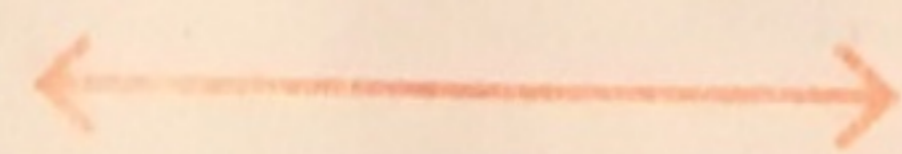


GREAT GETAWAYS



NEW HAWAII

Away from the bloat and bluster of Waikiki lives a city that's full of soul, style, and serious street cred.

Come see how the locals do Honolulu. By Peggy Orenstein



"IT'S

like L.A. here," my almost-12-year-old daughter observed, as we crawled through the inevitable Honolulu traffic toward our hotel. "Except pretty. With trees. And flowers."

A few minutes later, as we passed a strip mall anchored by a Jack in the Box and a 7-Eleven, she corrected herself. "No," she said. "It's like San Jose. But more interesting."

She changed her mind again as we passed a string of construction sites. "They're building so many skyscrapers here! So, I think it's more like San Francisco. But warm."

She was right. All three times. A lovelier L.A. A balmier San Francisco. A more compelling San Jose. I used to swear I would never write about my affection for Honolulu. I wanted to keep its secrets to myself. But with Honolulu's 4.8 million visitors a year, I suspect that particular horse is not only out of the barn, but also the barn itself has burned to the ground, been rebuilt, the horse caught, and escaped yet again.

Still, most of those millions stick to the concrete cavern that is Waikiki, where the beaches seem filled with more bodies than grains of sand. That, needless to say, is not my Honolulu. I'm not saying that I've found the proverbial little grass shack here. More like an urban paradise—one with fabulous restaurants, distinctive boutiques, and a lively arts scene, plus the opportunity for a morning dip in a cerulean sea. At its best, Honolulu mixes the high and low, the old and new—plus it blends Asian, American, and Polynesian culture in a way that is unique not only in

Hawaii, but in the world as well.

As we passed Kapiolani Park, under the cane-scented blooms of the shower trees, the traffic finally thinned out, the hawkers and buskers replaced by kids playing soccer and picnicking families. A slack-key guitar melody wafted toward us from the lobby of The New Otani hotel. My husband and I first stayed here nearly a quarter-century ago. Although it had been five years since our last visit, the bellhop grinned in recognition when he saw us. "It's been a while," he said. "Welcome back." We had timed our arrival for sunset; the view from our newly renovated room stretched from Diamond Head all the way across Waikiki Bay. The three of us stood side by side on the lanai, watching silently as the sky deepened from tangerine to lavender to indigo, the lights of the city flickering like stars on the water.

HONOLULU'S CHINATOWN was partially forged from the ballast stones that 19th-century whaling ships carried in their hulls to stay upright, but that didn't make the neighborhood more even-keeled. Two major fires, a bubonic plague epidemic, and strict immigration laws reduced the number of Chinese residents by World War II, leaving behind a warren of bars and brothels that enticed sailors on shore leave. As recently as the 1990s, Chinatown was still an area of dubious repute: A mix of old-school lei shops, divey restaurants, and produce markets during the day, it was, by night, blighted by drugs and homelessness. Tourists, for the most part, kept away.

