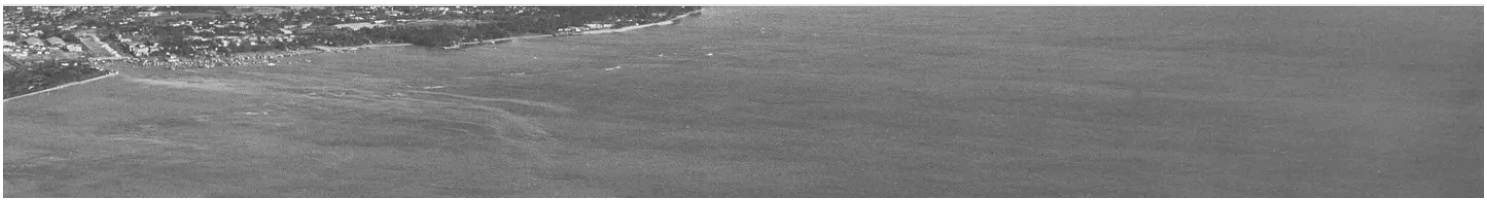
TOP STORY

Driver accused of killing family of 4 at West Portal won't face jail time

TRAVEL | HAWAII

89 years ago, an SF-to-Hawaii flight changed the world forever



A Boeing 377 Stratocruiser flies over Honolulu in 1956.
ullstein bild Dtl./ullstein bild via Getty Images

By **Kent German**, *News Editor*

Dec 20, 2025

Listen Now:
How one airline's San Francisco to Hawaii route changed everything
About 10 Minutes
1x
Everlit

There's a good reason the legendary opening theme of the original "Hawaii Five-O" features a jet airplane flying overhead. More than anything else, the jet age brought mass tourism to the Islands. From the moment the first Boeing 707 from the continental U.S. screamed over Diamond Head in 1959, jet airliners made getting to Hawaii dramatically easier, faster and cheaper than ever before.

Hawaii, though, had long lured people willing to make the trip, even when a weeklong voyage on one of Matson's ocean liners was the only ticket. A century ago, the technology for long-distance navigation by air was still in its infancy: Through the mid-1920s, no aircraft had the range to make the 2,400-mile trip from San Francisco to Hawaii. And even when the daunting transpacific gap was finally bridged in June 1927 with a 26-hour nonstop flight from Oakland, the disappearance of three air crews participating in the Dole Air Race two months later was a stark reminder that flying to the Islands remained a staunchly risky endeavor.

But then, just eight years later, the groundbreaking airline Pan American changed everything. Flying to Hawaii was no longer a fantasy, as long as you had the time, money and chutzpah to do so.

The flying boat era

Founded in 1927, Pan Am grew rapidly, with routes that connected the United States with the Caribbean and South America using its trademark "Clipper" flying boats, which required water landings. Juan Trippe, the airline's visionary founder, next planned the first passenger flights to Europe. But when Pan Am was initially unable to secure landing rights in France or the United Kingdom, Trippe turned to crossing the Pacific instead.

Passengers board a Boeing 314 at Pan Am's Treasure Island base.
Apic/Getty Images

Passengers relax in the cabin of a Boeing 377 Stratocruiser in this photo from 1949.
Museum of Flight Foundation/Corbis via Getty Images

A flight attendant pours a hot drink as passengers relax in the lower deck lounge of a Pan American Airways Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, circa 1950.
FPG/Getty Images

Reaching Hong Kong was the ultimate goal, but the proposed route from San Francisco would put Hawaii firmly on the air travel map. Honolulu would be the first of several steps necessary to span the nearly 7,000-mile distance of the world's largest ocean. Flights would then stop overnight at Midway Island, Wake Island, Guam and Manila, Philippines, all of which were U.S. territories at the time. It was a seven-day trip that was far faster than two weeks on a ship.

The logistical preparations were immense. First, Pan Am had to perfect the navigation methods that let pilots find tiny islands in the middle of the ocean. Then, in addition to securing the needed terminals and maintenance facilities in each location, Pan Am had to build hotels on Midway and Wake to house passengers overnight. Though Midway already had a small human presence with a transpacific cable station, Wake was an uninhabited atoll just 2.5 square miles in area and thousands of miles from any populated land. On Wake, crews also had to clear the island's lagoon of the coral outcrops that would have impeded the operation of flying boats, the aircraft best suited at the time to fly such long overwater routes.

