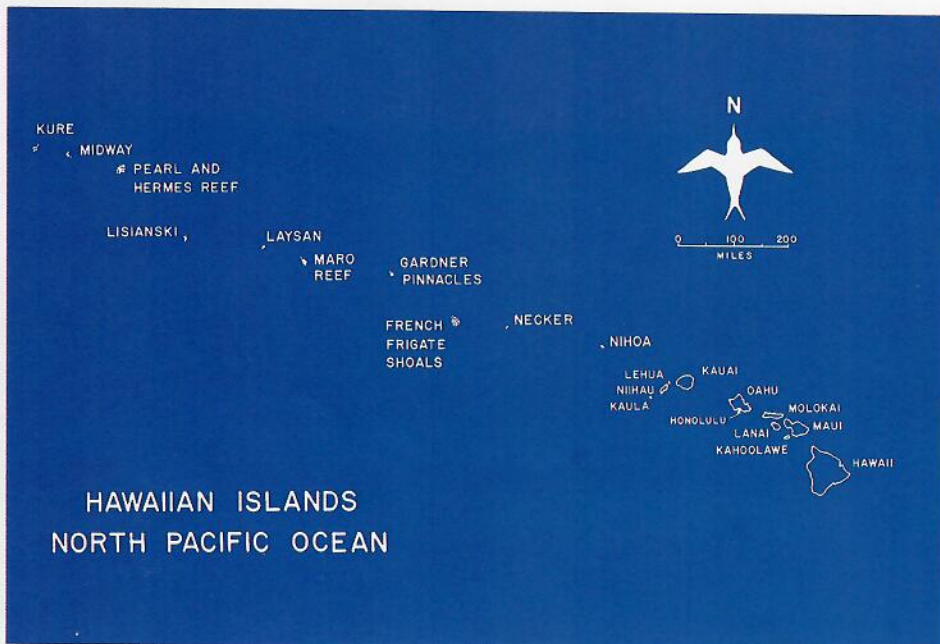


The "hidden" Hawaiian Islands

by George Balazs



George Balazs

Many visitors to Hawaii, even some long-time residents, often are surprised to learn that the Hawaiian Islands extend well beyond Kauai out into the vast North Pacific Ocean. Known as the Leeward or Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, this hidden segment of the 50th State forms an 1,100-mile path of islets and shoals that are the eroded tips of ancient undersea volcanoes. The total land area of these islands amounts only to about five square miles, compared with 6,400 square miles that make up the eight major and geologically younger islands clustered at the southeastern end of the chain.

For the most part, Hawaii's Leeward Islands are without human inhabitants. Kure, the northwesternmost island, is the site of a small U.S. Coast Guard Loran station where 20 personnel serve one-year tours of duty. A similar facility

that existed at French Frigate Shoals from 1944 until it was deactivated in 1979 now is inhabited by a few biologists of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Midway, the only island in the Hawaiian chain not included in the State of Hawaii, has about 450 residents and is under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Navy. The waters near Midway were, of course, the scene of the decisive naval Battle of Midway during World War II. Prehistoric Polynesians are known to have lived on, or at least regularly visited, the precipitous rock islands of Nihoa and Necker. However, these sites were abandoned long before Captain Cook first arrived in the Hawaiian Islands in 1778.

The sparse human population of the Leewards contrasts sharply with the rich abundance of native wildlife living and breeding in this region. Numerous species of sea birds, the Green Sea

Turtle, the rare Hawaiian Monk Seal, and four kinds of land birds found nowhere else in the world depend on the area for survival. The importance of

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Whale Skate, one of the small sand islets at French Frigate Shoals.

these isolated islands as critical breeding sites was recognized in 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt established the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation. Today, this internationally acclaimed sanctuary is known as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. It includes the sites of Nihoa, Necker, French Frigate Shoals, Gardner Pinnacles, Maro Reef, Laysan, Lisianski, and Pearl and Hermes Reef. Along with certain adjacent waters, these island-units of the Refuge encompass about eight percent of the total area found



White Tern chick waiting to be fed.