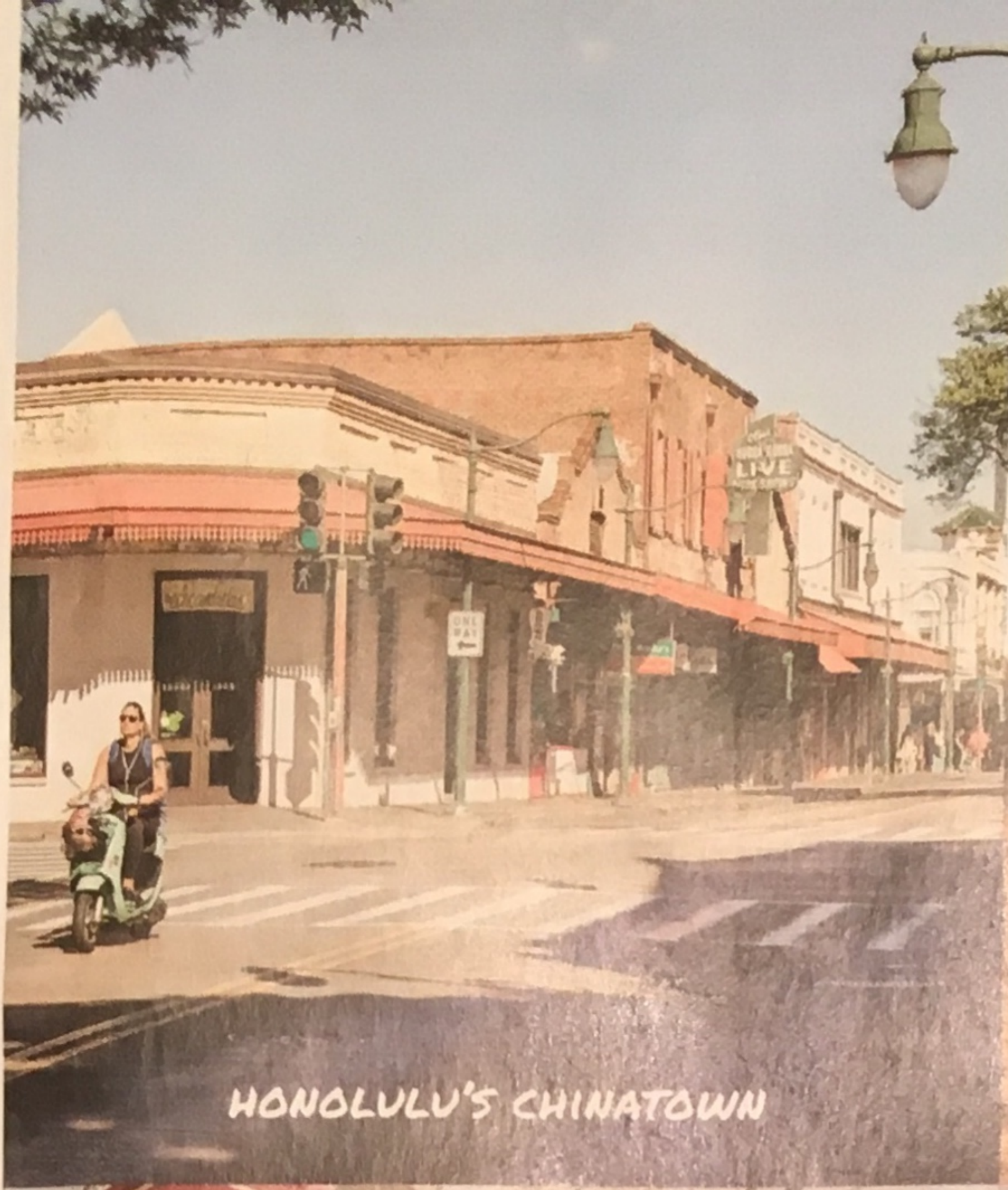
Over the last decade, though, the neighborhood has changed—a renaissance similar to those in the downtowns of Los Angeles and Oakland. The new crop of artists, chefs, and shopkeepers supports one another in the spirit of *ohana*—family, community—and are eager to talk story. We thought we would zip in and out of the neighborhood one morning, a cursory visit after a breakfast of dim sum at the classic Legend Seafood Restaurant. We ended up staying the whole day. At La Muse, a women's clothing and home store, a salesclerk regaled me with details about the artist (a pediatrician!)

whose drawings of leis I admired. Although I ultimately resisted, she somehow chatted me into a pair of linen trousers. My husband went for a tiny, whimsical wooden horse sculpture for his office. We stopped by In4mation, which caters to the skateboard, hip-hop crowd that set the Chinatown revival ticking. Nearby, designer Roberta Oaks had turned the aloha shirt—Hawaii's formalwear of choice—into something modern and stylish. At Fighting Eel, which carries locally designed clothing, my almost-12-year-old found a silky cream-and-black dress that was only a smidge inappropriate for Bay Area weather.