More importantly, Pan Am was seeking a flying boat that didn't yet exist: one powerful enough to safely make the trip with a load of mail, cargo and paying passengers. It ultimately settled on the Martin M130, built specifically for the airline's needs. The largest commercial aircraft at the time, the M130 had a range of 3,200 miles and a cruising speed of 130 mph. Fully loaded, it had room for around 40 passengers, but weight restrictions limited the number of passengers between California and Hawaii, the longest leg of the Hong Kong route, to eight.

A Pan Am Boeing 314 in flight.
H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassicStoc/H. Armstrong Roberts/ClassicStock/Getty Images

Pan Am's "China Clipper" over San Francisco in July 1936.
Universal History Archive/Universal History Archive/Univer

Since the Midway and Wake hotels weren't ready yet, Pan Am's first flight to Manila only carried mail. It departed Pan Am's initial Bay Area base at Alameda's Seaplane Lagoon on Nov. 22, 1935. Though the heavy M130 China Clipper was forced to fly under the cables of the unfinished Bay Bridge before gaining enough altitude, the rest of the journey to Honolulu was uneventful. It was a sensation: 25,000 people witnessed the transpacific flight take off from Alameda, and its success inspired a nationwide mania.

Passenger service began almost a year later on Oct. 21, 1936, with the appropriately named Hawaii Clipper. From then on, Hawaii was permanently connected by air to the continental U.S.

Flights to Honolulu were typically once a week, departing Alameda in the mid-afternoon and arriving the next morning. On the 18-hour flight, passengers ate prepared meals at tables with fine china, relaxed in a lounge and slept in full berths. Upon landing on Oahu at Pearl Harbor, passengers continuing on to Manila or Hong Kong would stay overnight at Waikiki's Royal Hawaiian Hotel, which opened in 1927. Fares of $648 round-trip (around $14,900 in 2025 dollars) to Honolulu limited the flights strictly to the wealthiest travelers and those with generous expense accounts.

Despite a few setbacks that included the still-unexplained loss of the Hawaii Clipper between Guam and Manila in 1938, Pan Am invested in a far larger and more luxurious flying boat, the Boeing 314. First introduced in 1939, the two-deck 314 had a range of 3,500 miles and a cruising speed of 184 mph. It could carry 74 passengers (or 40 with sleeping berths) and was spacious enough for a main lounge, dressing rooms and a private suite. Sixteen feet longer than the M130, the 314 was so big that the wings had crawl spaces for crews to make engine repairs during flight. In 1939, Pan Am also opened a new route between Honolulu and Auckland, New Zealand, and shifted its Bay Area base to brand-new Treasure Island, operating out of the Art Deco Administration Building, which still stands.

When the first Pan Am Clipper flight to Hawaii took off on Nov. 22, 1935, the heavily laden flying boat was forced to fly under the cables of the unfinished Bay Bridge.

Collection of SFO Museum

Passengers would socialize in the main lounge of the Martin M130 during a flight.
Collection of SFO Museum

After the war

Commercial flights to Honolulu were suspended with the onset of World War II. Under martial law following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was not a place for pleasure travel of any kind. By 1945, Pan Am's flights moved operations to Mills Field (now SFO), but by then the rapid advancement in aviation technology from the war had made flying boats obsolete. Clipper flights to Hawaii ended on April 8, 1946, and were replaced with land-based aircraft that could easily reach Hawaii from the West Coast.

One of the most notable of those airliners was the Boeing 377 Stratocruiser, which first flew in July 1947. Based on the B-29 Superfortress, the warplane used in the bombing campaign against Japan during the war, it had a cruising speed of 300 mph and a range of 4,600 miles. One of the earliest commercial aircraft to be pressurized for better passenger comfort, the Stratocruiser's roomy cabin could fit as many as 100 passengers, though it typically carried 63 to 84. And in a preview of the Boeing 747 that would come two decades later, it had a lounge on another deck reached by a spiral staircase.

Passengers relax in berths of an Martin M130 Clipper flying boat.
Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

Passengers on Pan Am's Clipper flying boats ate prepared meals on fine china.
Collection of SFO Museum

A steward serves a meal in the spacious main lounge of the Boeing 314.
Collection of SFO Museum

The Stratocruiser began service on Pan Am's SFO to Honolulu route on April 1, 1949. Flight time was cut to between 8 and 9 hours, with reclining "sleeperette" seats largely replacing full berths (though the 377 could fit 18 bunks for longer flights). United Airlines started flying the Stratocruiser to Hawaii the next year, offering buffet-style meals and a private suite to its aircraft. Though transoceanic flying wasn't without incident — in 1957, a year after all passengers were saved from a Pan Am Stratocruiser that ditched at sea, another 377 vanished while en route to Hawaii — flying to paradise became routine. Other pre-jet aircraft that flew the route during the 1950s were the Douglas DC-6 and DC-7 and the triple-tailed Lockheed Constellation.

