

# HAWAIIAN CULTURE

“Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.” They may be words from Disney’s Lilo & Stitch, but they encompass what Hawaii is all about. Behind the seemingly never-ending summer days and postcard beaches is a rich culture strongly founded in the spirit of aloha.

Words by Hayley Penrose



*Young girls hula dancing on the beach.*

Located 3,200kms southwest of mainland USA, the state of Hawaii is steeped in historical and cultural significance. The picture perfect landscapes are the product of the Pacific Plate moving over a hot spot in the earth’s crust, resulting in the formation of the volcanic chain, known as the Hawaiian Islands. It is these beginnings that give Hawaii its unique

geographical look, as the islands are constantly changing and have been created from volcano activity and shaped by lava flows and craters.

In the entire archipelago, or island chain, there are over 100 islets, atolls and reefs, but only eight main islands that make up the official state of Hawaii - Hawai’i, Maui, O’ahu, Kaua’i, Moloka’i, Lana’i, the privately owned Ni’ihau and

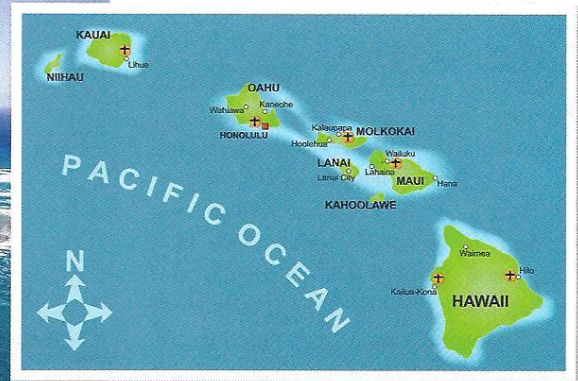
Kaho’olawe which is uninhabited. Each island also has a casual nickname. They are The Big Island, The Valley Isle, The Gathering Place, The Garden Isle, The Friendly Isle, The Pineapple Isle, The Forbidden Isle and The Target Isle, respectively.

*Aloha* is the foundation of everything on these islands, from Hawai’i to Ni’ihau and everywhere in between. It is a greeting





*View of Kauai, Hawaii from the air.*



often featuring chants and instruments such as the ukulele. Each move has specific meaning, and it is deeply rooted in religion. It is believed that the first hula was performed by a goddess.

Hawaiians have a polytheistic belief system with many gods and goddesses, known as *Akua*. There is not a lot of documented information on the Hawaiian deities; instead the knowledge comes from chants passed down through generations which speak of thousands of gods. It is unclear whether Hawaiian practice originally began this way or if, over time, the various cultures that came to the islands combined some of their beliefs. Regardless, there are many gods celebrated in Hawaii including Pele the Volcano, Lightning and Fire Goddess, her rival Poliahu who is the goddess of snow,

to say hello and goodbye, a way to express mutual love and regards and, most importantly, it embodies the aloha spirit. Literally translated, aloha means 'the presence of breath' or 'the breath of life.'

The Aloha Spirit is so entrenched in the Hawaiian way of life that it is considered a state 'law.' It is not the kind of law that will see you in behind bars if you break it, but it does serve as a reminder to treat people with deep care and respect, like the Hawaiian ancestors did. In §5-7.5 of the Hawai'i Revised Statutes, it states that "Aloha Spirit is the coordination of mind and heart within each person. It brings each person to the self. Each person must think and emote good feelings to others."

A luau is a Hawaiian celebration that encompasses the goodness of aloha. In ancient times men and women of Hawaii ate their meals separately but then in 1819 King Kamehameha II, who is also credited with uniting the islands, removed the religious laws that were practiced and sat and ate with the women. This was the beginning of the luau celebrations which today involve food, dancing, music and customary lei giving.

Lei's are necklaces most often made from flowers arranged in stunning combinations that are limited only by the artist's imagination. The art of lei making is considered sacred itself and there are a few things that must be done when giving

and receiving these traditional pieces. As the giver, it is customary to kiss the person you are bestowing the lei on, on the cheek. As the receiver it is bad manners and insulting to the giver if you take the lei off in their presence. It is best to take it off when you are alone.

