

ABAC Goes to Hawaii

July 2003

By Mike Chason, Director of Public Relations, ABAC

Aloha! In Hawaii, they really do say it. A lot. It's the Hawaiian form of hello and goodbye. After experiencing Hawaii firsthand, I can tell you it's a lot easier to say hello than goodbye to the land of hula, coconuts, palm trees that really sway, volcanoes, rain forests, orchid farms, and golden sand beaches.

Last month, Katrina Williams from the Public Service and Business Outreach Center at Abraham Baldwin College led the annual continuing education summer expedition to a place that boggles the imagination, floods the mind with postcard-like images everywhere you turn, and leaves you with a sense that if this place is not paradise, it's real close.

My wife, Kris, and I had journeyed twice with the PSBOC. In 2000, we went to England, France, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany on a wonderful eight-day whirlwind tour. Last year, we traveled to England, Ireland, and Scotland on a terrific trip that I had dreamed about since childhood. This year's trip topped them all. It was Hawaii!

Here's a day-by-by snapshot of my most fascinating travel experience ever:

Day 1: Chartered bus rolls out of ABAC parking lot at 4:30 a.m. headed for Atlanta. Much more security than last year. Shoes off to go through scanner. Ninety minutes to a lovely Detroit airport. Then just over four hours to Seattle where the magnificent Mt. Rainier looms in the background. Finally, we settle back for another five-hour ride over the blue Pacific to Honolulu where the time is six hours behind Tifton.

Aloha! We land on America's only island state which lies 2,400 miles southwest of the mainland. Hawaii itself actually includes 132 islands. We'll visit three of them, Oahu where Honolulu is located, Maui, and the big island of Hawaii. leis made with real flowers for everyone as we get off the plane.

On to the hotel located only two blocks from world famous Waikiki Beach. Lots of palm trees but no native huts because Honolulu is a big, bustling city with skyscrapers and thousands of people, half of them wearing shorts and the famous flowered shirts.

The temperature is perfect, 81 degrees with a light breeze. In fact, my new career is going to be a television weather forecaster in Hawaii. What's the forecast for tomorrow? Perfect. What's the forecast for next week? Perfect. Average year round temperature, 76 degrees. Locals say they have never felt the temperature go below 60 degrees.

Day 2: We breakfast on fresh pineapple at an outdoor café. No flies, No gnats. Perfect. Tour bus rolls through downtown Honolulu and on to Pearl Harbor.

We look out across the bay and think of a quiet, blue-sky Sunday morning on Dec. 7, 1941. A 33-ship Japanese task force waited completely undetected 200 miles from Oahu. The country with the rising sun on its flag was about to set the world on fire.

The museum's video on the "Day of Infamy" brings chills and tears. We board a U.S. Navy boat to ride out into the harbor to see the USS Arizona memorial. Looking over the side of the uniquely designed white monument, it's easy to see the big battleship lying directly underneath. Oil continues to seep from the ship which still entombs over 1,100 brave men who went to a watery grave only nine minutes after the attack began. The Stars and Stripes wave smartly in the breeze as tourist chatter fades, and the only sound is the click of camera shutters.

Bus tour continues with a drive through the Punchbowl Cemetery, an extinct volcano crater that now serves as the National Memorial of the Pacific, where more than 18,000 war casualties are buried. We see Aloha Stadium, home of the Rainbow Warriors of the University of Hawaii. Coach June Jones just got a new million dollar contract. Like Georgians, Hawaiians are proud of their college football team.

Day ends with a luau on the shores of the Pacific. Genuine hula dancers try to teach us the dance but for some reason our hips don't get the message. Hawaiians say hula tells the story through the hands, but I can tell you, nobody's looking at the hands of these grass-skirted beauties.

Day 3: Fantastic bus tour of entire island includes a stop at Kuala Farms where my wife drinks the juice from a ripe coconut which the attendant slices open with a machete. Mountaintop view overlooking the town of Kailua is sensational with Pacific stretching out in the background. Twenty-five percent of Hawaii's population involves the military. Only one percent of the people are native Hawaiians.

Birds of Paradise flowers grow wild here. We visit Polynesian Cultural Center which showcases history of South Pacific. Samoa performer is amazing as he creates fire the way Tom Hanks did in "Castaway." He says Hanks could have gotten it done faster but he used the wrong kind of wood: Hollywood.

Stop for a picture at the famous "Banzai Pipeline" beach on the North Shore. We expect surfers and monster waves. We see a giant blue lake called the Pacific. I've seen bigger ripples on Lake Baldwin. Our guide explains that the 25 to 30 feet waves abound from November through March. Pass by Waimea Bay, another great surfing destination.

Dole Pineapple Plantation one of my favorite stops. Three crops of pineapples come off one plant at 20 months, 34 months, and 45 months. Pineapples grow on top of the ground, not in trees. Each plant harvested by hand in the red soil of Oahu.

Top off the day with moonlight dinner on Waikiki Beach with sea spray misting on our table. Only in Hawaii.

Day 4: Up early for flight to Maui, second largest island in the chain created by eruptions of two volcanoes. My wife arranges 45-minute helicopter trip around the island which includes a peak into the Haleakala crater, the world's largest inactive volcano. She loves it, I get a little queasy. Spectacular view of waterfalls, lush green vegetation, and the ocean that's bluer than the eyes of a blonde-haired high school cheerleader.

