



Hawaii had been on my bucket list forever. Now with a big birthday looming, it was time to figure out what those little blotches in the middle of the Pacific Ocean were all about.



Checking Hawaii off the Bucket List

Diamond Head—Oahu's iconic mountain that is actually a crater—looms large and proved irresistible for us the first morning. It's actually a National Historic Park, and for a dollar, you can hike up to the top and get a breath-taking view of Waikiki and Honolulu. (If you are prone to claustrophobia, be forewarned: there is a 50-yard tunnel near the top of the hike that could play tricks on you.) What a view! The deep blue water of the Pacific Ocean to the left and the shiny extended skyline of Waikiki and Honolulu to the right.

Our hotel, **Aqua Palms**, was in a perfect location. We were able to walk anywhere—close to the beach, the park, and good restaurants. The helpful concierge suggested we check out the activities offered by the Waikiki Rigger, a championship racing catamaran that offered everything from off-shore snorkeling (turtles and trigger fish) to a high-speed sail, to a relaxing afternoon sunset cruise (unlimited drinks and good music). Afterward we had a lobster dinner at the nearby Shore Bird restaurant in the Outrigger Hotel. We sat along the open windows and watched the sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

Trivia: Hawaii is the most isolated population center on Earth, 2390 miles from California and 3850 miles from Japan. It is the widest state—and southern-most in the U.S., and is the only state that grows coffee.

The next morning we headed for the number one visitor destination in Hawaii—**Pearl Harbor**. Visitors are shown an emotional half-hour documentary that sets the mood before shuttling across the harbor to the rectangular memorial that is built over the remains of the **USS Arizona**, the final resting place for many of the 1,177 crewman killed on December 7, 1941. You can look down and still see the ship,

as well as oil still floating away from the vessel.

Our final night on Oahu was spent at a much different historic destination. **Tropics Bar & Grill** is well-known for being frequently depicted on the new *Hawaii 5-0* television series. It's in the Hilton Hawaiian Village in one of the most active strips along Waikiki Beach. The dinner, service, and even the entertainer, **Starr Kalahiki** (think Sade)—were excellent.

Oahu complete, we went back to the Honolulu airport and took a half-hour shuttle flight to the "Big Island" of Hawaii. We stayed at the beautiful Hilton Waikoloa Village in Hilo, a 1,241 room resort on 62 acres adjacent to the Pacific Ocean. It's exactly where you want to stay when you come to the Big Island. A beautiful large spa, several pools, a

recreational lagoon with kayaking, snorkeling and paddle board, as well as a kids camp, and the most popular attraction **Dolphin Quest**. My bucket list is getting shorter by the day!

The resort is enhancing its tennis program and the head pro is the right man for the job. **Tim DiDonato** has a larger-than-life personality and has taught everyone from **President George Herbert Walker Bush**, to **Tony Bennett** to **Nicole Kidman**. He told me about a dozen other names that can't be published due to confidentiality waivers. (He did tell me a story about a super model who drew a paparazzi camouflaged in black against the lava rocks.) Tim conducts daily clinics for players of all levels and has a very encouraging way about him. He was kind enough to hit with me and quickly diagnosed a problem with my two-handed backhand.



Ray Collins and Tim DiDonato

- He suggested I use my left hand more on my backhand. It helped. He also told me to pull through the ball. I'm not exactly sure what that meant, but the image helped drive the ball better.
- He had a unique tip for getting the ball deeper: He said to aim for the base of the fence.
- He also thought my stance was too far sideways on the serve.

The helpful clerks in the tennis pro shop are willing to line up matches with other guests who are also looking for games.

The resort has access to two nearby golf courses—**Kings Course** and **Beach Course**—and free shuttle rides. I rented clubs at the golf pro shop and was set up with three nice guys who were also there on vacation. It was unique playing alongside lava fields, as well as a view of the Pacific Ocean and mountains nearby. All things you don't see much in Florida! One thing that didn't change—my erratic golf game, but I digress.

Something else you don't see much in Florida—whales! We went on a sunset cruise/whale-watch with the fine folks of Ocean Sports. Fortunately, we were there during the peak of whale-viewing season and caught glimpses of the large mammals cresting randomly around the 65-foot catamaran. The excursion includes a buffet and open bar. A fun way to meet new people, too.

The best dinner we had was at Kamuela Provision Company or KPC. Actually it may be the best dinner I've had anywhere. Picture this—sitting along a bluff with a panoramic view of the ocean and the setting sun, framed by torch lights and palm trees, with impeccable service. I had steamed lobster tail and filet mignon. We had a night-cap in the Malolo Lounge (named after the **SS Malolo** which sailed from San Francisco to Hawaii in 1927).

History, fun, and relaxation. We got it all in this trip. Where's my pen? I have to check "Hawaii" off my bucket list!

For more information, visit: HiltonWaikoloaVillage.com, AquaResorts.com, WaikikiBeachSailing.com, ShoreBirdWaikiki.com, HiltonHawaiianVillage.com, and PacificHistoricParks.org.



Ray Collins is a communications consultant in Sarasota. More details at www.RayCollinsMedia.com.

