

Obama's Hawaii

In the countdown to the US presidential elections **Anne Z Cooke** looks behind the scenes at the state that made the current White House boss.

IF YOU'VE been to Hawaii on holiday, you know the come-hither scent of flowers, the tradewinds cooling the peaks and the warmth of the ocean.

Now imagine growing up here, where Barack Obama was born, exposed from the first to a culture where the impossible has evolved: a multi-racial society, tolerant of differences and busily pursuing the delights and challenges of daily life.

For voters still wondering why Obama stays cool, thinks things through and keeps an eye focused on peaceful solutions, look toward the 50th state. The "ah-hah!" clues to the man have been right here all along, waiting to be mined.

Obama's background is an open book, writ large on the pages of Hawaii. Hawaiian islanders are colour-blind from the cradle. The blend of races and cultures here, at work, at play, in school and in every neighbourhood has been a fact since westerners arrived to mix with Hawaiians, and the Japanese and Chinese came to work in the sugarcane fields.

Before the last presidential campaign, travellers to the main island of Oahu spent their time at the beach, rarely touring Honolulu's inland neighbourhoods. Since the election, however, a half-dozen tour companies have added an Obama Tour, focusing on places connected to the president. The homes where his mother and grandparents lived; Kapiolani Hospital, where he was born in 1961 (see his birth certificate at obamasneighbourhood.com); the corner market where he stopped on the way home from school; the park where he and his friends shot hoops; and Punahou, his high school.

Go online for a photo of Obama's kindergarten class (obamasneighborhood.com). Lined up and smiling are five white children, seven mixed-race children, 12 full or mixed-origin Asian children, Obama, and three Japanese-American teachers. For these kids, the world looked international before they could read.

Think of their class picnic, the buffet table laden with parents' contributions: spaghetti, pizza, teriyaki chicken, plate lunches, potato salad, Spam musubi

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American Japanese), chow mein, malasadas (Portuguese) and huli huli chicken (Hawaiian).

The parents and children would have been, at a minimum, all or part Portuguese, Spanish, mixed-European, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Samoan and native Hawaiian. Was pidgin (the Hawaiian-English slang) a common denominator? I wish I knew.

"Do you think people are as colour-blind as they seem?" I asked Darlene Morikawa, formerly with the State Tourism Office.

"Just about everyone here has inherited what I call potluck," she said. "We're proud of our individual heritage, but we're Hawaiian first and foremost. That's where we get our identity,



our sense of who we are. I happened to catch Oprah when her guests, African Americans mostly, were talking about how it mattered if you were more brown, or less brown, or almost white. It really surprised me. I didn't know that people on the mainland thought about colour like that."

My advice? Rent a car and drive. Pass up the submarine rides, booze cruises and national-franchise hamburger joints. Instead eat at cafes patronised by kama'ainas (local Hawaiians). Try that most revered Hawaiian fast-food, the plate lunch. A treat when



Made in Hawaii: Obama boardshorts feature in an exhibition at Honolulu Museum of Art, and Sandy Beach on southeast Oahu, a favourite bodysurfing spot of President Obama.

Photos: Angela Walker, Oahu Visitors Bureau/MCT

stretch of shoreline. The grassy side, named for Queen Kapiolani, is Hawaii's oldest public park, founded in 1875. The grounds include the Waikiki Shell (site of free evening concerts), zoo, tennis courts, football fields and enough space to fly a kite. Bring a beach towel, a picnic basket and dine to music. Obama picnicked here with his grandparents and more recently, with his own children – and the Secret Service.

To swim with the locals, head to Kailua Beach County Park, on Oahu's southeast shore. Here's where the Obamas and friends have spent holidays together, in two rented, adjoining houses. Some streets have public parking, but do observe "kapu" (taboo) signs, usually posted on private driveways. Even Hawaiian tolerance has limits. Stop at Sandy Beach to see where Obama still bodysurfs, but don't get in the water yourself. Famous for its treacherous undertows, Sandy chews up novices.

For a luau you'll never forget, pass up the over-crowded event your hotel organises weekly, and look instead for a church or charity-sponsored event. Visitors are welcome and get a chance to talk to real Hawaiians.

an expert makes it (and a dog otherwise), it's a basic food group. Obama likes the Rainbow Drive-In, whose website proclaims, "For 45 years, Rainbow Drive-In has served the most ono grindz (pidgin for delicious food) to Hawaii and the World."

I prefer the barbecue chicken plate lunch, with macaroni salad and rice. The Ifuku family, owners of Rainbow, at 3308 Kanaina Ave, supports local scholarships and school supplies, something to consider as you open your wallet. See their menu at rainbowdrivein.com.

My favourite lunch item is saimin, served at Zippy's, one of Obama's hangouts. To chicken broth soup, they add saimin noodles, char sui pork, won tons, eggs, green onions and bok choy. I haven't eaten at Alan Wong's, famous for Hawaiian regional food, at 1857 King St, but I'm told Obama eats here on special occasions.

If you're staying in a Waikiki Beach hotel, walk southeast toward Diamond Head, to Kapiolani Park and beach. Local families picnic on the sand, swim in the waves and sun on this