

## The Spirit of Aloha:

By Alexandra Kahn

A series of mountainous islands make up the small arcing shape of America's Hawaiian islands. While technically a state, Hawai'i is vastly different from the rest of America's culture and remarkably similar to the Polynesian culture—the people who initially discovered and developed Hawai'i. While I have traveled to Hawai'i before as a tourist, during 2017 and 2018 I decided to spend significant amounts of time living there. With this additional time, I delved deeper into the natural beauty that has formed legends, a history that has shaped culture, and a state of mind that has formed attitudes. While each island has a unique geography and vibe, they share the Hawaiian pride and the spirit of Aloha.

While by definition, the word "Aloha" translates to "Hello" or "Goodbye," it also means "love" "peace," and "compassion," and the Hawaiians look to it as a guideline for living. Those who live here and have adapted to the Hawaiian way of life work hard to preserve and infuse the culture into their days. Hawaiian words such as "Ohana," meaning "family," "Mahalo," meaning "thank you," and "pupus," meaning "appetizers" are all incorporated into their English sentences without hesitation. They go for "Pau Hana," meaning "after work" drinks and watch the sunset from the "lanai," or patio while toting their "slippers," or flip-flops as we call them elsewhere. They refer to relaxing or hanging out as "cruising" and often ask, "howzit?" for "how are you doing?" The people use the Shaka to symbolize the Aloha spirit, but it also symbolizes the feelings of gratitude, friendship, and understanding. This pride in and adoption of Hawaiian culture shines throughout all parts of each island and every type of person you might encounter- from the homeless man on the street, to the politician, to the professional surfer. By channeling the spirit of Aloha, it unites the island in a feeling of calm and an appreciation for the present. As a "haole," or foreigner, I struggled to remember the local terminology and often laughed at the bizarre form of a language barrier; however, the uniqueness of this culture within the United States is extremely rare and worthy of a visit.

Coming from Maryland and then from Colorado, on "the mainland" as they call it, I am used to a more "agro" form of living. People rush, honk, get angry, and often wear sour expressions. Everyone has somewhere to be and someone to see, or so it seems. It is rare just to stop and watch the sunset with a group of people, or drive slowly through a sun shower where a rainbow reveals itself. There is often stress and anxiety, a struggle to figure out what is next, and how to accomplish tasks with greater ease. I arrived with this mental baggage and mind-frame from the mainland, and the power of the islands made it dissipate overnight. For the most part, I forgot how to feel stressed and how to rush. I forgot how to get upset over trivial things or worry about what the future holds. I learned to live in the present in my everyday life- however, my style of and passion for climbing and fitness did not and will not fully adopt the Aloha spirit :)

The climbing culture on Oahu is relaxed, friendly, and unlike any climbing culture I've seen. Conditions are sub-par, areas are sparse and often access sensitive, and there is a tiny outdoor climbing population. Typically, someone brings beer and music to the crag, and there is usually more cruising or cleaning than climbing. However, indoor climbing is growing at a staggering rate considering the ability to be outside 365 days out of the year, and this is all in part because Oahu now has two climbing gyms: The Arch Project and Volcanic Rock Gym. The gyms locations are about 30 minutes apart, but during rush hour, they might as well be on different islands. One gym resides in the beautiful gentrified area of Kailua on the east coast. The other, where I worked throughout my entirety in Hawai'i, is located in a business park on the way to the famous North Shore. While The Arch Project is a brand new Walltopia gym and for the most part, aimed at introducing new people to climbing, the homemade Volcanic Rock gym has been around for some years and is well established as a facility for training and competition.

