

The Golden Age of White Ships

A hundred years ago, a cruise ship arrived in Honolulu—along with Hawai'i's first tourism boom



There was a time, long before you could book airline flights online, when getting to and from Hawai'i often meant a leisurely sea voyage aboard one of the luxurious ocean liners built by the Matson Navigation Company. For half a century these American-flagged steamships connected San Francisco and Los Angeles with Honolulu and the South Pacific. The exquisite service and hospitality onboard came to be known as the "grand manner of Matson."

They were called the "white ships," for they were painted gleaming white. They bore the names *Lurline*, *Monterey*, *Mariposa* and *Makalo*, later renamed *Matsonia*. The largest carried seven hundred passengers—a lot then, if not today. A single modern cruise ship, carrying five thousand passengers or more, would have dwarfed the entire white ship fleet.

Duncan O'Brien, an amiable video producer from Canada, knows both today's megaships and the elegant

ocean liners of the past. When he was a boy in the 1970s, the white ships were the O'Brien family's preferred means of traveling to Australia to visit relatives, something they did almost every other year. It was a three-week voyage to Sydney from San Francisco aboard one of the twin ships *Mariposa* or *Monterey*, with stops in Hawai'i, Tahiti, Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand. O'Brien recalls vividly the carefree days of breakfast buffets, shuffleboard and sloshing around in the seawater swimming pool.



Before the jet age, visitors to Hawai'i arrived by sea, most aboard Matson's "white ships," which were integral to tourism starting in the 1920s. Matson's marketing emphasized romance and glamour; artists like Alfred Stieglitz—who illustrated the woman above and the woman waving on page 91—helped create the ads. Opening page: A tugboat nudges the SS *Lurline* away from the dock in Honolulu Harbor.

"I think because the trips were so long, the memories are very clear in my mind," he says.

He still goes to sea frequently, now as a guest lecturer for Princess Cruises. From October to May, peak cruise-ship season in the Pacific, he's more likely to be found on the open ocean than on dry land. His talks focus largely on the golden age of steamship travel in the Pacific, with particular attention on the white ships. He's written two illustrated histories on the subject—*The White Ships* and *The Grand Manner of Matson*—plus a children's book, wherein an adventurous young mouse goes to sea aboard the *Lurline*, discovering, among other things, the joys of the breakfast buffet.

He gives one forty-five-minute talk for each day his ship is at sea, offering insights into the bygone era that laid the foundation for today's cruising experience. "Eventually the cruise ship

model took over the steamship model, but it was Matson that set the bar and perfected it," he says. A popular talk might draw three hundred people—not enough to fill the cavernous cruise ship auditoriums but nearly as many as either the *Mariposa* or the *Monterey* could carry.

Matson today focuses on transporting freight between the West Coast and Hawai'i, something it's done for more than 140 years. It initially carried passengers, too, though without many frills. That changed in 1927 with the launch of the *Malolo*—the largest, fastest and most luxurious passenger ship of its day. Five hundred eighty-two feet long, with a top speed of twenty-three knots, the *Malolo* made the passage from the Golden Gate to Diamond Head in just four and a half days—nearly two days faster than any ship before it.

Malolo ("flying fish" in Hawaiian) was lavishly appointed, with stately furnishings and paintings of hula, surfing, volcanoes and other evocative Island scenes. Its seven passenger decks were connected via elevators, a novelty on ships at the time. Its indoor swimming pool resembled a Roman bath, and its well-equipped gymnasium came with fitness instructors and even a mechanical bull. As O'Brien writes in *The White Ships*, the *Malolo* had "a unique ambiance that was part Tudor manor, part grand American hotel and part tropical resort."

In the 1930s, the *Lurline*, *Monterey* and *Mariposa* joined the *Malolo*. Even during the Great Depression, enough well-heeled vacationers came to Hawai'i to keep the ships busy. To accommodate them, Matson built the ritzy Royal Hawaiian Hotel and obtained its regal neighbor, the Moana Hotel. "This was Matson's way of continuing their 'grand

manner' on shore in Hawai'i, and to ensure there were enough rooms for everybody," O'Brien says.

The arrivals and departures of passenger liners at Honolulu Harbor were marked with great fanfare, especially in the years before commercial jet travel, when Hawai'i relied on the steamers for transportation. Large crowds gathered on the piers beneath Aloha Tower to bid aloha—hello and goodbye—to traveling friends and relatives. Bands played. Cocktails flowed. Boys dove for coins tossed by passengers into the water.

