

Postcard from Hawaii: ‘Waikiki was as unspoilt as the day Captain Cook arrived’

T [thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/postcard-from-hawaii-waikiki-was-as-unspoilt-as-the-day-captain-cook-arrived-pbs5fl9lh](https://www.thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/postcard-from-hawaii-waikiki-was-as-unspoilt-as-the-day-captain-cook-arrived-pbs5fl9lh)

Leslie Lang

November 7, 2021



The Hawaiian Islands are no stranger to catastrophic disease. Captain James Cook’s 18th-century “discovery” of the islands for the western world opened the floodgates to missionaries, whalers and other travellers, who came inadvertently bearing cholera, influenza, measles, mumps, smallpox and other contagious diseases to which the previously isolated Hawaiians had no immunity.

The result was a tragic decline in the Hawaiian population. It’s estimated that between 200,000 and one million people were living on these islands in 1778 when Cook and his men first came ashore. By 1920, according to the US census, there were fewer than 24,000 Hawaiians left.

And memories, it seems, are long. When Covid was spreading like wildfire across the mainland US in March 2020, but hadn’t yet hit Hawaii hard, some people here were upset that tourists were still arriving. One resident stood alongside a road near Kahului airport in Maui wearing a facemask and holding a sign: “Why is your vacation more important than my health?”



Green sea turtles in Hanauma Bay flourished during the quiet of the pandemic

GETTY IMAGES

Policy mirrored that apprehension. Hawaii was the first US state that required visitors to quarantine for 14 days after arrival and tourism slowed to a crawl. On one day in April 2020, only 109 visitors arrived in Hawaii, compared with almost 30,000 per day the year before.

Residents enjoyed empty hiking trails and relaxed on quiet beaches. Popular Waikiki Beach was virtually deserted, and if you squinted and ignored the backdrop of high-rise hotels, you could almost imagine you were seeing the curve of beautiful white sand beach and gentle turquoise waters that Cook would have encountered. Traffic was light. There was calm. Paradise, indeed.

Scientists noted positive changes at Hanauma Bay, Oahu, the nature reserve contained within a volcanic crater, which, while closed for months, healed from the consequences of its popularity. Water clarity and visibility improved 64 per cent, and the bay held more and larger fish than before the pandemic shutdown. Its coral, so crucial to the bay's health, flourished. Green sea turtles and monk seals rested on the empty sands.

When a healthier Hanauma Bay reopened to the public in December 2020, visitors were capped at 720 a day; in 2019 daily attendance was about 3,000. That sort of destination management, already a hot topic before the pandemic, has become an even bigger

conversation now. How should Hawaii protect what makes it such an appealing visitor destination?

While authorities figure out how to provide a memorable visitor experience without overtaxing the land, visitors can again visit the Aloha State, where, in August, the Delta strain filled hospitals to their limits, and the governor asked people to stay away.

From tomorrow travellers from the UK, Ireland and countries in the European Schengen zone will be able to enter the US, provided that they are fully vaccinated with either a US Food and Drug Administration-approved vaccine or one granted an Emergency-Use Listing from the World Health Organisation (which includes AstraZeneca).

When travelling directly to Hawaii from an international destination, visitors must present a vaccination record and a negative Covid test taken within three days of boarding the flight. International travellers arriving in Hawaii from another US state must register their vaccination status with Hawaii's online Safe Travels programme to avoid the state's mandatory ten-day quarantine.



The character Armond, played by Murray Bartlett, from The White Lotus

HBO

What will you find on the ground? Will it be anything like the idyll seen on HBO's hit dark comedy *The White Lotus*? Hawaii's fleet of rental cars is down by 40 per cent — struggling rental firms had to sell off chunks of their fleets to get them through the worst of the tourist-starved months — and vehicles can be hard to come by. Because the state doesn't have a strong mass transit system, it's wise to reserve a car before confirming your other travel plans.

Masks are still required indoors, except when actively eating or drinking. Some indoor bars, restaurants, gyms and other social establishments are open at 50 per cent capacity, so you may encounter queues. On Oahu, everyone over 12 years old must show a vaccination card to enter such buildings (or a negative Covid test taken within 48 hours, plus one other form of ID). Parks and beaches are open. A maximum of 10 people can gather indoors and 25 outdoors.

But cases are low (just 1,641 new cases in the past 14 days) and vaccination is going the other way: 92 per cent of all eligible residents have had at least one jab. On Hawaii Island (aka "Big Island"), musicians treated mask-wearing crowds to live Hawaiian music while they waited for Covid inoculations at Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium in Hilo. That's where, in normal years, the world-renowned Merrie Monarch hula festival is held.

Now visitors are returning. Beaches have their usual numbers of people enjoying the warm winter sunshine, and tour buses are rolling. Most of us are still here, playing slack-key guitar and telling our stories, cooking our native laulau and other local dishes, and sharing a beautiful locale and a smile with visitors — carefully.

Follow Times Travel on Instagram and Twitter and sign up for our weekly Travel newsletter for all the latest articles, expert advice and inspiration for your next trip