



Posted on: Tuesday, January 9, 2007

Winter in the Islands is a surfer's mecca

By Jon Letman
Special to The Advertiser

Kaua'i — Winter waves provide some of the best reasons to appreciate Hawai'i.

In the absence of heavy rains and blustery winter storms, the winter season can boast clear, cool nights, sunny days with steady trade winds and mornings that break in a whisper of pink and orange altocumulus clouds.

Here on Kaua'i, Kawaikini on Wai'ale'ale, the Garden Island's highest peak, so often enshrouded in clouds, can be seen towering against deep blue skies like crisp paper cut-outs.

By Christmas, the first big swells of the season have hit the north shore, transforming beaches like Kaua'i's Tunnels and Pine Trees into a surfer's mecca. North Pacific winter storms generate massive swells that travel in sets 3,000 miles across the ocean.

Because Hawai'i has no broad, shallow shelves or protective fringing reefs to slow the swells, the waves are smooth and free of chop, slamming into the Islands with explosive force.

During this season, locals anticipate the arrival of waves with faces (the measurement from the top of the wave crest to the low part of the trough in front of the wave) that exceed 35 feet.

These enormous waves can produce unusually high tides, threatening property and coastal roads, but also inspire surf contests like the Quiksilver Big Wave Invitational in Memory of Eddie Aikau at Waimea Bay. Competitions are held when waves exceed 20 feet, and attract surfers from around the world. There have been only seven contests since the Aikau's inception in 1986.

The last "Eddie" was held in December 2004 and won by Kaua'i surfer Bruce Irons, riding waves more than 40 feet high.

Last month, in what was reported to be only the fourth occurrence since 1980, an out-of-season southern swell brought high winter surf to south-facing shores.

All day long, in front of the Prince Kuhio (P.K.'s) surf point in Po'ipu, local surfers, tourists and wave watchers gathered to admire the clean, even sets of unexpected winter surf rolling in from the south. Unlike O'ahu's north shore, which becomes notoriously backed up with throngs of people who come to watch the surf, the scene at P.K.'s was lively and festive, but not crowded.

Locals leaned against pickup trucks, drawing beer from cold green bottles. A grizzled surfer plucked at a guitar, and pet dogs sniffed the salty air. One surfer stood alone with his palms pressed together before his chest, his eyes closed calmly in zen-like meditation before taking to the water.

Tourists, happy to have left the snow and cold behind, watched from a grassy lawn,



The Islands' north shores get stunning waves in the winter.

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Surf-watchers gather on a bluff over Hanalei Bay, Kaua'i, to admire 30-foot high waves. Big surf in the Islands, especially during the winter season, is a magnet for locals and tourists alike.

Jon Letman

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Just then, a sudden rain shower fell from an otherwise flawless blue sky, casting a rainbow over the sudden splash of a tale-slapping humpback whale. Thundering waves of blue and white sent bursts of spray skyward. Surfers rode grand sweeping waves into the late afternoon.

Near Po'ipu's landmark Spouting Horn, a 92-year-old visitor from Wisconsin gazed out at the sea. "This is as close as I'll ever get to paradise," she said.

The rare southern swell has passed, but more big waves may yet reach north- and west-facing shores.

From Po'ipu to Polihale, north to Hanalei, east to Kealia Beach and south to Shipwreck Beach, waves crash turbulently against the shore, yet they have a calming effect and, like all high surf, bring an ethereal, fleeting quality to the Islands.

In this season, we change our calendars to mark the end of one year and the beginning of the next. Yet perched high on a north shore bluff or seated on the sandstone cliffs at Maha'ulepu, watching the surf, the waves reveal themselves as infinite, stretching beyond time.

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