



GETTING YOUR “SHAKA” ON

EXPLORING THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

Text and photos by Brandi Mueller

Alooooooooha - a word synonymous with the Hawaiian Islands, and a greeting heard over and over again on any visit to Hawaii. It means hello, goodbye, love, and describes the way of living in Hawaii. Local Hawaiian residents drive with aloha. Once a week they have Aloha Friday. And there's Aloha Monday, Aloha Tuesday...well you get the idea. And then there's the "shaka." The surfers may have used it first above water, but underwater in Hawaii the shaka is possibly more common than the okay sign – with your thumb and pinky extended and your other fingers folded into your palm. Underwater it is the sign you give after a phenomenal creature encounter or just a greeting as you pass other divers to say 'hello' or 'aloha' to those lucky as you are to be diving the Earth's most isolated island chain.

With its stunning waters, sunshine, rainbows, waterfalls, luscious green landscape, active volcanoes, beautiful bird life, and everything else Hawaii is famous for, you know topside Hawaii is amazing. But did you know under the water it has the same reputation? Home to



the highest percent of endemic species (those found nowhere else besides Hawaii), unique marine life found nowhere else abounds. And then there's the lava tubes, caverns, and beautiful geology which can be seen at different stages from the older islands such as Kauai, to brand new lava creations on the Big Island. Then there are the sharks, dolphins, humpback whales in the winter, manta rays, and the list goes on and on. With seven islands made incredibly easy to dive, Hawaii has it all.

The island of Oahu, or the "gathering place" is usually the first stop on any Hawaii itinerary. Visiting the North Shore, Pearl Harbor, and Waikiki are stops on everyone's bucket list. But a few feet away from (and below) these famed tourist spots are some incredible dives. Just off Waikiki sits three artificial wrecks that you can dive with a 20 minute or less boat ride. A Corsair plane made a water landing in 1946 and sits at 100ft in sand just off the East side. In the summer, the famous North Shore waves disappear and divers are greeted with mirror calm conditions to dive unique eroded lava caverns.

You can get picked up from your Waikiki hotel, and minutes later you will be jumping in the deep blue Pacific waters. Most mornings, the first dive of the day is either the **Seatiger** or **YO-257** wreck. The Seatiger, once a Chinese owned vessel confiscated by the USCG due to some illegal activities, is 165ft long and 40ft wide, sitting between 65 and 130ft. With proper training and a guide, this boat is fantastic to penetrate. Two favorite Seatiger residents happen to be two baseball-glove size frogfish. And macro life is common on this wreck, pointed out by your dive guide's attentive eye. Endemic Kahuna nudibranches are all over the deck as well as blue dragon nudibranchs. Turtles love the Seatiger and there's often a shark or two next to the boat in the sand. The occasional manta and even humpback whale have been known to pass by.

The YO-257 is a Navy Yard Oiler built in the 1940s and sunk in 1989. This artificial reef seems to be as popular with turtles as it is with divers. Octopi can be found in nooks and crannies of the wreck and schools of eagle rays are known to swim by. On most days you can see (and swim to) the San Pedro wreck which was sunk right next to the YO. Also sunk intentionally, it is a bit shallower at 60-80ft and 90ft long. Part of the San Pedro has collapsed on itself, so there isn't much left to penetrate, but several sharks and sleeping turtles do and you can often see them from the outside or by sticking your head in. That is, if you can get past the schools of blue stripe snappers and butterfly fish.

Non-divers can check out the YO-257 and San Pedro underwater courtesy of Atlantis Submarines, who were responsible for sinking



both ships and the submarine visits them several times each day. (And lucky divers can see a submarine underwater if they're diving the wrecks at the right time!) The boat ride to all three wrecks gives you a great view of Waikiki and Diamond Head from the ocean, and often playful dolphins ride the bow and humpbacks are commonly seen in the winter.

In the summer, the North Shore's massive surfer waves are replaced by calm, clear, and perfect diving conditions. **Shark's Cove** is a local favorite accessed by shore and a nice hike down some old lava rock. Once in the water, divers find intricate caverns and swimthroughs formed in the black lava rock from those powerful waves that bring the surfers in all winter long. Turtles, white tip sharks, and the occasional monk seal show up here, and the undersides of the lava rock walls are loaded with nudibranchs, flat worms, and many different types of eels. The maze-like cavern system makes for a really fun night dive.