The climbers who go outside make up such a small group, that they all know each other and often climb together— there is even an Instagram account dedicated to them, @boulderinghawaii. This account focuses more on Oahu, as that was the first island to have established climbing; however, with recent development, Maui now has significantly more established rope climbs and around the same amount of boulder problems. Maui has such climbing potential, compared to the other islands, that even Jeff Jackson, the past editor of America's famed Rock and Ice Magazine, now lives there. The climbing population is even smaller on Maui, but unlike Oahu, they all climb outside because there is no indoor facility. There was once a small co-op gym and now there is talks of a real climbing gym coming in 2019, but nothing has been built yet. There are a few Maui climbers who have taken the reins regarding rope and boulder crag development, as well as a couple of folks from Oahu who make regular trips over to assist in the development of the areas. There has been such interest from foreign and local Hawaiian climbers that two of the primary Maui developers have even began their own guiding service- [mauirockclimbing.com](http://mauirockclimbing.com).

Lance, a local climber/outdoor enthusiast, and our weekend host picked up my friend Wai Yi (one of the few outdoor female climbers in Hawaii) and I from the Maui airport after a 30-minute flight from Oahu. It was my first time exploring Maui climbing, and I couldn't wait to sample some of the climbs I had seen in photographs. In the real spirit of Aloha, Lance arrived with a cooler of cold drinks, zip locked snack packs with our names written in permanent marker, and a smile to warm even the coldest of hearts. The weather was raining and muggy, but "did we want to tour the island?" he wondered. Having been to Maui once as a kid and never ventured far from the resort, I had read all about the wonders of the island. He suggested we drive straight from sea level up 10,000 feet to the famous volcano of Haleakala; luckily for me, this had been the number one attraction on my list. Driving slowly up the winding road, we broke through the clouds, and it looked as if we were floating above the earth. The volcano was different than I had expected. Inactive, it had become a common location for hiking and camping. There were shades of red and brown in varying textures and shapes in every direction. Throughout the remainder of the day, Lance drove us to different villages and

down beautiful roads, stopping periodically to describe a native plant or pick fruit from a tree. He was so proud of his island and giddy to share his enthusiasm with us. We saw trees bearing bananas, mango, lilikoi, and papaya; we chopped sugar cane and chewed the stalks. Something about this island felt like traveling back in time; it was much quieter and less developed than Oahu. The pace was even slower here, as was the speed limit, and most of the roads were wide enough for one car to pass.

Maui as an island has more varying altitudes and temperatures than Oahu. Because of this, conditions are often colder and dryer throughout the island, which has allowed for extremely different styles of rock to develop over time, including reddish-brown cliffs which resemble sandstone. Having only climbed in the main bouldering areas of Oahu, I had assumed that the rock throughout each island was sharp and volcanic. However, I was learning that the rock on each island varies at each area- even if they are only a 15-minute drive apart- providing an exciting variety. In Maui alone, I encountered towering cliffs of bullet hard face climbing, technical slab, and unique overhanging features all in one zone. Across the island, rock is covered in slopers, crimps, and even holds that resemble hexagons. There is sport climbing as tall as high-ball boulder problems, some a full 70-meter rope length, and others that are nearly 600 feet of multiple pitches with ledges at each belay station. Rope climbing, however, is just one of the climbing aspects Maui offers. There is also deep-water soloing and bouldering; jugs, crimps, slopers, pinches, short power lines, long endurance lines, you name it, they have it. While the island of Maui has no climbing gym yet, the plethora and diversity of the natural rock resembles a gym in itself. The climbing population is less than 20, and they all meet up on Sundays at the gym version of the local crag known as PK. PK is the easiest approach of the climbing areas, allowing cars to literally drive to the cliff and park. This area has over 30 lines ranging from warm-up to 5.14; there is camping, a fire pit, a compostable toilet, ample parking, and 30-second access to a beautiful black stone beach. The rock is unlike any I have ever seen, large rounded sloping holds and pinches covered in little bumps which the hands must grip for dear life. The rock is black, and the walls are sustained, coupled with warmer conditions, these walls give you a run for your money. Like most of the climbing I had sampled in Hawaii, the grades were never undervalued. Less than 20 minutes away by narrow curving road that is bordered by ocean and mountain, a valley opens up to reveal almost 100 boulder problems and an entirely new steep crag the locals have recently begun to bolt. These boulders look slick in appearance but actually allow for excellent smearing and a gripping texture. There are roofs, jugs, slabs, slopers and some of the better crimps I have climbed on anywhere. The setting is stunning with tall jagged mountains bordering both sides of the valleys and wild goats running up and down the steep cliffs. I was able to quickly make one of the few ascents of the tension style crimp line Kaimana SDS 7B+/C which sits in the middle of the river bed that divided the valley over time. **(I supplied pictures of this boulder)**

