

## The Luau

Sometime during the first trip to Hawaii, everyone must go to a luau. The luau is a tradition which combines palm trees, dancing, drums, grass skirts, the hula, poi, and roast pig. There is probably no image of Hawaii more iconic and colorful than swaying palm trees and hula dancers.

Jeannette and I made reservations to attend a luau on the last night of our stay on Kauai near Kapaau on the east side of the island. We anticipated the feast of roast pig and native entertainment all week. When Friday arrived, we were not disappointed. The colors of the Hawaiian costumes, the friendliness of the people, and the delicious food combined to make the evening a memorable one.

One feature I wasn't prepared for however, was the portrait of Jeannette and me at the end of the evening taken by a photographer upon entering the celebration. Jeannette had purchased brightly colored outfits to wear to the luau from Hilo Hattie's, a local clothing merchant. I sported a turquoise Hawaiian shirt with green palm fronds, and she wore a Mumu made of matching material. Her dress was floor length and my shirt were extra-large to allow the sea breeze to blow through. We entered the pavilion for the luau feeling swelt and ready to party with the locals. We felt our clothing wonderfully complimented the outfits the dancers wore.

When we retrieved the photograph at the end of the evening, we were shocked to see two plump, middle-aged tourists staring back at us in ridiculous-looking mock Hawaiian costumes. The contrast between our pudgy, pasty bodies and the tanned, lithe islanders who had entertained us was so stark, I immediately felt like crawling into a hole. Jeannette insisted we frame the 8x10 inch portrait when we returned home. I could only think of losing it somewhere on the way back to San Diego!

The beginning of a luau always starts with the blessing of the roast pig. Early in the morning on the day of a luau, a pig is prepared for roasting by stuffing it with fruit and spices, wrapping it in banana leaves, and burying in an underground pit full of hot coals. At the dinner the guests are invited to surround the pit for a blessing.

Because many Hawaiian ceremonies typically include hula dancing and strange costumes, torches, and pagan images, I expected to hear some strange incantation over the pig with war dancing and erotic swaying by hula dancers telling a story with their hands and hips. I was completely taken aback when an elderly Hawaiian man stepped forward and asked everyone to bow their heads for the blessing. He offered a simple, Christian prayer requesting God's blessing on the food and the people gathered around with his family. It was clear that he was a Christian who wanted to sincerely express his faith. I realized that the seeds planted by the Congregational missionaries who traveled from Boston to win the islanders to the Lord, so many years before had taken root!

The pit containing the pig was then uncovered, the leaves removed, and the pig carried by two young warriors on a bier to the dining area for feasting. The dining table was covered with roast pork, tropical fruit, various colored punches, and a large bowl of poi. Poi has the most disgusting flavor of any vegetable I've ever tried to eat. It's made by grinding the roots of the taro plant into a tasteless, purple, paste. It must be an acquired taste, like eating wallpaper glue! But, the remainder of the food was sumptuous!

Significant to our enjoyment of the festivities at the luau that evening was an incident that occurred earlier in the day. We visited Nurses Beach on the north shore of Kauai. This is the beautiful, small beach featured in the movie, *South Pacific*, where Mitzi Gaynor sang, "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair". It was enjoyable remembering the movie scene from one of the favorite plays Jeannette and I attended on dates twenty-five years before.

We wanted to swim at the beach during a short stop while driving along the north shore. Jeannette decided to relax on shore while I waded out to one of the distinctive rock outcrops at one side of the small bay. I climbed up on a shelf of rock that was being washed by small waves flowing in from the open ocean. The view from the rock looking back toward shore was beautiful - a sandy beach surrounded by a crescent of trees rising to a mountain capped by clouds. This was reminiscent of the mythical island of Bali Hi created by the cinematographers of *South Pacific* using optical trickery. They filmed the clouds over the mountain peak of Kuai and superimposed it over the ocean, making it look like a tropical island.

I was contemplating the scene before me when, unknown to me, a rogue wave was forming off shore. An important rule for beach goers is, "You never turn your back on the ocean." Unfortunately, I was so enthralled by the view and my recognition of how Bali Hi had been created, that I failed to sense the water rising around my ankles and legs. I turned just in time to catch a face full of water and a current that threatened to wash me off the shelf I was standing on. I reached out desperately to grasp a ledge to my right for dear life. The water rose over my head and nearly threw me off the shelf toward the shore.

The current slowed and then reversed direction, drawing me toward the ocean. It was all I could do to keep from losing my grip and being swept out to sea. I continued to cling to the ledge as the water level began to drop and the current decreased. My feet finally emerged from the water and I was able to catch my breath. I immediately looked for another wave that might submerge me again.

I saw no new waves forming on the ocean side. I quickly looked down to find a path off the rock and to safety, constantly keeping a nervous eye on the ocean. Because I hadn't worn any shoes, I had to be careful not to stumble or cut my feet. It was then I discovered that the wave had ripped off my glasses and left me with diminished vision.

I was able to work my way to the edge of the rock and was about to scramble off when Jeannette reached up and grabbed my hand. She had seen me searching for a path back to the beach and had come to investigate why I was taking so long. She offered to help me down to the sand while I explained that I had lost my glasses in a rogue wave and was having difficulty finding my way across the ledge. She hadn't seen the wave or my effort to escape the ocean.

Once I recovered, Jeannette drove us back to our hotel to relax and get ready for the luau that evening. My vision was so poor without the glasses I couldn't drive for the remainder of the trip. I just wanted to sit by the pool for the rest of the afternoon and reflect on my narrow escape from drowning.

We enjoyed the dinner and most of the entertainment at the luau that evening, except that Jeannette was unable to understand the narrator and I could only see colorful fuzzy images of the hula dancers just beyond my range of vision.

Jeannette's hearing had begun to fade, even thirty years ago, and I was almost blind without my glasses.

At the dinner table that evening we happened to be seated among retirees with walkers and wheelchairs. We felt like members of the geriatric set as I repeated the emcee's announcements to Jeannette, and she described the clothing and activities of the hula dancers to me. I was devastated not to be able to see the show!