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At the North Shore, the surf is always up

By Maribeth Mellin

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KAHUKU, OAHU, HAWAII – The guy behind me in the line at the front desk carried two surfboards and a small duffel bag. Other boards were stacked along the walls by the bellman's desk. Most everyone in the lobby was barefoot, bronzed and buff. I felt like I'd stumbled onto an "Endless Summer" set.

The surf was up on Oahu's North Shore, as it is every December. Pro surfers from South Africa, Australia and Southern California were competing on the 15-foot waves at Haleiwa, the Pipeline and Sunset Beach. I hadn't considered that fact when booking a surf lesson before arriving at the Turtle Bay Resort. I figured it would be just a little lark, a chance to get wet and test my balance.



Maribeth Mellin

This is what draws people to Oahu's North Shore: the surf. The best of the best in the surfing world have contests there. And the not-so-good can get lessons.

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Before going any further, let me clear up one thing. This is not a story about how a surfer wanna-be conquered the waves with amazing speed and agility. I did not end up grinning with pride and glee. Let's just say I'm glad there weren't many witnesses.

Our three-night stay on the North Shore was a bit of a lark itself. I'd tacked it on to a weeklong time-share trip to Oahu. We'd be staying in a high-rise condo tower in Honolulu, visiting our grandson who'd moved from San Diego to go to college in Hawaii. I decided my husband and I needed a full-blown change of pace before joining the crowds at Waikiki.

Turtle Bay is one of those endearing, sprawling, low-key resorts one finds in Hawaii (if you look hard enough). The six-story hotel sits above beaches and waves at the edge of an 880-acre former sugar-cane plantation. The buildings and rooms have been updated several times since Del Webb opened the hotel in 1972. Most recently, ongoing \$70 million renovation has spiffed up the accommodations and added oceanfront villas and a tropical spa. Our room had comfy beds, a small balcony overlooking the beach and plumeria-scented toiletries. We arrived just in time to worship the sunset with our fellow guests on the rocks at Kuilima Point overlooking a pod of surfers jockeying for takeoff on ever-larger waves.

After fueling up on divine macadamia-nut sticky rolls and coffee at the breakfast buffet the next morning, I headed out to Haleiwa with an extremely buff, young surfing instructor. After gesturing at a very large long board, he headed across the parking lot to the beach, which looked miles away. It took several tries for me to even figure out how heft the thing – I couldn't even get my arms around it. I gained a whole new respect for the surfers I see lugging their boards around San Diego's Ocean Beach.

**Once on the sand,
we quickly
practiced the
jumps and steps
one is supposed to**

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glide through to stand upright on a board. My fellow students looked bored, like they'd been there before. Then we were told to paddle far, far out to the break. I hadn't thought this through. I'd assumed the instructor would paddle the board, then push it into a wave after I'd climbed on. I didn't want to learn how to be a hard-core, fanatic surfer. I just wanted to ride one wave.



It didn't turn out that way. I paddled and paddled till I got board rash on my arms and fell off every time a wave came along. I vaguely remember clambering to my feet and standing Cro-Magnon-style atop a gentle wave. It was kind of like the green flash – gone the second it appeared. All I could think of was the massage I had scheduled for that evening. I'd need a lot of lomi-lomi and an elbow in my trapezius.

The rest of our stay was far less strenuous. Even the shark-diving excursion was tame compared with surfing. We walked some of the resort's 12 miles of trails, past horse stables, an old lighthouse and a gorgeous big bay. Green turtles swam in clear waters beside the trails, and somewhere off in the distance golfers followed their balls around the resort's two championship courses.

Our grandson, Christopher Holden (who grew up in OB and Santee), joined us to watch the surf competition at the Pipeline one morning. I could not believe so many people could sit on the beach so quietly for hours. It was 8 in the morning, of course, and there wasn't a Starbucks in sight. We watched Andy Irons, Pancho Sullivan, Kelly Slater and other top surfers blast through tunnels that looked like they could swallow the whole beach. The crowd was in awe, as if

watching a sacred ceremony.

Between sets I asked Chris why he'd moved from San Diego to Hawaii when he could surf every morning at Tourmaline. His look plainly said "Duh."

"Everybody wants to be here," he said. "There's always been a surfing scene. It's part of the culture. Everybody's pretty much at least tried it."

I felt better about my surf lesson. After all, I kind of rode a wave in the place Chris called "the surfing mecca." Now I never have to paddle a surfboard again.

Information: Hans Hedemann Surf School (six locations on Oahu) (888) 349-7888

Turtle Bay Resort: (800) 203-3650, www.turtlebayresort.com

Oahu tourism: www.gohawaii.com; (800) 464-2924

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