

Honolulu

Until the Europeans came,
HONOLULU

was insignificant; soon so many foreign ships were frequenting its waters that it had become Kamehameha's capital, and it remains the economic center of the island. The city covers a long (if narrow) strip of southern Oahu, but downtown is a manageable size, and a lot quieter than its glamorous image might suggest. The tourist hotels, and most of Honolulu's hustle, are concentrated among the skyscrapers of very distinct WAIKIKI, a couple of miles east.

The setting is beautiful, right on the Pacific and backed by dramatic cliffs and the extinct volcanoes of Punchbowl (a military cemetery) and Diamond Head; but then beauty is not so rare a commodity on Hawaii, and you can see this sort of scenery in plenty of other places without a city in the middle of it. What attracts most visitors to stay in Honolulu, and especially Waikiki, is the sheer hedonism of shopping, eating and generally hanging out in the sun. It's also the center of an exemplary public transportation system, facilitating exploration of the whole island.

Downtown Honolulu

is surprisingly small, set back a little from the sea and centering around a spacious plaza on King Street that includes Iolani Palace and the state capitol. The palace was built for King David Kalakaua in 1882, but, apart from its koa-hardwood floors, contains little that is distinctively Hawaiian (Tues-Sat 9am-2.15pm; \$15). Across the road is a flower-bedecked, gilt statue of Kamehameha the Great.

To reach the nearby ocean, pedestrians have to negotiate fearsome traffic. Although the sea may be turquoise, the shorefront is concrete, not beach, and you can't wander along it for any distance due to excessive recent construction works. The Aloha Tower on Pier 9 used to be the city's tallest building; the area around its base has been converted into an expensive shopping and dining mall, fronting onto the city docks. The view from the top of the tower is little short of ugly, but is good for orientation (daily: April-Sept 9am-7.30pm; Oct-March 9am-7pm; free). The Hawaii Maritime Center (daily 8.30am-5pm; \$7.50), just east of Aloha Tower, documents Hawaii's seafaring past in superb detail, from ancient migrations through to white contact, nineteenth-century trade and twentieth-century cruises. A stunning film from 1922 (with Clara Bow in a bit part) shows the true-life drama of whaling, and there's a wall of gigantic historic surfboards. In the adjacent dock are the fully rigged four-master Falls of Clyde and the replica Polynesian canoe Hokulea, whose voyages to Tahiti and New Zealand over the last two decades have inspired tremendous interest in traditional methods of navigation.

Though few tourists seem to know about it, Honolulu residents take great pride in the stunning fine art on display at the

Academy of Arts

, half a mile east of the capitol at 900 S Beretania St (Tues-Sat 10am-4.30pm, Sun 1-5pm; \$5). Highlights of the superb collection of paintings include Van Gogh's Wheat Field

, Gauguin's

Two Nudes on a Tahitian Beach

and one of Monet's

Water Lilies

. The Academy also holds some fascinating depictions of Hawaii by visiting artists, including a pencil sketch of Waikiki drawn in 1838, and vivid, stylized studies of Maui's Iao Valley and Hana coast by Georgia O'Keeffe, plus magnificent ancient Chinese ceramics and bronzes.