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THE ARTFUL DODGE

STEER AWAY FROM HAWAII'S BEACHES FOR A MOMENT
AND DISCOVER A VIBRANT ARTS SCENE.

(Travel)

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HONOLULU - Most vacation travelers arrive in Hawaii with an agenda configured in two prongs: recreation and vegetation. Only the ratio of time devoted to each is variable.

When these same people visit Paris or Athens or St. Petersburg or Kyoto, cultural tourism might be high on their priority lists. But in Hawaii? Hedonism is more the rule, with a chair for the sand, an umbrella for the drink, smooth water for the kayak. The thought of venturing into a downtown museum of fine art or a major performance hall probably doesn't register with most visitors.

Which is a pity, because Honolulu's arts offerings are not the least bit vapid - surprising, perhaps, in a land known for loco moco breakfasts, surfing competitions, barefoot bars and the hang-loose wave.

In fact, the arts scene is impressively robust, ranging from exhibitions of Asian antiquities to modern ceramic sculpture, from opera - with island- born talent - to an ambitious symphony.

Arts in Hawaii reflect the dramatic convergence of influences experienced over the last 223 years by this tiny chain of islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

After British Capt. James Cook bumped into the islands in 1778, Hawaii ceased to be a remote, isolated world. The parade of early visitors included whalers, traders, missionaries and the entrepreneurial offspring of missionaries who established sugar and pineapple plantations and cattle ranches. In turn, these enterprises required workers, and they poured in from Japan, China and the Philippines.

As a result, Hawaii's fine art is a lively, cross-cultural stew. And one of the best places to survey it is at the Hawaii Gallery, which opened two months ago at the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

The museum is downtown, on South Beretania Street - a long way from the beach, yes, but you might enjoy this radical change of pace. The Hawaii Gallery, located on the second floor of the just-opened Henry R. Luce Wing, is devoted to a pictorial record of the islands.

But as you stroll among the works, a realization slams home: This is largely an outsider's record. At the time of European contact, Hawaii's indigenous people were not sketching pictures of beach scenes or painting portraits of each other. They were too busy scratching out a subsistence.

So this artistic observation became the province of the visitors, and as such you can't help thinking the perspective of island life and landscape was slightly askew.

John Webber, for example, was an expedition artist who accompanied Cook. One of his works on display is a sketch of a Hawaiian male, posing ridiculously with a curved British saber.

On the other side of the museum, in the East Meets West galleries, is a painting - ostensibly of Kealahou Bay on the Big Island - by Frenchman Jean Gabriel Charvet, who was inspired by Webber's drawings. The work, "Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique," is a patent absurdity, in that the native people resemble Indians of the American Northeast and are clad in togas, the volcano in the distance bears a suspicious resemblance to Italy's Mount Vesuvius, and the bunches of bananas on the trees are growing upside down.

Many of the artists who came to Hawaii, however, were clearly beguiled by its beauty, and they are almost reverential in their depictions of it.

The Hawaii Gallery includes paintings by Jules Tavernier of France, who was fascinated by Hawaii's volcanoes, and American modernist Georgia O'Keeffe, who was brought to Hawaii by the Dole company to paint pictures of pineapples "but painted everything but pineapples," according to academy spokeswoman Charlene Aldinger. The most prominent O'Keeffe work on display is "Hawaii: Waterfall, End of Road," which she produced in 1939 after a visit to Maui's Iao Valley.

Island-born artists are weighing in more and more with their impressions of the land. The first floor of the Luce Gallery is used for temporary exhibits, and the annual "Artists of Hawaii 2001" show opened last Thursday, to run through Aug. 26. It will be followed by "Legacy: Facets of Island Modernism" (Sept. 13-Oct. 21), which will concentrate on the work of senior Japanese artists in Hawaii.

The older items of indigenous art on display at the academy, as at Honolulu's Bishop Museum, reflect day-to-day native life: tapa cloth, koa-wood calabashes, leis made of feathers, shells or human hair. There is also a glorious red-and-gold cape, made from the feathers of tiny tropical birds as an adornment for a Hawaiian king.

Because of the strong Asian influences on Hawaii's culture, it's probably appropriate that this museum has an extensive collection of works from Japan, China, Korea, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands. They include Japanese ukiyo-e woodblock prints (most collected by author James A. Michener), kimono fragments that date to the 17th century, Chinese paintings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, and Korean ceramic bowls and wine jars.