At the back of the river bed, the canyon dead ends at a massive steep cliff with the potential for dozens of lines. The cost for bolting, along with the time required and the small amount of developers, is making Maui's development slower than it could be, but there are still dozens of projects left for even the most talented local climbers and end-

less rock to ultimately bolt over time. Three males have spearheaded Maui's bolting initiative and for the most part, have used their finances to obtain the proper materials to bolt the areas. However, the materials are expensive, and the labor is intensive, so there are constant crowdsourcing and fundraising initiatives to make development easier and quicker.

On Maui, climbing felt more like a group sport than an individual one; just as the climbers meet up to climb together on weekends, they meet up for meals as well. A potluck was one night and the other night, Lance had prepared a curry in a crock pot, and people were invited over to share the food. No one lived extravagantly, and yet everyone shared what they had. I have experienced great hospitality within the climbing world throughout my travels, so perhaps part of this spirit is ingrained in the minds of all who climb. Because we share a passion for something that is so hard for others to comprehend, we instantly accept and take in those who share that passion and are traveling from abroad. Climbers around the world want to showcase their home crags and get foreigners on their local test pieces to see how they fair. We desire to share our favorite meals and non-climbing places as well, wanting the foreign climbers to be a more significant part of our small climbing culture.

With multiple military bases and the bustling city of Honolulu, Oahu is the most populated of the Hawaiian islands. It is also most famous for its outdoor activities which bring tourists from around the world to experience famous sights like Diamond Head, Waikiki, and The North Shore. When I first visited Oahu in 2013, the gym culture was tiny, as was the gym itself. The climbers whom I met on the island all climbed outside and rarely ventured to the one gym in downtown Honolulu. The Arch, which is still today considered as the staple of Hawaiian outdoor climbing, had recently been found and partially developed, and this was the place the climbers frequented most. Located near the end of Ka'ena Point on the north-west side of the island, it could be accessed by both the north and west entrances to the park. Either way a high clearance SUV or a long walk is required, but the area provides some of the best conditions on the island because it is situated right on the water, allowing for a constant ocean breeze. The arch itself is massive and boasts some dozen climbs as well as a project or two. The climbs are long, the top outs are challenging, and the landing is terrifying, so climbers have taken to bringing massive inflatable pads as their primary form of protection. The climbs range from 6C to a project around the 8A grade, or harder. The lines combine sustained endurance and power, with the ability to grip sharp rock that often cuts or bruises the skin. Foot cuts and kneebars are a commonality, and falls occur frequently. The Hawaiian climbing community tries hard, harder than most, and I would even consider some to be reckless in their attempts, and yet they are so psyched and passionate about their sport that I cannot pass judgment. Climbers pile into trucks and truck beds filled high with crash pads, snacks, and beer, heading down the bumpy dirt road to the arch. Tides determine the ability to climb in this area, and its proximity to the ocean often leaves The Arch wet or partially submerged. The landing is always adjusting in height and stability due to waves which wash beneath the arch and move the black rounded-stone fall zone.