Viewed through today's air travel lens, the passenger experience of the decade does look comparatively glamorous. Multicourse meals were standard, lavatories were more like changing rooms, everyone flew the same class and the "pack 'em in" mentality of modern airlines didn't apply. On the other hand, fares remained high, flights were longer and the nose and vibration of the propeller-driven engines didn't make for a quiet trip. But then again, you're going to Hawaii. So, really, who cares?

I was able to live such a flight, at least vicariously, when my grandmother bequeathed me souvenirs from her own Hawaiian vacation from 1955 including her ticket, a timetable and an aircraft safety brochure. The flight from LAX took just over eight hours on a United DC-7 and cost $275 return (around $3,300 in 2025 dollars). Her room at the Moana Hotel on Waikiki Beach (now the Moana Surfrider) was $8 a night (or about $97 today).

Photo of Pan Am's travel ticket and pamphlets from 1955.
Lance Yamamoto/SFGATE

Photo of Pan Am's travel ticket and pamphlets from 1955.
Lance Yamamoto/SFGATE

Photo of Pan Am's travel ticket and pamphlets from 1955.
Lance Yamamoto/SFGATE

Fifty years later, when I went to Honolulu myself for the first time and walked through the Moana, I tried to imagine her sitting on the shaded veranda, feeling the soft tropical breeze and admiring the stunning view of what, I imagine at the time, was a quiet Waikiki Beach.

When the jet-equipped 707 and Douglas DC-8 began flying to Hawaii in the 1960s, it had been only 35 years since Pan Am's first Clipper slowly climbed over San Francisco Bay headed for Honolulu. Flight time from the West Coast was down to five hours, fares dropped, and airlines rushed to connect neighbor islands like Maui and Kauai nonstop with the continental U.S. Of course, mass tourism where one flight could drop as many as 400 people on an island at one time brought profound impacts for Hawaii, not all of them good. What is a dream vacation for many also has resulted in an economy overly reliant on one industry, badly behaving visitors, exploitation of a rich Indigenous culture and degradation of a fragile ecosystem.

A Pan Am travel poster promoted its Clipper flying boats to Hawaii and beyond. Though the B314 was large, its size is exaggerated here.
Collection of SFO Museum

Even as more tourists began to arrive in the 50th state, some semblance of luxury remained in the earliest years of the jet age: The first 747s had upper deck lounges for first-class passengers decorated with tropical flowers. But those amenities soon flew into a melting Hawaiian sunset to be replaced by few frills, boxed food for purchase and as many seats as possible. Thanks to the jet age, Hawaii became more accessible than ever — now, you can even get there on Southwest — but the romance of getting there just wasn't the same.

More Hawaii News

— As visitors to Hawaii decline, risks abound
— 33 years after his son went missing in Hawaii, father still holds out hope
— 'It's terrible': Hawaii locals fight back against proposed new hotel with lawsuit
— America's largest coffee grower faces closure

We have a newsletter all about Hawaii, with news, tips and in-depth features from the Aloha state. Sign up here.

Dec 20, 2025

Kent German
NEWS EDITOR

Kent German is a news editor at SFGATE. A California native, he's a USF graduate and a veteran of CNET, where he edited features and wrote the review of the first iPhone. He's also a dog person and a proud aviation geek with a healthy knowledge of airport codes. You can contact him at kent.german@sfgate.com.

If You Get Social Security, Don't Skip This March Benefit Check
By HealthyWallet

Seniors Born 1939-1969 Receive 11 Benefits This Month If They Ask
By Super Saving Online

Top Doctor: If You Eat Eggs Every Day, This Is What Happens
By Health Club Journal

Edema is Not From Salty Food. Meet The Real Enemy of Swollen Legs
By RejuvaCare

Forget Collagen, Use This Household Item Instead
By Health Club Journal

Cardiologist Warns Americans: "Pour Out the Bottled Water"
By Gundry MD

Let's Play

Cross|word | Pile-Up Poker | Typeshift | Really Bad Chess | Flipart

SFGATE

Top

About

Contact

Services

Quick Links