Leis are also often worn by hula dancers when they are performing. Hula dances will often be performed at luaus and represent the spirit of Hawaii through graceful movements and music,

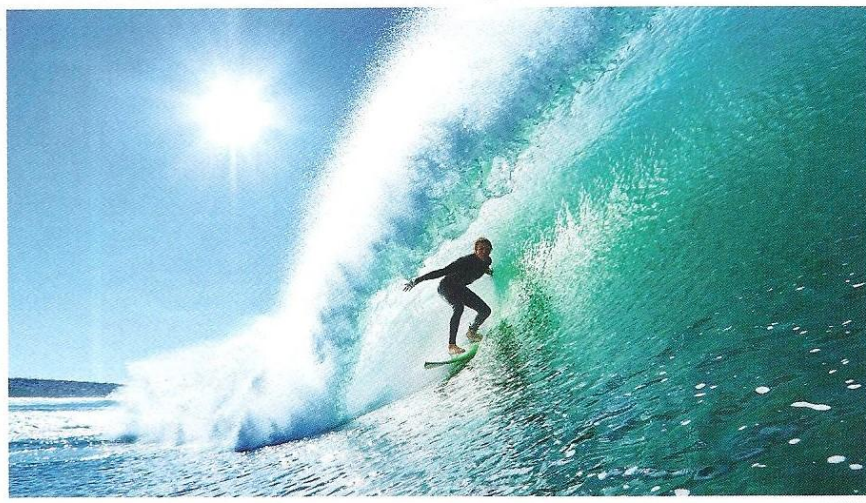


*Male fire dancers in Hawaii.*

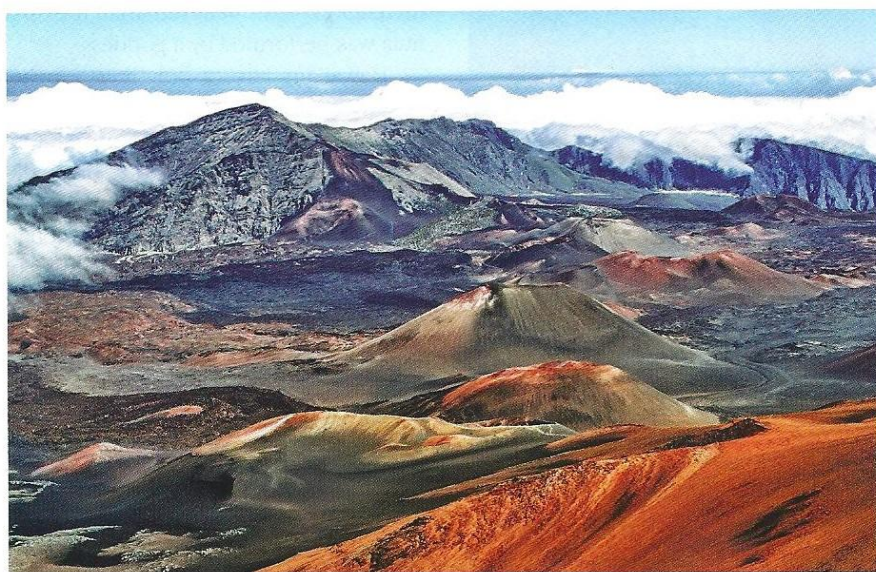


and Kanaloa the God of Magic, the Underworld and the Ocean.

Each year Hawaiians spend a week celebrating all aspects of Hawaiian culture from hula performances and chanting, to arts and crafts at the Merrie Monarch Festival held on the Big Island. It began in 1963 when Hawaii was suffering from bad business and a tidal wave and needed an economic, and moral, boost. Helene Hale, Chairman of the County of Hawai'i put together the festival celebrating King Kalakaua who had a major role in reviving Hawaiian culture in the 1880's. The festival originally featured a King Kalakaua beard



*Surfer riding a wave.*



*Caldera of the Haleakala volcano in Maui.*



*Flowing lava from Kilauea Volcano.*

look-alike contest, a re-creation of his coronation, as well as a barbershop quartet contest and a Holoku Ball among other activities.

Hawaiian culture has developed from hundreds of years of history and tradition. The exact date of human discovery and inhabitation of the islands is the subject of academic debate although it is widely agreed that the first settlers were from the nearby Marquesas Islands and arrived around 300 – 600 AD.

The first Europeans to set foot on the shores of Hawaii were Captain James Cook and his crew in 1778. Credited with documenting some of the first European encounters with Hawaiian natives, Captain Cook made only two journeys to Hawaii. He was killed on the second after attempting to hold a Chief for ransom after one of his boats was stolen by a group of natives.

Hawaii as we know it today is part of the United States of America. After years of rebellion in the 1800's, Hawaii was voted into the statehood under the United States on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, 1959 after being under martial law from the time Pearl Harbour was attacked through to the end of World War II. It was the 50<sup>th</sup> and final state to join the US.

Since then, Hawaii has been advertised as one the most ideal tourism locations around the world. Hundreds of thousands of people visit the islands each month to see the stunning beaches, breathtaking scenery and experience the famous aloha spirit. ★