A short flight to the east leads to Maui. Arguably the most popular island for diving is Maui. This is the home of the world-famous **Molokini Crater**, often rated as one of the top ten dives in the world. This island is the top of a volcanic crater and a protected bird sanctuary. This marine reserve has amazing diving all the way around, the inside being known for its pristine hard corals, abundant fish, and aquarium-like conditions. The backwall of Molokini, often subject to strong currents, is a more advanced dive with the steep wall descending more than 300ft. As you rush by the Backwall, you're likely to see white tip, black tip, and grey sharks, eagle rays, manta rays, turtles, and large schools of fish.

In between Oahu and Maui are the smaller islands of Lanai and Molokai. Lanai's Cathedral dives are world renowned. The ocean's power has transformed the lava rock of Lanai into

spectacular caverns 30ft high, as well as smaller swim troughs and many lava arches to swim under. Inside the cathedrals, schools of fish hang out and nudibranchs are found commonly on the walls. The light shining down through openings in the ceiling creates mystical sun beams that challenge photographers to capture their beauty. While diving the site called **First Cathedral**, the east wall allows light to penetrate through the lava, making it appear to be a stained glass window.

Molokai offers clear waters, big schools of fish, sharks, and not many other divers. Most of Molokai's dives can have strong currents, so it's best for advanced divers, but the strong currents are worth the rewards of possible scalloped hammerheads, Galapagos sharks, schools of barracuda and other pelagics. Lucky divers have even spotted monk seals and humpbacks.

Both Lanai and Molokai can be amazing trips on their own,

but for convenience, several dive shops on Maui do daily trips across the channels to dive Molokai and Lanai.

Further east is Hawaii's largest island, Hawaii, also known as The Big Island. Being the tallest and the largest (and still growing), the Big Island's Leeward side, the Kona Coast, has some of Hawaii's healthiest reefs due to the protection the island gives them from waves and weather. Best accessed by a liveaboard, the Kona Aggressor is the only operation that will take you all the way from Kona to South Point to give you the best diving the island has to offer.

Kona is home to the world famous **Manta Night Dive**. More than 30 years ago a hotel pointed lights out on the ocean; and low and behold mantas started showing up in front of the hotel. Turns out the lights attracted the mantas favorite food, plankton, and not long after, the mantas attracted divers. The site has been moved slightly north

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now and dive shops nightly put large buckets of lights (campfires) on the sand at 30ft. Almost every night the mantas show up to perform their graceful ballet for hours as divers hold their flashlights, contributing to the buffet for the mantas. Some of the same mantas have been seen since it all started, and dive guides can tell you their names based on the black marking on their bellies.

Further south of Kona, the Aggressor will take divers to little accessed sites of extinct volcano craters, deserted white and black sand beaches and sheer lava walls. Dolphins and pilot whales are common visitors as the boat cruises and humpbacks can be seen from the boat almost every day during the winter season.

And last but not least, all the way to the west is Kauai. Most divers miss this gem of an island, flocking instead to Maui or the Big Island, but it shouldn't be missed. Truly embracing the Aloha Spirit, Seasport Divers takes fantastic care of their customers while showing them the best Kauai has to offer and sharing their knowledge of Hawaii marine life. With boats departing from Poipu daily they dive sites including **Sheraton Caverns** where you'll get sick of seeing turtles in lava tubes. The turtles are simply everywhere. In between turtle sightings you will likely find a few octopi, moray eels, and even a frogfish if you're lucky.

Several dive operators run regular trips to the island of Niihau; also known as the Forbidden Island and located 17 miles east of Kauai. Niihau is your best chance in Hawaii to dive with the endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal. You can swim along with the monk seals as they twist and turn along sheer lava walls covered with rarely seen nudibranchs and many of Hawaii's rare endemic species. Sharks are common including white tips, Galapagos, grey reef sharks, and even the occasional lemon, silky, or tiger shark. Niihau diving can have strong currents and rough seas, so it is best for advanced divers.

After the diving is done, one can't avoid ending up on a beautiful beach with a Mai Tai in hand watching a bright orange sun set into the dark blue water. As you order another, you'll be sharing your diving stories of mantas bumping into you, humpback whales breaching next to your dive boat, and maybe the flyby of a monk seal. And yes, by the end of your Hawaiian vacation, you'll probably groan at the sound of a minute long alooooooooha...but it will bring forth a smile of the paradise you've visited both above and below water.