We passed Cake Envy—"cheesecakes so fabulous they make other desserts jealous"—three times before my willpower gave out. The shop features more than 100 flavors of cheesecake, although only eight are on offer on a given day. We chose lilikoi—which tasted clean and surprisingly light—and green tea, which was speckled with matcha. Both were, just as the humongous Barbie-pink script on the wall behind us claimed, "delish."

I could have spent a whole day in Hound & Quail, a curio shop owned by Mark Pei, a pilot, and his partner, Travis Flazer, a performing arts faculty member at Punahou School, President Obama's alma mater. It's chockablock with weird medical gear, Victorian natural-history objects, and mod furniture. A pair of old snowshoes leaned against a wall, anachronistic but sculptural. I lingered over shelves of preserved butterflies, bats, seashells, and birds. Pei, who finds the store's treasures during his travels, loves what he called "bad taxidermy," like the owl with its wings slightly askew, its feathers oddly mussed. He was eager to show me the basement, a cream-painted gallery space; highlighting the area's artists is part of Hound & Quail's commitment to the community. The store also hosts wine classes to lure people to the neighborhood at night. As we left, Pei pressed a guide to the new breed of businesses into my hand, reeling off a list of others we should visit. "We're all doing this together," he said.

We dithered over dinner: Should we try



HONOLULU'S CHINATOWN



LUCKY BELLY



WING ICE CREAM



THE SURFJACK HOTEL + SWIM CLUB



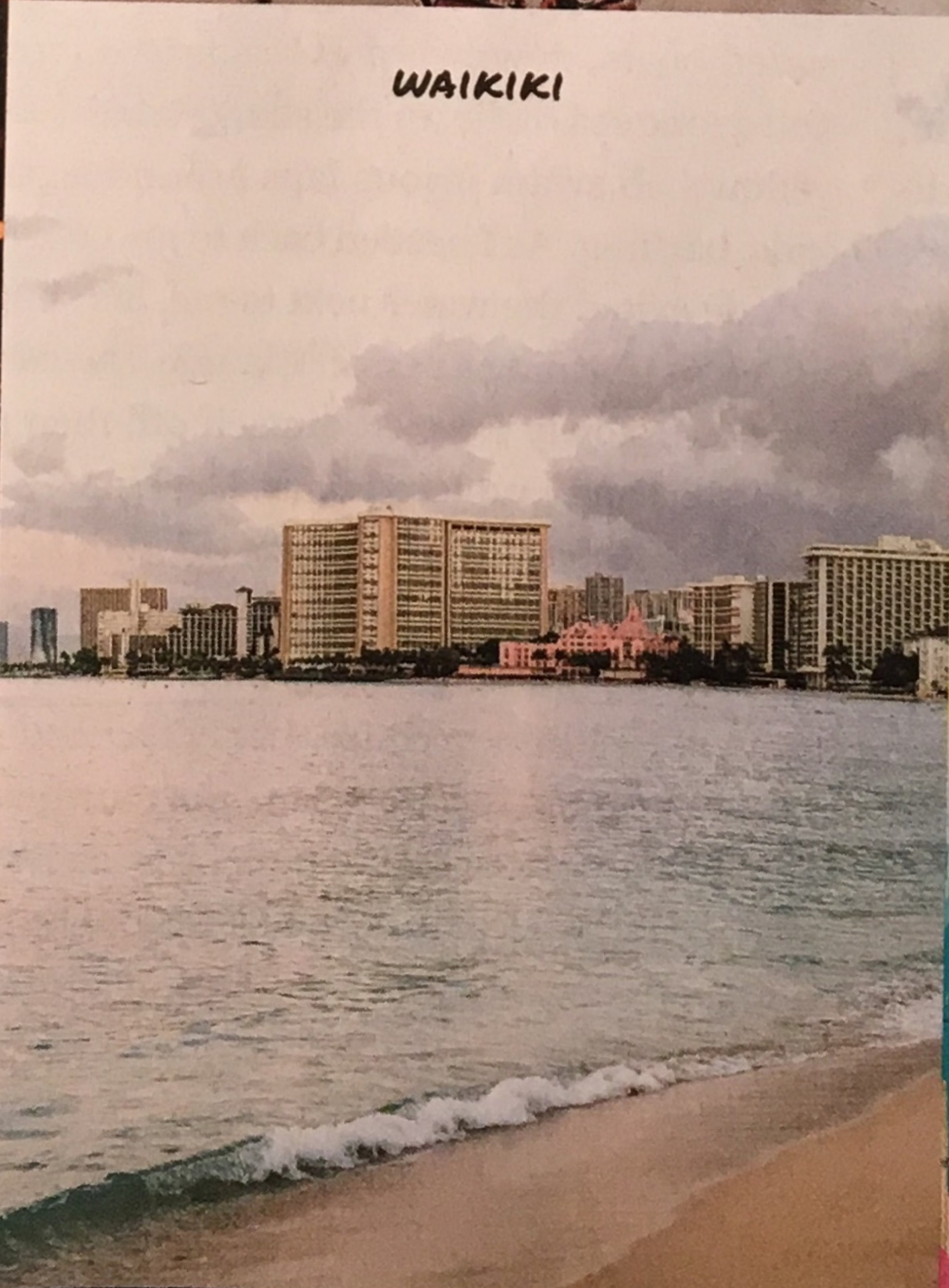
JULIA CHU OF LA MUSE



KAPIOLANI PARK



LUCKY BELLY



WAIKIKI



ARTIST JASPER WONG



MARK PEI (LEFT) AND TRAVIS FLAZER OF HOUND + QUAIL



THE ARTS AT MARKS GARAGE



THE SURFJACK HOTEL + SWIM CLUB