Boat days remained a big deal well into the jet age, which drastically reduced Hawai'i's dependence on steamships. As O'Brien recalls, the excitement on arriving ships began at first sight of land and intensified after rounding Diamond Head, when Hawaiian entertainers, riding out in a launch to meet the ship, came aboard. "Then, when we entered the harbor, things really went off the charts," he says. "The crowd on the dock is waving and crying, the ship's whistles are blasting and there's an orchestra playing—as a kid from Toronto to come in and experience that was incredible."

The send-off ceremonies were more misty-eyed. After the visitors who came aboard to say their farewells had returned to shore, the passengers tossed colorful streamers down to them, and each side held an end as the ship eased away from the pier. "When you have five hundred people on deck throwing these things, it creates this massive tangle of color," O'Brien says. "Then the ship starts pulling out from the dock, and the band is playing 'Aloha 'Oe,' and all these streamers begin tearing apart—and when the last streamer broke, that was it—it was time to go."

Boat days could draw thousands of well-wishers, especially when celebrity passengers were aboard, which was often. "All the big celebrities from the 1920s on came to Hawai'i," O'Brien says. "It was the thing to do. And most of them would mingle freely with the passengers as if they were just another guest." When the child movie star Shirley Temple arrived on the *Mariposa* in 1935, newspapers estimated the crowd at

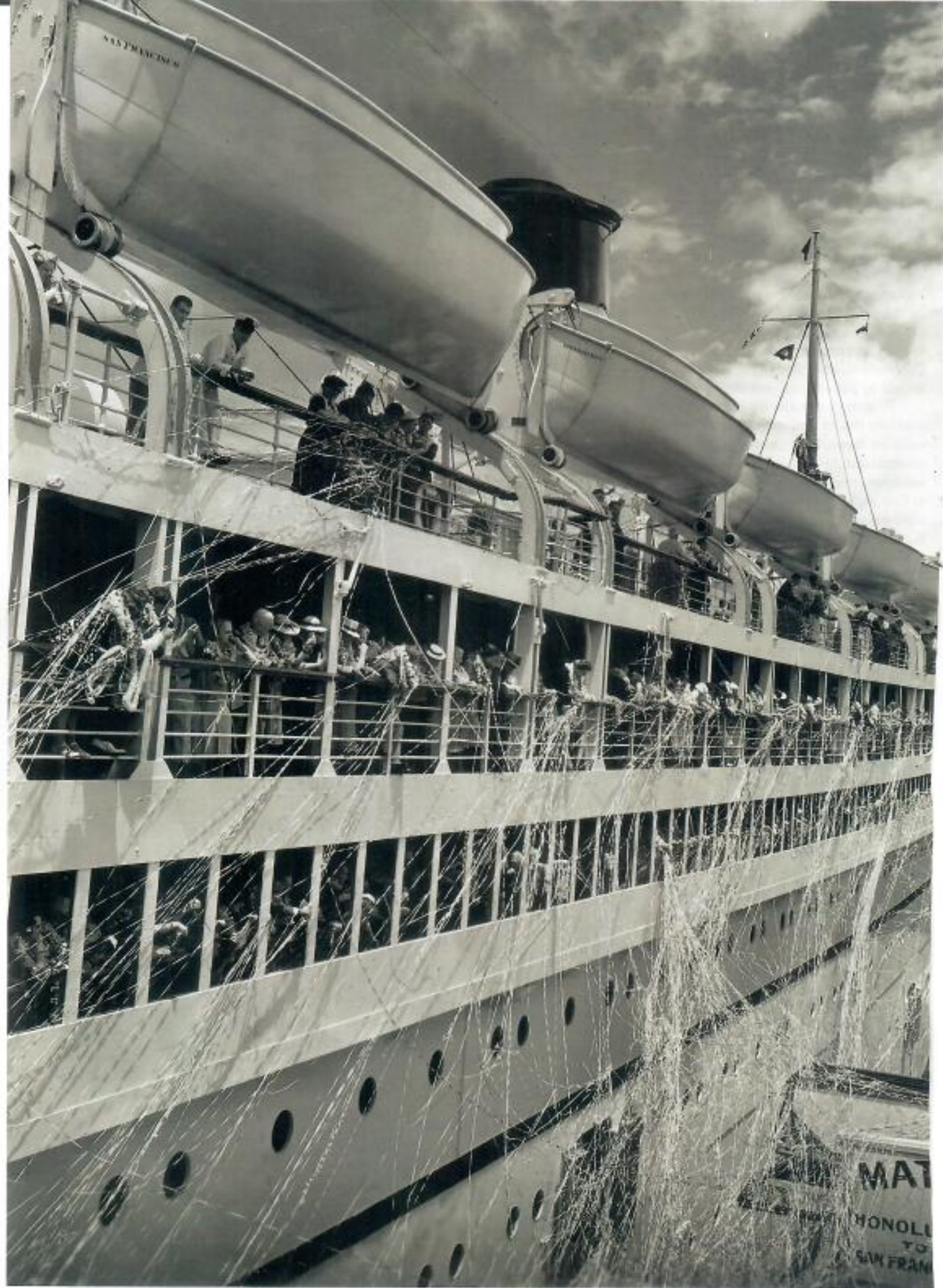
For you. For Family.