In a distant corner of the Pan Asian Buddhist Gallery is "Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva," a circa-1025 statue from China. The figure is seated so casually, and is lit so dimly, you might hesitate an instant, momentarily convinced that it is a living being about to rise.

One nice feature of the Honolulu Academy of Arts is that its design is closely intertwined with the outdoors - important in a land of perpetually mild days and clear skies. Its galleries are configured around six inner courtyards, which reflect the themes of the art exhibitions nearby. These are ideal locations for a moment of peace or contemplation.

Another Honolulu art museum that has impressive outdoor grounds is the Contemporary Museum, which is situated high in the hills above the city. This was prime real estate when it was built in 1925 to be a home for Anna Rice Cooke, founder of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

It is devoted to works created since 1940, from every medium imaginable. The primary exhibition space is devoted to one type of art - in the case of our visit, American drawings, some of which appeared no more sophisticated than doodles or a child's crayon scrawls - so if the theme doesn't resonate with you, you're out of luck.

But the grounds are remarkable, with kinetic and ceramic sculptures, mature gardens, and a terrific view of Diamond Head and the Waikiki skyline from the museum's upper terrace. Sometimes, the intricate and symmetrical monkeypod trees appear to be sculptures themselves.

As you walk the complex, it seems unfathomable that this used to be someone's home.

Another exhibit that was found to be intriguing was a walk-in environment by David Hockney based on the sets and costumes he once designed for operas. This one is devoted to Maurice Ravel's "L'Enfant et les Sortilèges," a child's tale of enchantment featuring a black cat, a princess, wallpaper figures that come to life and furniture that sings.

The opera plays continuously in the exhibit, and at least one little visitor, wearing only a diaper and a T-shirt, found it to be an altogether spooky place. She stepped tentatively through the door, then asked her dad, "Are there ghosts in here?" (Actually, according to the libretto, yes.)

Another stop on the arts trail that should be included is the University of Hawaii. At various times of the year, its 4,200-square-foot Art Gallery features work by art students, faculty and retired faculty. In early May, the exhibit was of sculptures created by students who were due to graduate with bachelor's degrees in fine arts. It reflected the equal mix of enthusiasm and iconoclasm so common to the breed, and was great fun to peruse.

This fall, the UH Art Gallery will exhibit "Theatre de la Mode," miniature French fashion mannequins displayed in stage settings (Oct. 7- Dec. 21).

A short distance across campus is the John Young Museum of Art, yet another facility that celebrates Hawaii's intimate ties with Asia and the Pacific Island nations. Here, you'll find such antiquities as a "Guardian Lion" statue roaring to life from Cambodia's Khmer era of the 11th through 13th centuries, or Chinese pottery jars that are more than 4,000 years old.

The courtyard water garden is also a pleasant place to wander out into the sunlight.

The melding of cultures that is Hawaii's art scene was never more evident than at the Hawaii Theatre Center one Sunday afternoon in May.

The afternoon's program was a recital by soprano Helen Donath, and it was such a treat to see local residents turned out in their fine arts finery - women in brilliant floral muumuus, adorned with flowers in their hair and shell leis, men in light-colored sport coats or aloha shirts.

Donath, who previously played the governess in a Los Angeles Music Center Opera production of "Turn of the Screw," won over her audience in the first hour, singing in four different languages (English, German, Spanish, Hawaiian) before she even reached intermission.

She remarked on the "very beautiful words" of the Hawaiian tongue, and added, "Please bear with me if I massacre them," then proceeded to sing three songs written by Queen Liliuokalani with such tender emotion that she nearly brought down the house.

After intermission, she sang duets with Lea Woods Friedman and Quinn Kamakanalani Kelsey, two Hawaii-born opera singers. Kelsey, a barrel-chested University of Hawaii student with a ponytail halfway down his back, was then given a chance to perform a solo, and delivered a high-energy rendition of "The Toreador March" from Georges Bizet's "Carmen."

The moment exemplified the exhilarating diversity that is the Honolulu arts scene: In Chinatown, at an opulent art deco theater built by American tycoons in the 1920s, a soprano from Texas introduces a bass-baritone from Hawaii who sings in French about Spanish bullfighters while accompanied by a German pianist.

In the face of this, who needs nonstop beach time?

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