Andrew Le's modern take on Vietnamese family fare at The Pig and the Lady? The seasonally changing menu of "rustic American comfort food," at Livestock Tavern? We settled on Livestock's sister restaurant, Lucky Belly, a noodle bar with concrete floors and exposed brick walls. The 85° weather be damned; I'm a fool for ramen. I wasn't disappointed: My Belly Bowl—which featured pork belly, bacon, *and* sausage—was almost, but not quite, too much for me. My husband went for the more seemly House Bowl, with its toppings of soft egg, wakame, green onion, sesame, and ginger. My daughter, feeling sophisticated, went for the vegetarian Fungi Bowl, which, aside from maitake, *hon shimeji*, and shiitake mushrooms, included the magical-sounding porcini dust.

We ended our adventure at Wing Ice Cream, wedged between a lei shop and an herbal medicine purveyor. Its small-batch flavors are at once original and nostalgic, at least for locals: *ube* (sweet potato), coconut, mango, lemongrass, beet. The blue-haired owner, Miller Wing Royer, actually grew up in this neighborhood. He opened the shop for a simple reason: to try to make Chinatown a "happier place."

THE HAU TREE LANAI restaurant at the New Otani, under the same historic branches where Robert Louis Stevenson once lounged and wrote, used to be the height of elegance. These days, the restaurant's pink tablecloths feel endearingly retro and the space is often crowded (on the morning we

visited, it was packed with Japanese tourists, each of whom, for some reason, had ordered eggs Benedict). No matter. It is still a stunning spot. Nearby Sans Souci Beach (pictured on page 23), my favorite in Honolulu, is called "Dig Me" by locals for the pulchritude displayed by buff swim enthusiasts. The guys wear tight-fitting trunks; the women, serious training bikinis—none of those string-y thong-y things. They stroke methodically out past the wind sock that marks 250 meters from shore.