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wandering over the far reaches of the North Pacific. Others live and search for food close to the Hawaiian chain. All, however, eventually must return to land to lay eggs and raise their young. At the sea bird breeding sites in the Leewards, efficient use of the small land area provides all species with room to nest. This is achieved by staggered breeding seasons and by using all available space. For example, some sea birds—among them, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and Bonin Petrels—nest in underground burrows they dig with their beaks and

egg by shading it from the hot sun during the day and keeping it warm during the cool nights. When the egg hatches, both parents regularly go to sea in search of fish and squid to feed their ravenous offspring. With such devoted and meticulous attention, the chick grows rapidly and within a few months is able to fly on its own. Birds that survive to become mature adults can experience a long life. Ages as great as 40 years have been documented.

Within the Wildlife Refuge, the albatrosses, or “gooney birds” as they are affectionately called, are clearly the most comical and entertaining to humans. They are among the largest of sea birds, with wingspans of six to seven feet that permit effortless graceful flight over the open ocean. Sharp and powerful bills make it possible for them to seize squid swimming at the surface. While nesting on land, however, they are very tame and virtually defenseless—and were killed in large numbers at the turn of the century for their feathers, used to decorate women’s hats. (Nowadays, all sea birds are legally protected by an international treaty.) Two species, the Black-footed Albatross and the Laysan Albatross, nest in the Leeward Islands, forming a combined breeding population of more than a half-million.

The Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle is another species dependent on the Leeward Islands, especially French Frigate Shoals. Although this gentle creature was heavily exploited for its meat by commercial interests in past years, it now is fully protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act as well as laws of the State of Hawaii. Green Turtles often can be seen in shallow waters around the major islands—even off Diamond Head and in Hanauma Bay, Oahu—where they graze on submarine pastures of seaweed and sleep under coral ledges. However, when it comes time to breed, the adult turtles swim to the Leeward Islands, using an inborn navigation system yet to be understood by the scientific community. Identification tags placed on these turtles show regular migrations between French Frigate Shoals and resident feeding sites as far away as Hilo Bay and South Point on the Big Island, round trip voyages of nearly 1,400 miles.



Wedge-tailed Shearwaters nest in underground burrows.

George Balazs

within the 100-fathom curve of the Leeward chain.

For the few wildlife researchers, refuge managers and others fortunate enough to visit the Leewards, the most impressive and immediately noticeable feature is the great number of sea birds that band together on land in noisy breeding colonies. Some of these ocean-going avians spend most of their lives

webbed feet. At some locations, the ground is honeycombed with these tunnels and visitors must take care not to cave them in. Other sea birds, such as Sooty Terns and Masked Boobies, lay their eggs right on the ground, while Frigatebirds construct nests of twigs off the ground in shrubs. Most Hawaiian sea birds lay a single egg each season. Both parents take turns caring for the



A Hawaiian Green Turtle and a Hawaiian Monk Seal snoozing in the sun.

The breeding season of the Hawaiian Green Turtle starts in April when the adults arrive at French Frigate Shoals. In these shallow waters, the amorous males actively seek the attention of females for courtship and mating. Males are easily identified by prehensile tails that extend well past the hind flippers when swimming. Beginning in the middle of May and continuing through August, the females crawl ashore on small islets at night and dig nests in the sand. Their hind flippers slowly and expertly scoop out a chamber where up to 150 glistening white eggs the size of golf balls are deposited. The clutch is then covered over by sand. At times, the process takes all night and the turtle will not return to the ocean until the sun has started to rise. A copious flow of tears helps to keep the mother's eyes moist and washed free of soil during this exhausting ritual. Depending on the individual turtle, as many as six clutches of eggs may be laid at two-week intervals during a breeding season. However, Green Turtles breed

only once every two years or more, never in consecutive years.