If you continue north along the coast, there are multiple other areas for climbing, including Mokuleia, Oahu's only rope climbing area. There are also numerous areas along the coast where boulders lie in different styles and difficulties. Some are in the forest on the mountainsides; some are in the jungle, some are on the sand, while others overlook the ocean from hillsides. There are boulders 20 feet high, and others so small, you wonder why anyone decided to climb them in the first place. Each area is slightly different- the scenery, the conditions, the style of climbing, the type of holds, the difficulty of approach- and yet, each one is worth exploring in its right if you have the opportunity. Whatever the style you are looking for, you will find it on the island. The rock I climbed on in each area seemed of decently high quality, especially the rock set back into the jungle where it was more protected from wind, water, and salt. The jungle rock, while being more solid, was also usually sharper, with more humid conditions and mosquitos. The jungle rocks also require more consistent cleaning because the atmospheric conditions provide an excellent environment for moss to thrive, re-covering the holds on a consistent basis. The rocks closer to the beach are naturally smoother and weathered from the island conditions, but offer wind, less bugs and cooler temperatures for climbers. The rocks set away from the jungle never have moss and if cleaning is required, it's more to wipe off salt accumulation.

One of the most iconic lines of Oahu is the highball boulder, Night Terrors 7B+. **(I PROVIDED PICTURES OF THIS ONE)**. I had only seen pictures of this line but had felt inspired to try it. Parking at the base of the dirt trail, each climber needed to carry at least one pad in order to protect the landing of the prized highball. The area was small, separated by thick tall plants, and probably comprised of about 30 different lines. The hike was somewhat steep, but the heat coupled with the humidity of the forest and the weight of the crash pads had me slightly pessimistic for the day. After placing the pads down, one of the first pre-climbing rituals is unpacking the mosquito coils and lighting them. While the climbers bring bug spray to each area, the mosquito coils, which resemble something similar to incense in scent and look, are known to keep the mosquitos at bay and decrease the need for additional reinforcements. That day was my first day climbing outside on the island during the trip, and my senses were on overload from the mosquito coils, peeling paper trees, and swarming fruit flies which scattered as you stepped over the rotting fallen fruit of the forest. The Colorado climber in me wondered how anyone would even want to climb in such poor conditions. I was with three other female climbers and one male; however, I seemed to be the only one affected. Like the other areas, there was such diversity in style and rock type in such a small zone. We warmed up on a juggy lip traverse with some powerful toe and heel hooks followed by vertical tiny crimps up a face before repacking our things and walking over to the main boulder we had come for, Night Terrors.

Wai Yi is the only female to have completed this problem, and for her small size, it is an impressive feat. Wai is well known to be the strongest female boulderer throughout the Hawaiian Islands. While initially from the mainland, she made her home in Hawai'i years ago and never looked back. However, she is just one of many female climbers stretching across the islands these days. When you approach the boulder, the sight is so impressive that it is easy to understand why she chose it as her project and did not give

up until completion. With a relaxed start of traversing jugs, the climb kicks into high gear with a large and powerful move to the left, followed by a somewhat mandatory foot cut and pendulum swing from a high right foot to an upper left foot. The resulting body position is nearly horizontal as climbers are forced to mantle out of a hand/heel match on to slick holds. The boulder itself sits in a small clearing surrounded by towering arching trees with paper-like bark. With the unclear access issues surrounding much of the climbing on Oahu and the small population of outdoor climbers, there is no official trail. Slipping and sliding down the loose dirt, Wai Yi leads the pack.

When I visited Hawai'i four years ago, I met Wai Yi and the only other outdoor female climber at the time, Nancy Nguyen. Nancy is now the co-owner of The Arch Project Climbing Gym and the woman who I lived with during my entirety on Oahu. On this particular day I was accompanied by both Nancy and Wai Yi, a rarity with their heavy work schedules. During my time in Hawai'i, I never went to a climbing area with less than four other people and some days there were close to twenty climbers in our group. I was amazed by the quick pace in which climbing had grown from under 50 people to well over 300 in a place where everything moves on "Hawai'i time."