Sure, I could have done the same, but I was on *vacation*, so I took my morning plunge using snorkel and fins. Paddling around the wind sock, I gazed back at Ko'olau Range, out to sea at stripe-sailed boats, downward at brightly colored fish and a lone sea turtle. In the shallows near shore, a yellow Lab swam joyous laps around a group of kids, barking. As I headed back to my own family, a dude exited the water next to me, his shoulders and waist forming a perfect triangle. He stretched, strutted, slowly towed himself off, then pulled on a shirt and sauntered away. Dig him.

The KCC Saturday Farmers' Market at Kapiolani Community College near Diamond Head is famous for its morning bounty. And no question, it's fun, with its lush produce, richly flavored coffee, and *ono* grinds. But by 9 a.m., the tour buses are disgorging visitors by the hundreds, so it's also a mob scene. We slept in, and later that night, headed to the edgier, monthly Honolulu Night Market in yet another on-the-rise (*continued on page 31*)

WHERE TO STAY

Quiet

The **New Otani, Kaimana Beach Hotel** is an antidote to buzzy Waikiki. Rooms have private lanais, views of Diamond Head, and access to the restaurant where Robert Louis Stevenson came to write. From \$174; kaimana.com.

Artful

More than 30 local makers were behind the chic '60s look of the new **Surfjack Hotel & Swim Club**. Vintage designs from Tori Richard upholstery bed headboards, and custom-made wallpapers and murals boho out the space. From \$197; surfjack.com.

Classic

A distinguished timelessness still prevails at the 115-year-old **Moana Surfrider**. But a \$20 million makeover brings new comforts such as pillow-top beds and a beach club stocked with superfoods and juices. From \$325; moana-surfrider.com.



CLOTHING DESIGNER
ROBERTA OAKS



WAIKIKI

neighborhood. Once an ancient fishing village, Kaka'ako, near downtown Honolulu, was more lately given over to warehouses, light industry, and car-repair shops. Now, though, a new generation of artists, young entrepreneurs, chefs, and shopkeepers have turned the area into a mixed-use "urban island." Vibrant murals stretch across the sides of buildings, the work of local and international artists who've participated in Jasper Wong's community arts group, Pow! Wow! They reference Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and the street artist Banksy, and combine themes that are by turns whimsical, historical, fantastical, and political. In one, the late singer Israel Kamakawiwo'ole (who's behind that haunting, Hawaiian-style "Somewhere Over the Rainbow") stands wrapped in a white sarong, his powerful back to the viewer, looking at a heavenly sky. In another, a ferocious pink tiger chases a hammerhead shark, and yet another shows a beautiful blue wave teeming with sea life by Hitotzuki.

The Honolulu Night Market is a swirl of tattooed hipsters, parents with toddlers, and a smattering of senior citizens, all strolling under strings of Christmas lights. Inside an adjacent warehouse, pop-up shops sell clothing and jewelry, some for much lower prices than at their brick-and-mortar stores in the city's upscale

malls. We browsed fashions by Andy South, a *Project Runway* competitor, and watched a manicurist apply teddy-bear nail art to the fingers of a delighted child. Back outside, a band played. In a few hours, a fashion show would begin, all thumping beats and catwalking models, presenting the work of local designers to a raucously appreciative crowd.

We spent our last sunset on Oahu the way we had spent our first: watching the sky from our hotel room's lanai. Below us, we could see schoolchildren playing in Kapiolani Park, families packing up their gear on the beach. As the sky darkened, a fingernail moon rose, followed by the first planets. The city glittered with pinpoints of light. Suddenly we heard a *bang* and the red, blue, and green sparks of fireworks bloomed across the sky, exploding, drifting down, sputtering out. The unexpected display continued for the next 20 minutes or so as we watched, rapt. When it ended, with a final, percussive flourish, the kids in the park, the families on the beach, and the three of us applauded and cheered. It wasn't a quiet moment, definitely not serene or natural, but in its own way, it felt like paradise. 🌅

S **DIGITAL BONUS** For the best places to stay, eat, and play on the island: sunset.com/oahu.