and stayed in an airport hotel overnight (did not want to make entire trip in one flight). Left the following morning and arrived in Kauai that night. Sunday morning I awoke at 5 AM (9 AM New Orleans time) and went grocery shopping!! Attended the concierge orientation meeting at 8 AM and signed up for three activities including a helicopter ride around the island.

Kauai is a red island. It was the first to arise out of the sea from a volcano erupting through the shifting "Pacific Plate" millions of years ago. It took that long for the iron rich black lava to oxidize to red. From the helicopter the dark green rain forest was easily distinguishable from the many deep valleys and water falls, but most spectacular was the "Little Grand Canyon" in the west central part of the island. If I did not know better I'd have sworn I was over Arizona, except that the canyon was a lot smaller and closer.

The island is also home to many fascinating birds, including many Asian fighting cocks (orange and black) that got loose in a hurricane about a dozen years ago. They now run wild and wake everybody up at 5 AM. The enormous legendary albatross also nests there this time of year: one egg per season, plunked down on the lawns of a lush suburban development. The homeowners are glad to see them and mow their lawns very carefully so as not to disturb their nests. Small striped doves are all over the place pursuing one another prior to nesting. Large white doves and the usual rock pigeons are also residents, as are the spectacular red crested cardinals (black and white bodies), and tiny yellow finches that nest in palm trees (they also escaped from cages during a storm). Most interesting is the only truly native bird still around (most of the others were devoured by house cats and rats that escaped from ships), the Nene, a large brown goose that rarely flies (it didn't have to before humans came to the island). They now live in protected areas free from cats, but not rats. Wild boar and (believe it or not) mongoose were also imported to the island by Russians (the boar) and others. Both have done spectacular damage to native flora and fauna.

Also took a carriage ride driven by huge Clydesdales through a former sugar plantation, now used to grow other money crops since the sugar market plummeted. Later I drove through areas not covered by the bus tour and re-visited the canyon by car to get a closer look. All in all, this was my favorite island because of its beauty and spectacular views.

Next I landed on the Kona Coast (left) side of the "Big Island", Hawaii. Driving out of the airport to reach my resort which was part of the huge Hilton complex at Waikoloa, I thought I'd landed on an entirely black island, and only later realized that this was the area that had been covered with lava just a few thousand years ago. Since it is the youngest and largest island in the chain, the iron has not yet had time to oxidize, and the hardened lava is where the Polynesians first carved their stick figures known as "petroglyphs" telling their story of following the stars

and the birds to find their new home. It is also home to black beaches and large sea turtles that come up to lay their eggs on the black sand.

Once again I signed up for an all-day bus tour (thirteen hours) and an airplane ride around the island (2 hours). Needless to say I saw a lot of the place, and even walked through a “lava tube” carved by hot gases during an eruption. There are four huge volcanoes on the island (two of them more than 13,000 feet high) but thankfully only one is still active. I saw one crater (caldera) from the ground and watched the lava flowing into the sea from Kilauea, the active volcano, from the airplane. There was an earthquake about a month before I arrived, and one can clearly see both the rift caused by this quake and others (the eastern rift zone), and the new land currently being formed in the sea. I am told that another island is in formation now but won't be seen for a few thousand years. (Can't wait!)

Surprisingly, the Hawaiians fear the volcano far less than another dangerous situation. Some years ago a very large landholder planted thousands of acres in eucalyptus trees with the intention of selling the product to a Japanese company. When the landholder and his wife died the deal fell through. Now that the trees have all matured and stand in very tight formation in a large forest area, the residents fear a catastrophic fire in the event of a drought or lightning strike or even a careless campfire. Oil of eucalyptus may make a good healing lotion and or even great food for Australian koalas but they may also spell death to thousands of Hawaiians.