To fit with the calming spirit of the island, no one is ever in a rush, and no speed limit exceeds 50. Even on the highway, despite the multi-lane roads, it just takes awhile to get anywhere. The northern areas should be only 30 minutes of driving time from Honolulu, but due to the speed limit, often exceed one hour each way. Everyone on the islands, and all those who have traveled there, joke about Hawaiian time. It's something I tried to get used to and had to learn to accept- the concept that nothing ever starts on time and no one cares because everyone is cruising. If someone says we will leave at 10 am, you're often lucky to go before noon, if a party starts at 2 pm guests roll in between the hours of 4 and 5pm. Things end when people run out of food, run out of alcohol, or decide to go to sleep, no earlier. When house guests are fatigued, they are invited to spend the night because driving is too inconvenient in the late hours. No matter if there is not physically a place to sleep, the floor- carpet or wood- is always a suitable option and preferable to a 30-minute drive to your bed. I was often encouraged to pack a bag when I visited friends, because why would I go home? This welcoming feeling, as well as the ability to accept the invitation, felt foreign at first, but like most other attributes of the island, I got used to it.

The newest island undergoing development is the big island of Hawaii. Entirely different from the other islands, this island gets snow at the top of its highest volcano. The vastly differing elevations make for climbing conditions ranging from jungle to alpine, with some rock being smooth river stone and others having lots of texture. The most significant access issues are currently on the big island, as much of the climbing sits on private property. As with many smaller areas across the world, access issues are a problem and something to be respected.

These issues are a general concern on Oahu as well, preventing growth from happening quicker. The Arch Project, where I taught climbing classes, was initially started as a non-profit with the end goal of legitimizing rock climbing as a recognized sport by the

state of Hawaii, which would ultimately help with gaining more legal access. The non-profit now organizes their efforts in the gym and is involved in matters like trail cleanups, raising money for the homeless, and providing meals to those less fortunate. The non-profit and the gym alike have become a way to bring people together based on something they love- climbing- and allow them to give back to their community as a group. As I prepared to leave for Thanksgiving day with my family, my climber friends were prepping for a massive Thanksgiving meal to donate to the homeless population of Honolulu. This giving back mentality, once again, was part of the spirit of Aloha. It is seen in the actions towards friends, towards peers, towards those who are older and wiser, or younger and naive, those who are more affluent and those who are poorer— everyone is worthy.

I spent a significant portion of my time at the climbing gym- setting, teaching, training, coaching. The spirit of Aloha was even present here, and the welcoming vibe of that magnitude was one I had yet to experience in a climbing gym. Half the staff at the climbing gym are female, and at least a third of the members and drop-in climbers were also female. In a sport that for so many years has been dominated by a male presence, it was nice to see the global shift towards equality happening in Hawai'i as well.

My time spent in the gym, as well as exploring a variety of climbing areas around Oahu, increased my appreciation for the scenery and the motivation. As time progressed, my body became accustomed to the conditions, and they no longer felt humid and foreign. I no longer worried about the status of my skin or the conditions outside, as long as it wasn't raining. I grew an appreciation for the different settings of each boulder and the obstacles that accompanied each area. The seaside areas came with whipping winds which sent pads flying; sea spray caused an unfamiliar slimy, slickness, and tides and wave size determined accessibility. The jungle areas resembled a more tropical version of Switzerland's Magic Wood and portions of Austria's Zillertal. Here the air was stagnant, the mosquitos buzzed and the humidity soared, but you climbed amongst massive vines, waterfalls, flowers, and beautiful moss. Then there were the forest areas, like the area of Night Terrors. The boulders were set apart and often included harsher hikes, but there were still winds, the humidity was not unbearable, and the earth was dry. There are even more areas spread out across Oahu at various elevations, and there is also deep-water soloing on a few of the islands. The diversity of climbing on these small remote islands is one of the things that makes it so unique. From multi-pitch crimping slab sport climbs, to slopers and heel hooks on horizontal arches, there is indeed a mixture for everyone if you are lucky enough to find it.