Honey, I'm going to Hawai'i to
play golf with my buddies.

Great, when are we going?







ABOVE / Staterooms for trips to Hawai'i in 1933 started at \$125, about \$3,100 nowadays. "Lanai Suites," seen advertised above, started at \$1,000—a whopping \$25,000 today.

FACING PAGE / Festive "boat days" marked the arrivals and departures of the white ships in Honolulu. One tradition called for departing passengers to toss streamers to those remaining behind.

ten thousand. As the ship docked, the six-year-old stood on the balcony outside her family's stateroom and sang "The Good Ship Lollipop," accompanied by the US Marine Corps band and all the kids who knew the words.

After Elvis Presley performed in Honolulu in 1957, the press reported, five thousand teenagers—mostly girls—turned out for boat day to see him off. As the *Lurline* pulled away, Elvis appeared near the captain's bridge in a long-sleeve aloha shirt unbuttoned at the chest. Flinging one leg over the rail, he tossed air kisses and flower lei to his screaming admirers below.

World-famous surfer Duke Kahanamoku sometimes boarded the ships to welcome visiting dignitaries and movie stars, including Groucho Marx in 1937. As the comedian wisecracked nonstop during a shipboard press conference (approaching Honolulu on a stunningly clear morning, he quipped, "looks just like Philadelphia to me"), Kahanamoku hoisted him upon his broad shoulders for the photographers, echoing a photo he'd taken two years earlier with Shirley Temple.

Not every VIP was so lucky. The movie star Bette Davis, who arrived



TOSHIKO TAKAEZU WORLDS WITHIN

FEBRUARY 14-JULY 26

Experience 70 years of work by this groundbreaking Hawai'i artist.