Oahu, the middle island or “meeting place”, was the last island I visited in Hawaii. (By the way, Hawaiians put an apostrophe between the two i's: Hawai'i. What is confusing is that both the island chain and the “big island” are both called Hawai'i, as is the state of Hawai'i. Go figure.) Over a third of Oahu is taken up by the city of Honolulu, the suburb of Waikiki, and the port of Pearl Harbor. I stayed in Waikiki and signed up for a 6 hour bus tour this time, and a Luau on Christmas Day. On Sunday the 24th I took a shuttle to Pearl Harbor and visited the USS Missouri aboard which the surrender of the Japanese took place in 1945, and the bay where the US Navy was attacked on December 7, 1941. A number of the sunken ships still lie in place. The monument to the USS Arizona was especially moving because many of the bodies of the sailors who drowned that day are still down there. And oil still oozes from the wreck.

On the evening of Christmas Day, I attended the Luau at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel on the beach at Waikiki. It was spectacular, and the food (except for the poi) was excellent. The show presented singers and dancers representing many different types of Polynesian cultures and costumes, and included a Sumatran fire dancer. An interesting side point to this day was the priest at Mass on Christmas morning. He was a native Hawaiian who said the Mass in his bare feet. When I asked a parishioner why, I was told because he always did that on feast days. I had already noticed that many Hawaiians removed their shoes before entering someone's house, but I thought that was just a Japanese custom. Turns out it is a SE Asian tradition as well. (Don't know about the Chinese or Indians.)

The bus trip around the island was not that much different from the others, except for Diamond Head (an inactive crater), a Buddhist Temple (lots of Japanese in Hawaii), the Dole Pineapple Plantation, and those beautiful surfers' beaches on the northwest side of the island where the waves (or pipes) are sometimes over 40 feet high. There's even a Mormon Temple complex

where you are greeted by a young woman offering to show you around. We declined because of time limitations. One thing I especially noticed was a small island off shore called “Chinaman’s Hat”. It really does look like a Chinaman’s hat.

The following day I took a shuttle to Hilo Hattie’s shop and splurged on souvenirs and Hawaiian shirts, including a muumuu, to add to the numerous tee shirts I’d picked up along the way. As a footnote, everywhere I went people were constantly pointing out where popular movies and TV shows were and are now being made, from “Jurassic Park” to “Blue Hawaii” to “Lost”. The place is also home to many movie celebrities as well, with huge houses by the beaches with spectacular views. Sylvester Stallone sold his house when he was told he could not fence off the beach there because the law preserves public access to all beaches in the state. The bus driver in Hawaii (13 hours) is a native Hawaiian who regularly slept on the beach as a youngster, as do many homeless people today (everything is expensive in Hawaii), and recounted how he’d help himself to all bananas, papaya and other fruits growing nearby and along the roadway, as well as the fish and turtle eggs, and rarely went hungry. When challenged he’d simply say they belonged to him as part of his heritage! Too bad the Cherokee didn’t succeed with that argument when they were forced to leave Georgia and walk into exile in Oklahoma.

I was sorry to leave Hawaii even after three weeks. Maybe next time I’ll get to visit Maui and take a boat trip around all the other islands as well. My final week was spent at a resort across the street from the beach in LaJolla near San Diego. The area is famous for the harbor seals that sun themselves nearby and for the pelicans that nest there as well. On New Year’s Eve I spent three and a half hours driving up to visit Pat and Leo O’Conner at their winter home in Desert Hot Springs just north of Palm Springs. I talked non-stop the entire time I was there except for the time I was asleep. I guess I needed the therapy (post-Katrina). We joined their daughter Kim and her partner Judith for dinner at an excellent restaurant and later watched the New Year roll in throughout the country on TV. The following morning I returned to LaJolla after taking pictures of a windmill farm on the way back. (Californians are way ahead of the rest of the country when it comes to energy conservation.)

On Wednesday I met my old friend Howard from the days when we both worked in the Genevieve Blatt Senatorial campaign in Pennsylvania in 1964 (!) We are both approaching our dotage now, but Howard, the professional badminton player (even in his 60s) is in much better shape than I am. We walked all over Balboa Park in San Diego (slowly because of my still weak knee) and drove to Coronado Island to see the old Victorian hotel there. All-in-all, a lovely day. And a very memorable trip, over all. I arrived home on the night of January 5th exhausted but carrying camera memory cards loaded with approximately 900 digital pictures.