

DO THE LOCO MOCO

How to indulge yourself in Honolulu.

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It's my last day in Honolulu and I've finally summoned the courage to order the state's most famous dish. It's called loco moco and, honestly, it's ghastly. An anaemic hamburger patty squats on a bed of rice, swimming in gravy and topped with a fried egg. To the side, a scoop of "macaroni salad" — mayonnaise-soaked pasta elbows — congeals morosely.

I'm at the Rainbow Drive-In, a Honolulu landmark that's been serving loco moco since 1961. Around me, diners dig into "plate lunches" of katsu curry, pork long rice and chilli, all served with rice. This is cheap and generous comfort food, directly descended from the kind of meal leftovers plantation workers would bring to the fields for lunch during the 19th-century sugarcane boom.

To a non-Hawaiian palate, plate lunches like loco moco taste both familiar and strange. The odd pairings — Portuguese sausage with gravy, shoyu chicken with macaroni — reflect the state's unique multiculturalism better than a tourist brochure ever could. All across the state, locals — native Hawaiian, Asian American, Latino and Caucasian — sit down for lunches of saimin (a cross between Japanese ramen and Chinese chow mein), spam musubi (a scoop of rice and a block of fried spam, wrapped in nori seaweed), malasada burgers (kalua pulled pork on a sweet Portuguese malasada bun) and my favourite, the ubiquitous poke bowl — sesame, soy and chilli-marinated ahi (tuna) and avocado on rice: in 30-degree temperatures, a heck of a lot more appealing than fried eggs and gravy.

Hawaii is full of these quirky cultural collisions, especially on Oahu, the island known locally as "the gathering place" and home to around three-quarters of Hawaii's inhabitants. As far as a tropical paradise goes, it's surprisingly full of small but excellent museums and galleries, food markets — check out the monthly block party-style night market and the Eat the Street "food truck rally", both in downtown Honolulu — and sophisticated restaurants and bars. And yet, with around 80 per cent of the population clustered around the city, it's just a short drive to spectacular landscapes and deserted white sand beaches.

One of the unsung glories of Hawaii is TheBus. Twice named America's Best Transit System, the state-wide bus network is comprehensive and very cheap. It'll cost you less than \$3 to get across the island to the laid-back beach town of Kailua, the incredible snorkelling at Hanauma Bay, or to wild waves of the North Shore, two hours by bus from central Honolulu. But it's a lot more fun in a car.

Most visitors to the North Shore choose to drive the Kamehameha Highway, which tracks the path of the lush Windward (eastern) Coast. Heading northeast across the island to Kailua before turning north saves you time, but we chose the (even more) scenic route, following the coastal road out of the affluent eastern Honolulu suburbs and around the island's southern coast.

By breakfast time we were in Waimanalo, just one more sleepy community hitched to a jaw-droppingly gorgeous beach, parking up outside the health-food-focused Sweet Home cafe.

If there's one thing Hawaiians love as much as plate lunches,

it's serving meals in bowls. With the sun yet to chase away the morning mist, it felt a bit too early for a bowl of raw-fish poke: we opted for an acai bowl (acai sorbet, topped with banana, coconut and granola) and another of locally grown poi, or sweetened mashed taro. Acai and poi look similar — they're both purple — but the naturally fermented sourness of the latter must be an acquired taste.

At only 71 km long, Oahu is relatively quick to traverse: if you're single-minded enough to ignore all those beaches, you can be in Haleiwa, the North Shore's largest town, in little over an hour. Unfortunately for our schedule, I'm as weak-willed as they come. Stops were made for many, many beach swims and for a photo op at the crash site of *Lost's* Oceanic 815 (and another dip in the sea).

We pulled over for spankingly fresh fish tacos — and, mere minutes later, for garlic fried shrimps (prawns) from one of the shrimp trucks strung along the North Shore highway (try Giovanni's). To celebrate our arrival at historic Haleiwa, dessert. Shave ice is a cup of powdery milled ice, topped with syrup and served with vanilla ice cream or adzuki bean paste.

Like plate lunches, shave ice is a remnant of Hawaii's sugar plantation days, introduced by workers brought from Japan, where it was a popular treat. The best shave ice shops make their own syrups using real fruit juice, as at Matsumoto Shave Ice, which has been serving Haleiwa's tourist trade since 1951.

