Accidental Tourist

As I wrapped up another edition of Saturday Briefing last week, some friends called and asked if I’d be interested in joining them for some exercise. It was a beautiful day in Hawaii. Senior Editor Marie Casciato and Assistant Editor Lehua Kalai’i had everything under control. I needed to log some more miles on my pedometer. So I said, “Why not!”

Suddenly, I became an “accidental tourist,” and as the day progressed, I reacquainted myself with many of the fascinating and enjoyable opportunities available to visitors and residents on the island of Oahu.

We drove along the eastern shore, taking in the views of the deep blue Pacific Ocean, as we passed Hanauma Bay and rounded Koko Crater. We hiked up to the lighthouse perched on the cliff at Makapuu and marveled at the humpback whales below blowing jets of white spray into the air, as they lazed in the Molokai Channel. As we watched light clouds touch the peaks on the islands of Molokai, Lanai, and Maui, off in the distance, a plaque just off the trail reminded us to say a silent prayer for the nine airmen killed when their plane crashed there during World War II. (Apparently they had mistaken Makapuu Light for the naval air station at Barbers Point, a few miles away.)

Driving on, we came to the historic Kualoa Ranch. It has been many years since I last visited the property, and I could not help but be impressed once again by the beauty and history of this area.

John Morgan, President and General Manager, met us in Kualoa’s busy Visitor Center. He told us how the ancient Hawaiians considered the land there one of the most sacred places on Oahu. “It was a residence of kings, a place of refuge and sanctuary, and a training ground for royalty who were schooled in the arts of war, history, and social tradition.” In 1850, King Kamehameha III sold approximately 622 acres of the land to Dr. Gerritt P. Judd, a missionary and personal advisor to the king. Additional purchases over the years increased the area to 4,000 acres. It is a traditional ahupua’a (Hawaiian land division, spanning all the geographic zones from the mountains to the ocean, thus providing the ancient inhabitants with the full range of resources they needed), stretching from the sea to the ridge of the Koolau Range that soars over the valleys below. Morgan, a close friend, is a descendant of Dr. Judd.

The lands of Kualoa have had many uses over the years. From 1863 through 1871, it was a sugar plantation, and remnants of the old sugar mill still stand in mute testament to that era. During World War II, part of Kualoa was used as a military airstrip, with large monkeypod trees providing natural shelter for parked aircraft. Cattle have always been an important activity for the ranch, and paniolos (Hawaiian cowboys) still ride the land, although these days they are usually accompanying visitors. Movie and television production has become important, and Kualoa has been a location for Jurassic Park, Godzilla, Mighty Joe Young, Windtalkers, and Lost, to mention just a few well-known films with scenes shot there.

Even more important, under Morgan’s leadership, Kualoa, with 144 employees, has become an educational center focused on providing learning opportunities for people of all ages. Youth groups and visitors alike can experience and celebrate the rich culture and get close to the ‘aina (land) where Hawaiian royalty used to roam. It is ecotourism at its best and a unique experience less than an hour from busy Waikiki.

Our journey continued around the surfing areas along the North Shore. A stop at Haleiwa Joe’s for a snack followed, and the tour ended with a drink back at the OHANA Waikiki West with Father Leo Couture, a long-time return guest from Manitoba, Canada.

Playing hooky from the office for a day was fun and relaxing, but it also gave me an opportunity to rediscover some of the many places and activities that make Oahu such a wonderful, exciting island. The shops, restaurants, and hotels of Waikiki and Ko Olina are delightful, but if you take the time to go a few extra miles, you’ll quickly discover the lush beauty, culture, and aloha that have made Hawaii such a popular destination for so many decades. I heartily recommend it to everyone.