Close out the day with walk on golden sand beach located only 30 yards from our hotel room door in Lahaina. If God created Heaven on earth, He would call it Maui.

Day 5: Monday in Maui! Fresh fruit breakfast overlooking beach which is already attracting snorkelers and parasail daredevils. Bus tour guide took tourism course at Maui Community College. Must have been honor grad because he entralls us on 38-mile trip to top of Haleakala volcano.

Groups of bicyclists coming down the mountain as we go up. They coast for all but 400 yards the whole way down on a two-lane road, which is filled with tour buses and oncoming cars. Not me, baby.

Cattle grazing on hills. Hawaiians brought in Mexican cowboys to show them how to take care of cows. Flower farms 3,500 feet up give way to macadamia nut trees, which take 10 years to bear their first crop. Century plants, orchids, oleanders, rhododendrums, protea, and even wild poinsettias dot the hillside along with the mysterious silversword, which blooms only once and only in this location.

Ring of clouds around the volcano at 8,000 feet. View from the top is awesome. Crater itself looks like a moonscape.

Down the mountain and on to one of my favorite stops, Iao Valley State Park where Jurassic Park and several other movies were filmed. Gets 400 inches of rain a year. Great history lesson on how Captain James Cook discovered the islands but was later killed by the natives. Every Hawaiian name ends in a vowel. King Kamehameha united the islands as one country. Became 50th state in 1959.

Day 6: Up at 5:45 a.m. to try to catch the sunrise on Maui on video. No seagulls because there is very little change when the tide is in or out. Nothing for them to eat. Some people describe Maui in Hawaiian, no ka oi, which means "simply the best." I agree.

We fly to the Big Island of Hawaii, famous for lots of volcanoes and a black sand beach. Stay at a wonderful oceanside resort at Kona. Airport carved out of a gigantic lava field. Jagged black rock everywhere as lava leaves a souvenir where nothing grows for 50 years when the magma oozes out of the ground and devastates everything in its path.

No beaches on this island. Waves crash right up on the rocks. We swim in a man-made lagoon under a sign that warns of sea urchins. Sunset lives up to all the hype. Giant orange orb nestles into the Pacific at 7 p.m. Breathtaking.

Day 7: Only place in the world with lava flow update signs. Yes, there is a volcano erupting on this island today, Kilauea pours forth lava on a regular basis, has been for 20 years. We see the steam vents at Volcano National Park, and we know the lava is there but we don't see funnel-shaped mountains gushing forth the earth's insides like the movies depict. Kilauea did have one eruption that shot lava higher than the Empire State Building. What we do see is the barren landscape where lava has left its mark.

Don't take home a lava rock. Supposed to be bad luck, and each year, the Park gets hundreds of pounds of rocks sent back via the U.S. mail. One of our group does take a helicopter ride and sees lava. We settle for a walk down a lava tube, which is an underground tunnel where lava flowed at one time. Eerie. What's so strange is that it sits in the middle of a rain forest where it rains for the first time on the trip.

Mauna Kea, another volcano, is really the tallest mountain in world. Half of its 30,000 feet below the ocean however. Scintillating 420-foot Akaka Falls looks like it came off a movie poster.

Ka Lae is southernmost point of U.S., farther south than Key West. Lots of coffee trees and macadamia nut trees. Cheapest land in Hawaii. One catch. It's in the path of a future lava flow. No snakes or spiders here but some mice who chew the sugar cane. Sugar companies brought in mongoose to eat the mice. Unfortunately, while the mouse is eating, the mongoose sleeps. When the mongoose eats, the mice sleep. Problem.

Parker Ranch covers 225,000 acres, some of it in old lava field. Rainbow appears for perfect Kodak moment. Purple flowers called Jacarandas grow wild. Kona home to fabulous Kona coffee and the famous Ironman Triathlon.

Black sand beach formed from volcanic ash. Sand doesn't leave a stain, it's just black. Huge sea turtle among beach boulders where people are actually sunbathing on the black sand and swimming in the rocks.

Day 8: Crystal clear day in Kona. No vog. Vog is formed by volcano smoke and clouds. Usually rolls in about 11 a.m. each day. My wife loves this island. Fly back to Oahu for a great afternoon of shopping.

Day 9: Snorkeling trip to Hanauma Bay. Where Elvis filmed "Blue Hawaii." Horseshoe-shaped lagoon with picture-perfect beach and palm trees.

Reef about 50 yards from water's edge. Rainbow colored fish, yellow fish, big fish, little fish. Like having your own aquarium. Unforgettable experience.

Friday night shopping at Macy's on Waikiki Beach. Down to the seashore itself for one unbelievable video shot with full moon shining over Diamond Head. Casts glow into water. No views like this in south Georgia.

Day 10: Surfers are out early at Waikiki on our last day in Hawaii. Stroll through International Bazaar and haggle with venders over souvenirs. Lunch on the beach. Air is so fresh. To airport. On to Los Angeles, then Memphis, and Atlanta. Flying all night. Aloha to paradise.

###