**Ho
MA**

Honolulu
Museum
of Art

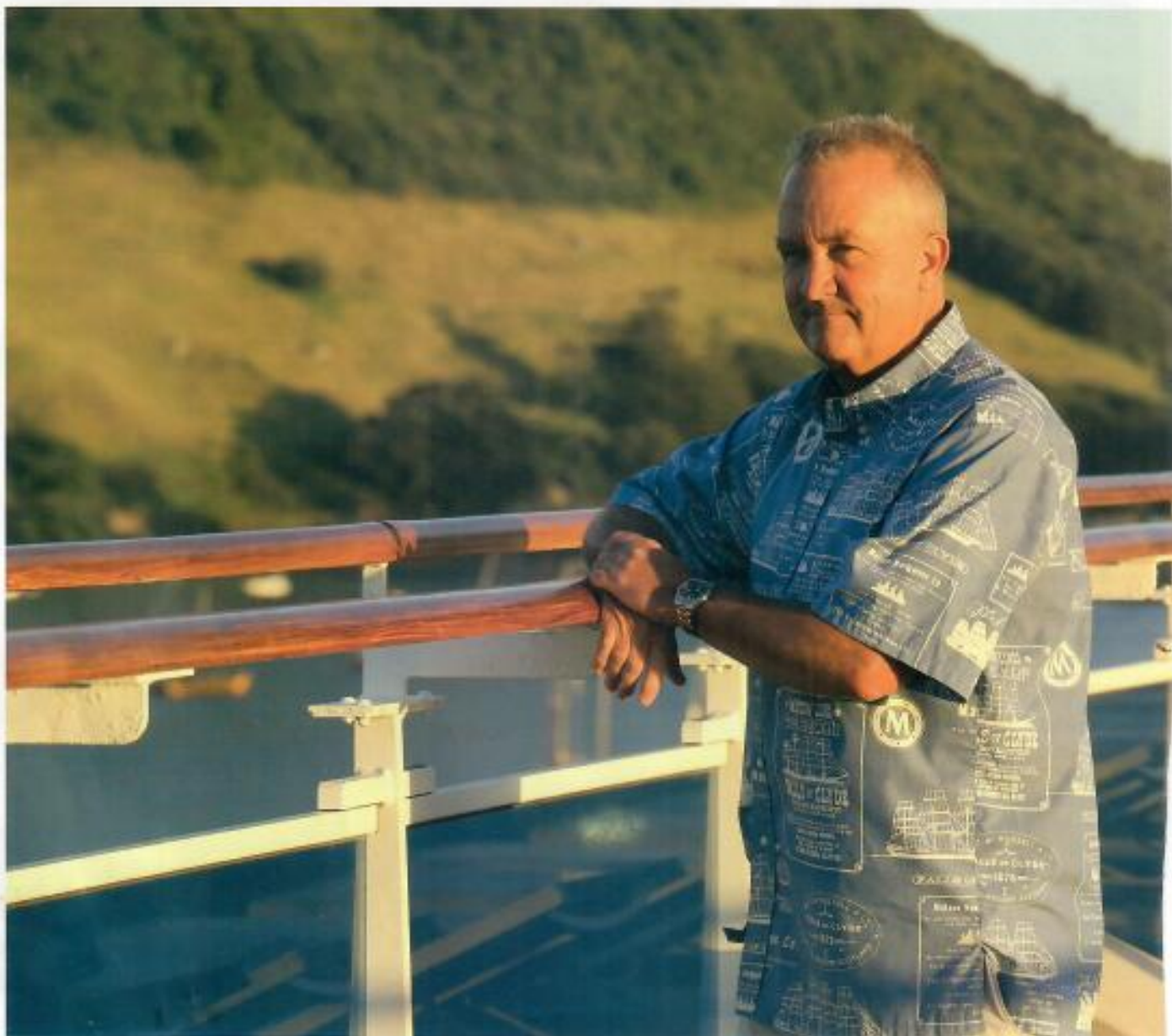
Open Wednesday to Sunday
honoluluuseum.org

ORGANIZED BY
noguchi

MADE POSSIBLE BY

LUCC HENRY
LUCE
FOUNDATION

terra Foundation for
American Art



As a guest lecturer for a cruise line, Duncan O'Brien teaches about the golden age of steamship travel, when Matson's white ships connected San Francisco, Honolulu and the South Pacific. Hawai'i's modern tourism industry emerged along the way. O'Brien is seen above on a cruise ship in New Zealand.

aboard the *Monterey* in 1940, was one whom Kahanamoku—who was also Honolulu's sheriff—missed. As the *Honolulu Advertiser* explained: "Seems Duke, greeter de luxe, couldn't come down and shower Bette with leis as he'd have liked to. 'He sent me apologies instead,' she choked with laughter, 'for he was busy putting someone in jail.'"

The white ships carried so many celebrities and appeared in so many movies and TV shows that O'Brien's

talk entitled "Sail with the Stars! From Hollywood to Hawai'i" is a two-part presentation. The 1927 debut of *Makalo* coincided with the dawn of talking pictures, and the ship appeared in one of the earliest "talkies," *Feet First*, starring Harold Lloyd as a hapless shoe clerk who becomes an accidental stowaway.

Hawaii Five-O was among the TV shows featuring white ships, often in the background and sometimes more prominently. In the 1968 pilot episode,

the *Lurline* doubles as a Communist spy ship posing as a luxury liner. In another episode, Five-O's detectives search for a killer during a voyage of the *Monterey*. "They actually filmed that one on the *Monterey* and used real passengers and crew as extras," O'Brien says. "Some even got speaking parts."

In a talk entitled "Stowaways!" O'Brien delves into a problem that plagued the steamship companies



Matson's SS *Malolo* rounds Diamond Head on its inaugural voyage to Honolulu in 1927. At the time *Malolo* was the fastest and most majestic passenger ship at sea—"part Tudor manor, part grand American hotel and part tropical resort," O'Brien says. But it wasn't painted white until 1932. Originally it was "seal brown."

trip from Honolulu to Hilo in 1955. Eleven stowaways, ages 17 to 20, were arrested. Others slipped away unnoticed. The *Star-Bulletin* said at least thirty-five people were involved—it was "one of the worst-kept secrets of the year, as many persons in the Waikiki Beach area were invited to join."

The most colorful unpaid passenger O'Brien discusses was Frederick Butler, a baker from London who set out to see the world in "stowaway class," sometimes donning costumes and a fake mustache to avoid detection. The Australian press celebrated his exploits in the late 1930s, dubbing him the "Houdini of the Deep" for his ability to slip through the hands of the authorities.

Once he was believed to have been spotted aboard the *Mariposa*, disguised as a crew member, before it departed Sydney for Auckland. He wasn't

found during a search of the ship, but two other would-be stowaways were discovered hiding in the crew's quarters.

In a talk entitled "White Ships Turn Gray," O'Brien covers the history of Matson's passenger ships during World War II, when they were requisitioned by the US government, painted Navy gray and used as troop transports.

Ships that had been carrying a few hundred passengers were jam-packed with thousands of soldiers. Ballrooms and lounges were filled with bunks and cots. Anti-aircraft guns were mounted on decks. Portholes were blackened to block light that might be seen by the enemy. Champagne and caviar service was suspended for the duration. "One of their masts was hit by a crashing German aircraft, but all four ships

survived the war," O'Brien says. "That added to the Matson mystique."

In 1948, when the *Lurline* rounded Diamond Head as a civilian ship for the first time since the attack on Pearl Harbor, it was greeted by a flotilla of two hundred local vessels. An eighty-foot lei was draped around its bow. O'Brien says that "Lurline Day," as that epic boat day was called, marked "a return to normalcy."

Matson rebounded after the war stronger than before, building two more Waikiki hotels, launching new ships christened with the old names, *Monterey* and *Mariposa*, expanding its passenger service in the South Pacific and making the "grand manner of Matson" more affordable. But the world was changing. When the first commercial jet airliner touched down at Honolulu International Airport in 1959, the era of mass tourism had begun.

And Matson pivoted, selling its four Waikiki hotels.

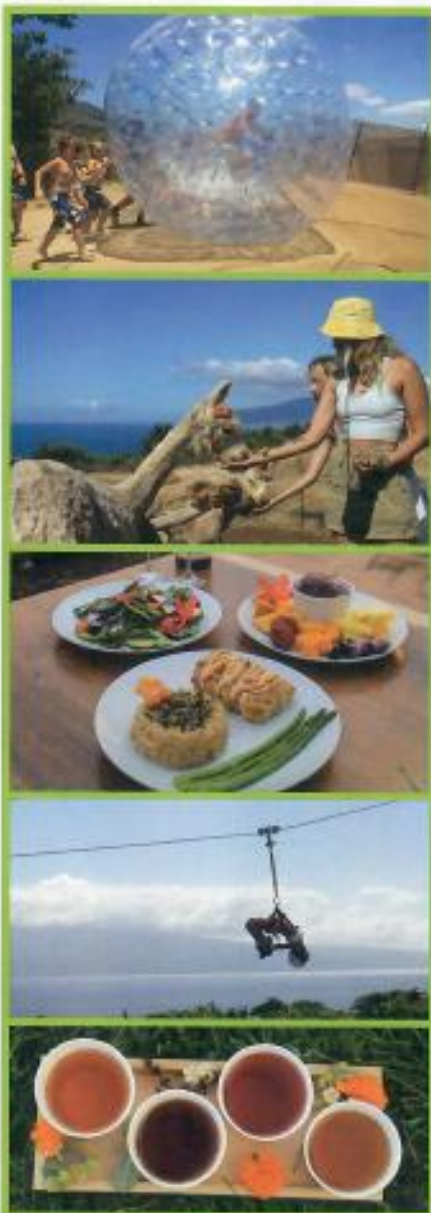
In 1970, with the cruise ship industry on the rise and its ocean liners showing their age, Matson sold the white ships. The new owner, Pacific Far East Line, kept them going until 1978, when the federal subsidies that helped sustain them expired. Foreign owners stepped in, the fleet was dispersed around the globe and the days of American-flagged steamships were done. Eventually all were salvaged or sank.

As a ten-year-old in 1977, during his family's final white ship voyage, O'Brien had no idea it was the end of an era. He had first traveled by white ship as an infant, and his family connection went even deeper: His parents had met aboard the *Monterey* in 1962, while sailing from San Francisco to Sydney. "The end of the white ships in the Pacific was a very emotional moment for passengers and crew," O'Brien says solemnly.

When the *Coral Princess* pulled into Honolulu Harbor one recent dawn, O'Brien looked down from the Lido Deck, fifteen stories up, and saw just two people on the pier—a dockworker and a security guard. It was a far cry from the rollicking boat days of his youth, though just one of many changes from the wondrous time when top shipboard amusements included driving golfballs into the sea, shooting at clay pigeons or simply whiling away the hours getting to know other passengers.

In the golden age of steamship travel that O'Brien recalls so well, a sea voyage meant leaving the world behind. Now, well into the age of cruise ships, the world comes along for the ride, with NFL games live on the Jumbotron above the pool, twenty-four-hour cable news in every stateroom and hypercharged, nonstop entertainment.

"I look back fondly on the vintage era," O'Brien says. "And so do a lot of other people who got to experience it. But the flip side is the people who didn't get to do that, they love cruising. It's what they know. And they've created a new life at sea for themselves." hh



The best adventures on Maui!

Come visit Paradise Eco-Adventures at our beautiful Maui Dragon Fruit Farm in Lahaina. Enjoy our exciting Zipline & AquaBall adventure, exotic tropical fruit tasting, alpaca and herbal tea tasting tour and sunset dinner tours. Our friendly team, gorgeous views and beautiful farm offer an experience you will not want to miss.

PRIOR RESERVATION RECOMMENDED

(808) 264-6127

833 PUNAKEA LODGE, LAHAINA HI
PARADISECOADVENTURES.COM



ACCESSORIES FOR YOU + YOUR PUP



Prints exclusively designed in Honolulu



bandanas



Walkies® bundles



collars



leashes,
poop bag holders
& more!!

Follow + shop

@portsandpaws
portsandpaws.com

V29 N°3
JUNE - JULY 2020



ISLAND INTELLIGENCE

20 /
Magic Markings

STORY BY MARTHA CHENG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELYSE BUTLER

23 /
A Walk Through Infamy

STORY BY PETER VON BUOL

24 /
Library on the Lava

STORY BY CONNER GORRY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN SPELMAN

27 /
Pâté People

STORY BY SARAH BURCHARD

28 /
Light Harvest

STORY BY LARRY LIEBERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT MALLAMS

30 /
Lucky Bunnies

STORY BY MADELEINE HILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELYSE BUTLER

DEPARTMENTS & FEATURES

34 /
The Exquisite Corpus
A meeting of imaginations
at the Hawai'i Artist
Collaboration

STORY BY CONNER GORRY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN SPELMAN

46 /
The Court Jesters
When the Harlem
Globetrotters needed a
rival and foil, Hawai'i
stepped up to the basket

STORY BY JARRETT VAN METER

54 /
A Bill for an Act
Bill Meyer has done
as much for Hawai'i's
creative industries as the
creatives themselves

STORY BY LARRY LIEBERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT MALLAMS

62 /
Kanikapila!
In Island backyards,
carports, parks and living
rooms, the jam goes
ever on

STORY BY DEREK FERRAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELYSE BUTLER

74 /
From the Ashes
The faces of Lāhainā,
three years after the fires

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANA EDMUNDS

86 /
The Golden Age of White Ships
A hundred years ago,
a cruise ship arrived
in Honolulu—along
with Hawai'i's first
tourism boom

STORY BY DAVID THOMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY HAWAII'S
STATE ARCHIVES

96 /
Pull Over and Grind
O'ahu's roadside food
corridor has a little bit of
everything, to go

STORY BY STEVE PETRANIK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTIAN NAVARRO



104 /
**Events Calendar &
Island by Island**

135 /
**Hawaiian Airlines
Information**

152 /
PAU HANA
A Cut Below

STORY BY BEAU FLEMISTER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW
SULLIVAN-HASKINS