After an incubation period of 60 days, an interval requiring no parental care, the eggs hatch and one-ounce turtles dig their way up to the surface. When the ground is cool, usually a few hours after sunset, the small turtles burst out and scramble immediately to the sea. Unlike other sea turtle breeding sites elsewhere in the world, the sea birds at French Frigate Shoals do not prey on the hatchling turtles. Although no one knows for certain how long it takes for a hatchling to grow to adult size (at least 200 pounds), studies under way in Hawaii suggest it takes several decades. How many years they live is anyone's guess.

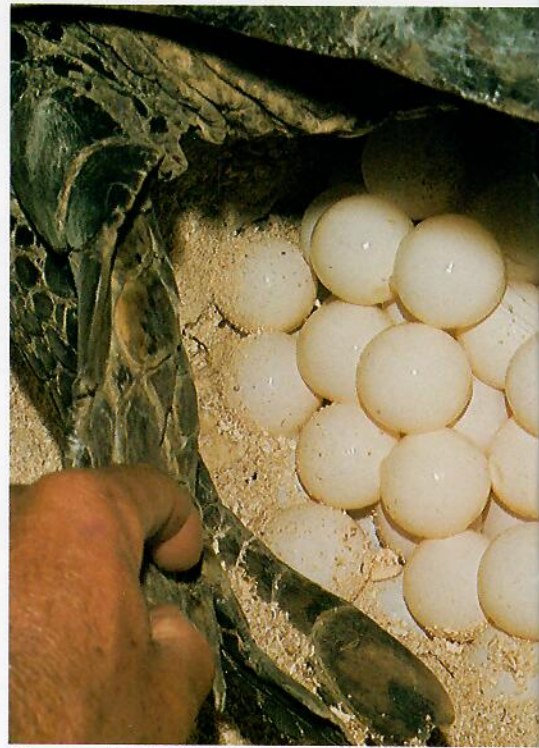
Except for the adult females coming ashore to lay eggs, sea turtles in other areas of the world almost never voluntarily return to land after they enter the ocean as hatchlings. Such is not the case with Hawaii's Green Turtles. In the Leeward Islands, both males and females regularly leave the

sea to peacefully nap in the sun for hours at a time along isolated shorelines. This exceedingly unusual behavior constitutes one more reason the Leewards have been considered unique as a wildlife refuge.

One of the rarest of all seals, the Hawaiian Monk Seal, makes its home in the warm waters of the Leeward chain where it dines on eels, lobsters and



A nesting colony of Sooty Terns.



The egg clutch of a Hawaiian Green Turtle.

other marine life. Its only living relative is the Mediterranean Monk Seal. A third species, the Caribbean Monk Seal, became extinct sometime during the early 1950s.

In the Leeward Islands, Hawaiian Monk Seals regularly haul out to rest

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Hawaiian Monk Seals — mother and pup.




on undisturbed sand beaches and rock ledges. At some of these same locations, the females give birth to a single jet-black pup during the spring and summer months. In preparation for this event, the expectant mother becomes very obese and may weigh over 600

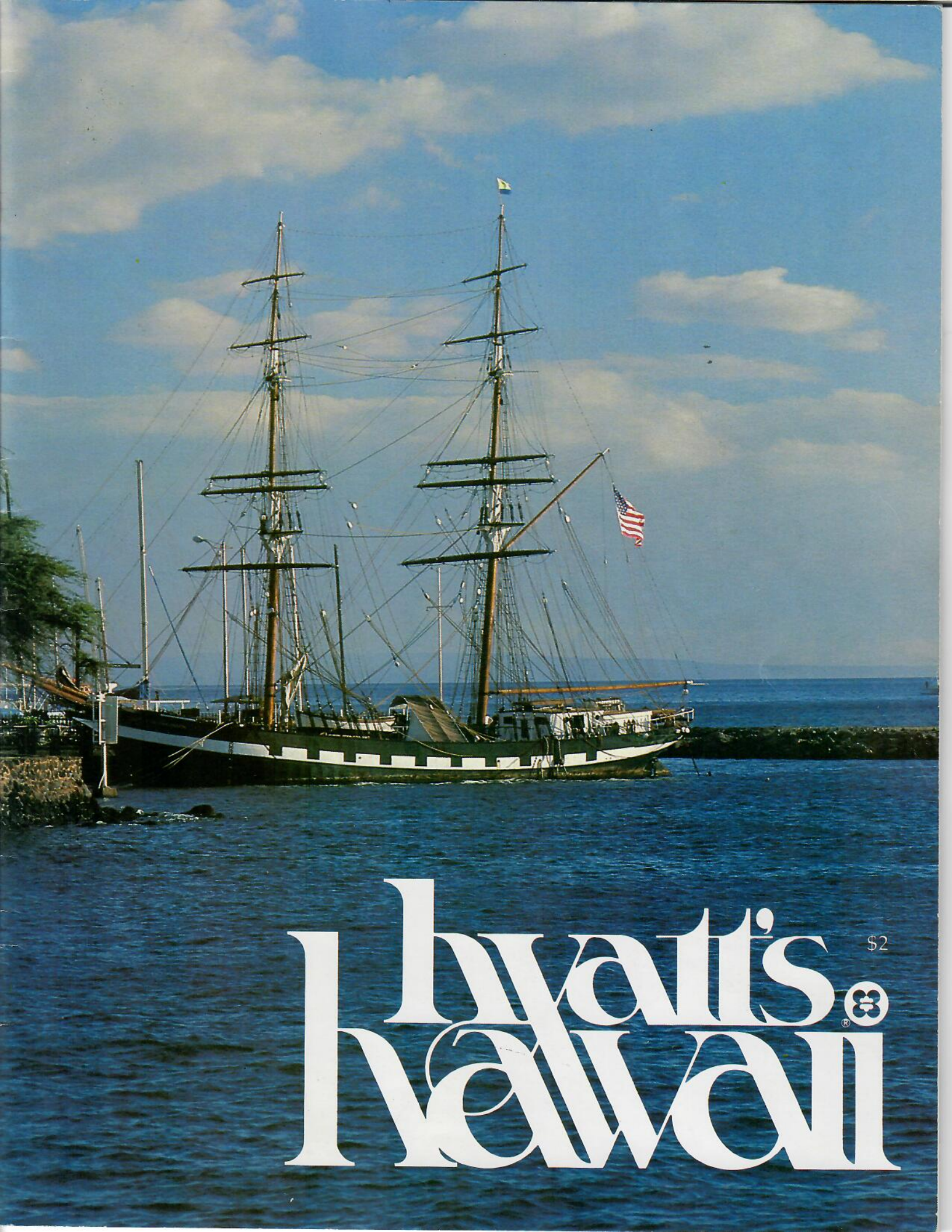
pounds. These extra fat reserves are necessary so she can continually watch over her pup for the six week nursing period when little, if any, food is available. When the pup is only a day or two old, the mother leads it into the ocean for its first swimming lesson. Several such excursions are then carried out each day, but only in shallow areas close to shore where fewer dangers exist from strong currents and large sharks. With a constant supply of rich milk, the pup grows rapidly and its coat changes from black to silver-gray. By the time six weeks have passed, the pup has increased from a birth weight of 25 pounds to a butterball of 125 pounds or more. With the depletion of the mother's fat reserves, weaning takes place in a sudden and permanent manner with her departure from the island. Over the next year, life is difficult for the young seal as it learns how to survive on its own. During the adolescent years of growth and development, extended fishing trips are sometimes undertaken and, occasionally, a lone seal is sighted around the major islands.


The most generous estimates put the total population of these seals at no more than 2,500. Considerable declines in their numbers have been recorded over the past 20 years, particularly at the extreme northwestern end of the Leeward Islands. At the same time, these

animals have dramatically increased in number at French Frigate Shoals. The causes of these changes are not known. Conservation practices simply rely on trying to keep the seal's pupping and nearshore feeding habitats as free as possible from human disturbance.

From the time Westerners discovered the Leeward Islands in the late 1700s, the wildlife of this vast region has been decimated—sometimes for food by survivors of shipwrecks, frequently by the greedy for no better reason than for feathers or furs. The introduction of harmful exotic animals and plants also has taken a toll. Fortunately, we are now keenly aware of the great heritage of wildlife in this remote portion of the Hawaiian Islands and, with this enlightened attitude, there is every reason to believe the area will continue to serve as a unique breeding refuge for marine life for generations to come. 

George Balazs is a marine biologist with the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology and is currently serving as a visiting researcher with the Honolulu Laboratory of the National Marine Fisheries Service. Over the past nine years he has made numerous study trips to the Leeward Islands. Balazs was president of the Hawaii Audubon Society, a volunteer organization with the goal of enhancing the protection and appreciation of native wildlife.



Hyatt's ^{\$2} 
Hawaii

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With this issue of HYATT'S HAWAII, we begin our fourth year of publishing stories on the people, places and events that make Hawaii such a special place.

In our lead story, marine biologist George Balazs describes the 1,100-mile path of tiny islets, rocks and shoals that comprise the Leeward Islands of Hawaii. Most are devoid of people and offer idyllic refuge to a rich assortment of birds, mammals and fish.

If you've been to Lahaina, chances are you've seen Carthaginian at its berth in Lahaina Harbor. It is a brig, a square-rigged ship of the kind that once brought people and supplies to these islands. Ruth Miller's story, beginning on page eight, traces the transformation of the shabby Swedish schooner Komet to the sparkling museum ship you'll want to visit next time you're in Lahaina.

What would you do with a no-longer-needed reinforced concrete bunker with walls 17 feet thick and a roof 22 feet thick? As you'll learn in Dan Myers' story, The guns of Waikiki, the answer to this real-life problem came after a steel wrecking ball was shattered in a vain effort to demolish Battery Randolph on Waikiki Beach.

As Jeanette Foster points out in her story, there is considerably more beauty in Hawaii than the mountains and palm trees, sunshine and beautiful sunsets we all enjoy. All you need do is put on snorkeling equipment to enjoy the clear water, brightly colored fish and coral reefs—all of which are especially beautiful in our underwater parks.

Would you believe the mere mention of a man's name could cause the wind to stop blowing? Or that removing a hand-shaped stone from an ancient place of refuge could bring misfortune? Hawaii-born Bob Hite

shares his knowledge of the powers attributed to *kahunas*, the priests who comprised Hawaii's professional class before the arrival of Westerners.

Hawaii's leap from the Stone Age to contemporary culture was nowhere more rapid than in Lahaina, Maui. This waterfront town was capital of Hawaii from 1819 to 1845, when the seat of Hawaii's government was moved to Honolulu. You're invited along as Dr. Leighton Taylor takes a stroll through Lahaina—beginning on page 23.

Hyatt Regency Waikiki's Italian restaurant, Spats, has earned a reputation for fine cuisine and attentive service. Beginning on page 26, we present a recipe for one of the several spaghetti dishes on the Spats menu. You'll also become acquainted with our Spats chef and Da Boss, the multi-talented Guido Salmaggi.

It is organized with precision and operated by thousands of volunteers who labor the year around. In just two days in February it is enjoyed by several thousand who leave behind about a half-million dollars. It's the annual Punahou Carnival, a fund-raising event conducted by the students of Punahou School and their parents. As you'll see from Jim Hackleman's account, this year Punahou celebrates the golden anniversary of the Carnival—and the 140th anniversary of the school.

Aloha,



Edward G. Sullivan
Regional Vice President
Hyatt Hotels Hawaii



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