

Willys Goes Hawaiian



It wasn't practical. It wasn't safe. It was questionably street legal. But the Willys Jeep Surrey, with its candy-store colors and fringed awning (seen above at 'Alekoko Fishpond on Kaua'i in a postcard from the mid-1960s), was the perfect vehicle for tooling around on vacation. For a decade during Hawai'i's golden age of tourism, it epitomized the carefree adventure of a trip to Hawai'i.

Perhaps no vintage car embodies tourism in Hawai'i in the late 1950s and '60s more than the Willys Jeep Surrey DJ-3A, built from 1959 to 1964. Painted in evocatively named colors like Tropical Rose, Coral Mist, Cerulean Blue and Glacier White, these simple, two-wheel-drive vehicles sporting striped upholstery, a fringed awning, whitewall tires and chrome bumpers were, briefly, a hallmark of Waikiki's heyday.

"The pink-and-white ones were perfect for the Hawaiian Village Resort," says Charles Phoenix, an expert on Midcentury Modern design, who featured the Surrey in his coffee-table book *Leis, Luaus and Alohas*. Elvis Presley had one; it's in the 1961 movie, *Blue Hawaii*. After filming wrapped, one was shipped to Graceland, in Memphis, where it remains today—the "only surviving one on public display," says Phoenix.

The Surreys were the brainchild of Henry J. Kaiser, the industrialist who developed the Hilton Hawaiian Village as well as the Hawai'i Kai neighborhood. In

1953, Kaiser purchased Willys-Overland, maker of the Jeep, to prop up his own failing car company, the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation. "Kaiser realized he could sell inexpensive Jeeps as a vacation vehicle," says automotive historian Patrick R. Foster. "It was really cheap to produce. The body tooling had been paid for a long time ago. The engine, too."

"They were extremely basic and cheap vehicles," says DeSoto Brown, historian and curator of the photo archives at Bishop Museum in Honolulu. "Otherwise, people wouldn't have been interested in them. With a kooky paint job and a fringe on the top, they were considered fun for a vacation." Based on Jeep's Dispatcher (a light truck marketed as a delivery vehicle for pharmacies and florists) and using an updated version of Jeep's World War II engine, the Surrey was cheap to produce and easy to maintain.

"You could get it as an open vehicle with one seat and no top, no doors and no passenger seats. It was the lowest priced new car at the time. Willys had

tried to market it as a pseudo-sports car," says Foster. Seatbelts were not mandated when they were made, so they didn't have any. Also missing: doors, a trunk or windows (except for the fold-down windshield). While they were cute for tooling around on resort grounds—many were sold to Hawai'i resorts and car rental agencies—locals saw them as impractical and unsafe. And an easy target, with "zero security for tourists' possessions," Brown says.

While they might have been inexpensive sixty years ago, today they're collector's items: A restored Tropical Rose model sold at auction in Chicago for \$49,500 in September 2025. Only about fifty of the original 1,200 remain, making Surreys among the rarest of Jeeps.

The Surrey was the perfect vehicle for visitors at a time when many more tourists were coming to Hawai'i, says Phoenix. "For those from the Mainland, Hawai'i was just a completely different experience. Unless you hired a driver or were on a tour, the Surrey was your perfect ride."