The oversized hotels and Las Vegas-by-the-sea tackiness may make you cringe, but if you're a tourist in Honolulu, you're staying in Waikiki. A beach resort on steroids, Waikiki is a bizarre collision of the divine — that heavenly sweep of perfect golden sand! — and the profane: a mammon-worthy mix of high-rise hotels, chain restaurants, absurdly expensive luxury stores and piles of tiki-themed tourist tat.

But, still, those views! To get the best of them, stay in a waterfront hotel — but you'd better have deep pockets, especially at the luxurious Moana, built in 1901, and the Moorish-style Royal Hawaiian, built in 1927 and nicknamed the Pink Palace of the Pacific. A couple of blocks back from the sea, rooms are a lot more affordable. We stayed at the mid-priced Vive, which at just 22 storeys is considered a boutique hotel round these parts.

Low-rise or high, Waikiki's scores of hotels place a heavy burden on the city's energy infrastructure, which is almost entirely oil-dependent. There's no perfect solution, but a proposed seawater air-conditioning project is set to significantly ease Waikiki's energy demands. The whole thing is remarkably simple: a pipe taps frigid waters at a depth of about 550 metres, 8km offshore, and pumps it into a heat-exchange system to cool fresh water for air conditioning along the beachfront strip. The hotel industry, currently spending around 40 per cent of its energy outlay on air conditioning, is unsurprisingly enthusiastic.

At the northern end of Waikiki lies the coolly stylish Modern Hotel, which each year plays host to the showcase event of the Hawaiian Food and Wine Festival. For one evening only, star chefs from across America and the Pacific cook for the public at stations dotted around the hotel's two pools, the warm air lit by



A LIFEGUARD STAND WATCHES OVER A BEACH ON OAHU

glowing lanterns and candles.

The whole thing is so gorgeously telegenic, I half expected *Top Chef's* Padma and Tom to barge in front as I waited for my pork-belly lettuce wrap with cucumber-papaya kimchee. This year, our own Michael Meredith joins the culinary line-up alongside international draws like Charles Phan, of San Francisco's The Slanted Door, and Andy Ricker, owner/chef at Portland's Pok Pok.

Chef George Mavrothalassitis may not be as familiar a name, but he's a colossus in Hawaiian cuisine. Born and raised in Marseilles, the young chef arrived in Honolulu in the late 80s. "Food here was so boring," he told me with a shudder. "Gourmet restaurants served something called 'continental cuisine', full of butter and cream. Vegetables, fruit, fish — everything was shipped in frozen." He quotes a *Bon Appétit* story on Hawaii from around that time: "Enjoy your meal on the plane — it'll be the best you get on your trip."

Inspired by the growth of local-food movements across the

mainland US, Chef Mavro, as he's universally known, founded the Hawaiian Regional Cuisine network in 1991, alongside 12 other chefs who went on to kickstart a Hawaiian food revolution. The leonine Mavro has been dreaming up new ways to incorporate Hawaiian flavours into his cooking ever since — for the past 15 years at his eponymous restaurant on a nondescript downtown corner, far from the Waikiki hordes.

Mavro admits it's hard to attract tourists across town to his slightly dated restaurant; offering only degustation menus and wine matches (he doesn't offer a list — "People order the wrong wine!") surely doesn't help. But there's a reason those in the know save for months to eat at Chef Mavro. His is a dining experience that celebrates the foods of Hawaii in all their glorious diversity, from Molokai ogo (seaweed) to Aiea watercress ("the best in the world") to chocolate from Waialua Estate, on Oahu's North Shore. Local food, sourced fresh, cooked exquisitely. And, thank god, not a loco moco in sight. M

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Hawaiian Airlines flies nonstop from Auckland to Honolulu three times a week. hawaiianairlines.com

The 4th annual Hawai'i Food and Wine Festival runs August 29–September 7, 2014. hawaiiifoodandwinefestival.com
Vive Hotel, rates from \$186 a night. vivehotelwaikiki.com
Chef Mavro, chefmavro.com

CATHERINE MCGREGOR TRAVELLED TO OAHU COURTESY OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES.