

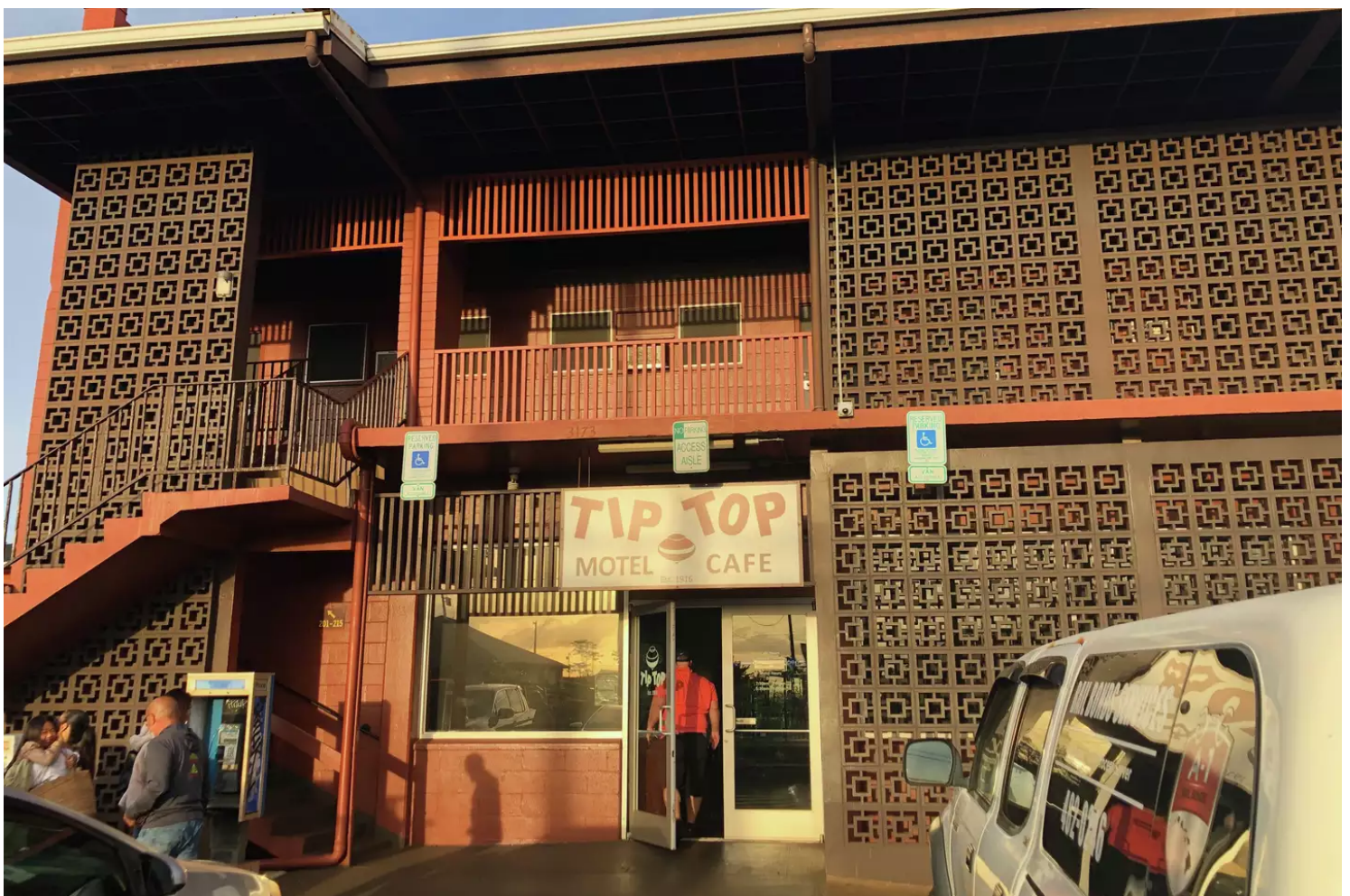
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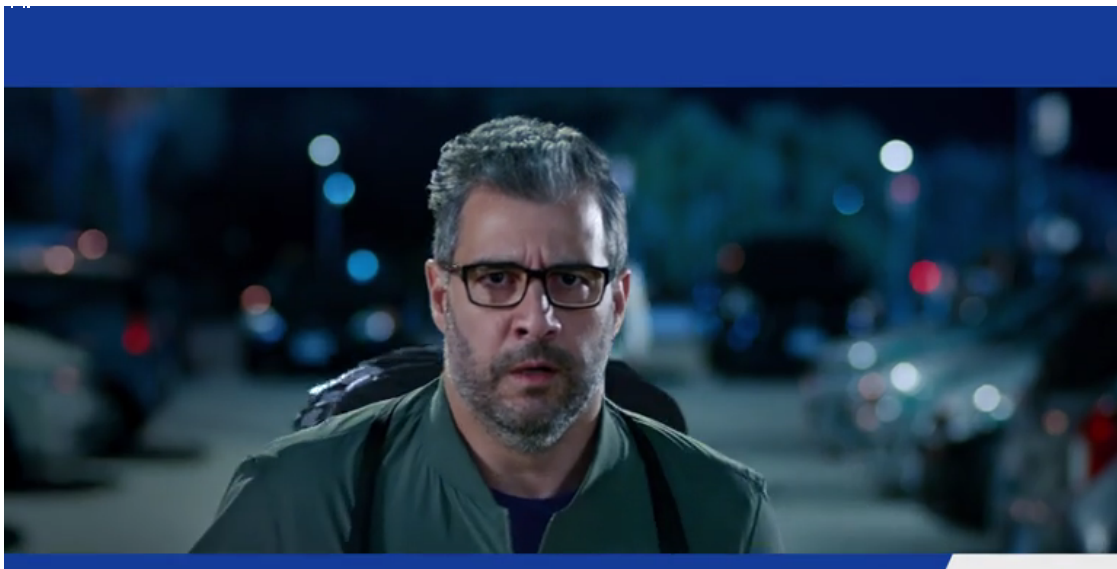


Located in Lihue, Kauai, Tip Top Motel & Cafe has been in business since 1916.
Christine Hitt

By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*
Feb 12, 2025

What it's like to stay at the cheapest... 1x
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I wasn't sure what to expect when I arrived at the two-story Tip Top Motel in the middle of Lihue, one of Kauai's largest towns. I parked and looked up at the crimson-brown cinder block building where my room was and wondered if I had made the right choice.



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Tip Top has a popular Hawaii restaurant that receives rave reviews, but I was not as familiar with the guest rooms. I didn't feel unsafe, which is sometimes the concern with motels, but I was worried about the bugs. I'd forgotten about Hawaii's centipedes, cockroaches and cane spiders, which I've even found in a couple of the best accommodations, and wondered if Tip Top could keep them out.

I chose Tip Top Motel because it was the best deal, coming in at \$195, while others were close to \$300. Hawaii hotel prices have increased the past few years, especially on Kauai. The average daily room rate on Kauai in December 2024 was \$455 — an increase of 32.9% compared with December 2019.

I wanted to give Tip Top Motel a shot, considering it's keeping its room nights affordable while others are climbing higher year over year. And so I arrived around 6 p.m. and watched a couple of construction workers, who I'm guessing flew in from a neighbor island to work, walk to their rooms.



My room was on the second floor of the motel's L-shaped building.
Christine Hitt

Check-in didn't require a front desk (it closed at 2 p.m. anyway). The day before, the motel had sent me my room number and a code to open the door. The code works starting at 3 p.m. and is deactivated at checkout time. I found this process to be easy and convenient and wouldn't mind if other hotels did things the same way.

I walked up the stairs and opened the door to my room. It was basic: a square, white cement block room with a bed in the center, a flat-screen TV on the wall, and a large, open closet space. The TV had a surprising number of channels. Jalousie windows kept the room cool, but there was also an air conditioner. The sheet and blanket were thin, but I didn't get cold. The room struck me as a no-frills solution for travelers needing a place to sleep and little else.



The motel room was fairly basic but included everything I needed for the night.
Christine Hitt

The furniture was dated, the bed lacked plush, and the room didn't have amenities, like a fridge or coffee maker, seen at other hotels. But it was very clean. From top to bottom, I couldn't find a spot of dust anywhere. I was impressed by the cleanliness. Best of all, I found no bugs during my entire stay, not even an ant.

4 generations old

In 1916, Denjiro Ota opened Tip Top Cafe & Bakery. He was a cook for a sugar plantation manager and was inspired to open his own coffee shop and bakery, where the town could get breakfast in the morning. He opened it in a building called Tip Top, which is how it got its name.

The business has been in the family ever since, passed down four generations. Denjiro's son, Mitchell, built the present location of the motel and cafe and moved the business there in 1965. Mitchell was also the person who created the secret recipe for the restaurant's famous pancakes, made from scratch daily. He also made the first macadamia nut cookie in Hawaii, according to the motel's website.



Tip Top Motel, Cafe & Bakery got its name from its original location inside a building called Tip Top. The business moved in 1965 to its current location.

Tip Top Motel/Jonathan Ota

"I don't think any of us thought we'd still be in business," Jonathan Ota, current owner and Mitchell's grandson, told SFGATE over the phone after my visit. "To reach 100 years is unbelievable. But you know, we owe it all to our employees, so it's only because of their dedication and hard work that allows us to continue."

Jonathan took over Tip Top Motel in 1990 and said the family business will end with him, since there are no more kids to pass it down to.

He said the motel attracts many Honolulu businesspeople and travelers from the continental U.S. “We even have a lot of European guests that are used to just simple hotels where they can go hiking and exploring during the day, and they just want to come back and sleep and take a shower,” he said.



Tip Top Motel & Cafe was passed down through four generations. Its current owner is Jonathan Ota, son of Owen Ota.

Sue Hudelson

As other hotels have raised their prices, Tip Top Motel has also raised its prices, Jonathan said. However, he doesn't want them to be so high that customers are choosing between a Hyatt and Tip Top.

“You know, we're not the Hyatt or the Marriott. So we know where we are in the market, and we try to be something that's clean, affordable, simple,” he said. “People who come here, they're not looking for the swimming pools and the concierge. They just want some place clean, affordable and easy to access. It's very centrally located on the island, so we keep our rates where we think it should be.”

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The old-school cafe

The next morning, I was up early enough to hear my neighbors' alarms go off in unison. It was a workday for a few people staying in the motel, it appeared.

Ready to eat, I walked inside Tip Top Cafe at 7:30 a.m. It was already busy. The space is one large room split by a partition. The motel's front desk is on one side, which also doubles as the cashier, and the restaurant booths are on the other side.

Servers were moving around quickly, and before I could sit down at one of the booths, I was already offered coffee. The breakfast menu has all your usual offerings, such as eggs and French toast, but there's a good mix of local favorites, too. The oxtail soup, for instance, is written in the largest lettering, describing it as "Kauai's favorite."

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At Tip Top Cafe, I ordered the Tip Top Grand Slam, which included two scratch pancakes, eggs, hash browns and Spam.
Christine Hitt

I was tempted but instead ordered the Tip Top Grand Slam for \$21.79, which includes Mitchell Ota's famous scratch pancakes, along with eggs, hash browns and Spam.

Thanks to guidebooks and online reviews, travelers are well aware of the café already. "We've been fortunate that they return and visit us again," Jonathan told me. "So we have a lot of repeat guests, and the locals always, they're the backbone of our business."

The food arrived quickly, and I dug into the two banana pancakes. They were hot, exceptionally tasty, with a touch of crisp. I liked that they weren't spongy, like some pancakes that make you feel over-filled, so I managed to eat half of them on my own. Everything else on the plate was satisfying too. The eggs were fluffy, hash browns were crunchy, and I was happy that I could get it with Spam. As I ate, I watched the activity happening around me.

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Without a doubt, Tip Top's café is a local gathering place. Servers, pushing old-school carts around with coffee and water, were smiling and calling customers by first names. Customers were saying "good morning" to each other across the aisle.

Similar to the motel, the café has a laid-back modesty about it that is part of its charm. It's friendly and welcoming, and it has everything you need at a decent price.

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HAWAII CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



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