

# Escape

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## Jam-packed in Hawaii

### Waikiki crowds prompt Aussies to head away from isle of Oahu

JOHN BISHOP

IT'S a bit daunting when you tell someone you are going to Waikiki and their instant response is "you won't like it".

This happened to me at a conference on the US mainland. The other person ran a hotel catering for Aussies and Kiwis on the Hawaiian island of Maui.

Trouble is, he was right. It is 32 years since I was last in Honolulu and the biggest change in that time is that the place is now overwhelmed with tourists.

In 1986, the year of my last visit with a young family in tow, the place was merely crowded. Now it is packed, and this is not even high season.

"Don't go there," said another mate in the travel industry. Trouble was, I'd just been.

What's happened is that on Oahu, the main island where Waikiki and Honolulu are, the tourist industry is now geared to mass travel and large numbers; shopping malls have food courts filled with mostly Asian fast food outlets.

Nearly two million visitors came from Asia to Hawaii in 2017, nearly four times as the number from Canada and six times that from Australia.

The other problem is cost: Up to 90 per cent of the food consumed in Honolulu is imported from the American mainland in container ships arriving daily from Oakland, San Diego and Los Angeles.

The imported cost plus retail tax and service charges make Honolulu expensive for

any cash-strapped tourists. It costs a lot to eat, and that is without being extravagant.

Waikiki Beach still arouses the same iconic feelings as when I first visited back in 1980. This is still the town of the 1960s surfing movies, of Fabian, Sandra Dee, James Darren, Shelley Fabares and Tab Hunter.

Elvis Presley made a movie here (*Blue Hawaii*) and staged a huge comeback concert here (*Aloha from Hawaii* in 1973).

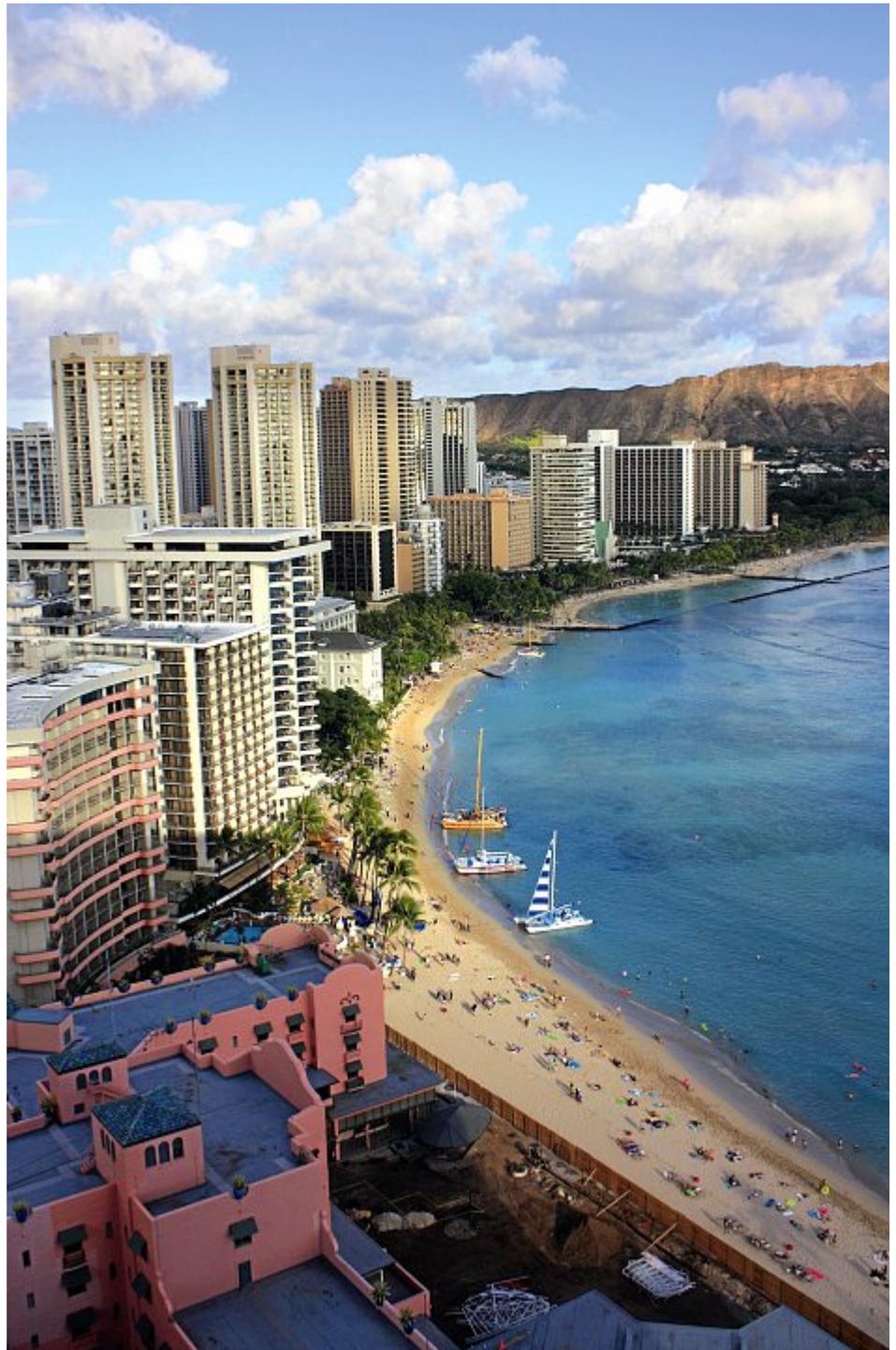
At my hotel and in Hilton Village next door, much is still made of the glory days of the past; of Duke Kahanamoku, the native Hawaiian who put surfing on the map, and of Chinn Ho, a local come-from-nothing entrepreneur, who built the Ilikai Hotel, which opened in 1964 as the largest condominium in the world.

The Ilikai is still doing business despite its limitations (poor internet and small pool for a start). In the 1960s there were extravagant stage shows in the 25th floor restaurant nightly.

Downtown the Ala Moana shopping centre is tired but still filled with luxury shops. There is a useful food court, a model duplicated in every shopping mall on the island.

On the plus side this is a reasonable family destination. The view from Diamond Head and Pali lookouts are still spectacular and the Museum of Art, the Bishop Museum and USS Arizona Memorial are still worth visiting.

John Bishop writes at [eatdrinktravel.co.nz](http://eatdrinktravel.co.nz)



**TIDE OF TOURISTS:** The famous Waikiki Beach, on Oahu, surrounded by high-rise buildings. Its modern vibe may suit some tourists but, if crowds aren't your thing, opt for another Hawaiian island. Photo: iStock