Despite the warm, welcoming and psyched vibes of the Hawaiian climbers, as the incredibly dedicated climber that I am, I struggled to understand how the climbers of Hawaii could maintain their skills and improve in such a relaxed environment and I wondered if they even cared. Coming from Colorado where everyone was consistently focused on improvement and training to be better at their sport, the concept of just climbing for enjoyment brought me back to my youth and why I began climbing in the first place. I often was surrounded by other climbers in the gym, but as I climbed, cam-

posed and trained, they regularly watched from their post on the ground, occasionally asking questions about my gym routines. Each week I taught a clinic at the gym, but my students were more excited to listen and watch me demonstrate than do the activity. I worked my hardest to motivate the students to try harder and climb more, even giving homework to practice in between sessions and for those who listened, I witnessed significant improvement. But just like Hawaii time and the spirit of Aloha, no one stressed about fitness, sending climbs, or training harder when it boiled down to it. If it rained, beers were cracked open as we huddled under the rock and watched the drops fall. "Perhaps it will dry? Maybe it won't? At least we are outside," they would say. "But how can we climb in the rain, it's so slippery?" I would complain, "this is Hawaii, it's never good climbing conditions, you just deal with it," they would laugh. I was often asked my opinion on the grade of a climb and would struggle to come up with an answer. Had this been anywhere that wasn't tropical or offered the exceptional climbing conditions like I am accustomed to in Colorado, each climb would feel significantly less difficult; but it was humid, hot, and wet and that had to be taken into account when grading the line. Regardless of the grades or the conditions, the support that the climbers had for each other was contagious. Whether it was during one of my clinics, on a random day in the gym, or outside at the crag, when someone accomplished a move they couldn't do previously, got to a high point, or completed the climb, there was typically applause and fist pounds all around. Climbers took turns, cheered, and spotted. While I had previously thought of bouldering as a very selfish sport, it seemed a bit less greedy here and a little more like a team sport, because we were all one big team, one big ohana.

Suddenly conditions and grades didn't seem to matter as much to me. With climbing on a tropical island, one should be prepared to feel humbled at the difficulty humidity and heat brings to the sport. Just like other tropical climbing destinations like Thailand, Vietnam, Cuba, and Virgin Gorda, climbing conditions are something you overlook in order to climb in a unique tropical paradise. These tropical climates never have a cold season, they merely have wet and "dry" seasons and climbing on a sunny, humid day seems ideal when compared to hiding inside from a monsoon. Hawai'i might never be considered a "climbing destination" and has even less climbing than Thailand, Vietnam and Cuba, but as a vacation destination that includes crystal clear warm water, staggering mountains, endless sunshine and rainbows, and a unique culture, that ALSO has a variety of climbing destinations sprawled out across a couple islands— it seems like one of the best worldwide vacation spots to me!

When the time came to depart from Hawai'i, I suddenly did not feel like I was returning home, but leaving home. Oahu had become my home; the climbers, the surfers, and other outdoor enthusiasts I had met along the way who had so graciously accepted me into their lives and their homes had become my Ohana. The spirit of Aloha had taken hold of my mind and my heart and changed me; I was not ready to give that up. I had arrived in Oahu focused on climbing conditions, the quality and quantity of my skin, and wondering how quickly I could complete the hardest lines the island had to offer. Something inside me had shifted, and I felt reunited with the very reason I had started climbing in the first place. The spirit of Aloha made me remember that climbing was



about spending time in nature, making new friends, sharing time and conversations with like-minded people, encouraging others, maybe taking risks or feeling scared, but most of all, it was about having fun. As I packed my bags to depart at the end of 2017, I packed four plastic shopping bags that would stay, with the plan to return with a one-way ticket three months later. In 2018 when I returned, I instantly fell back into the rhythm of the island and felt at home. These days I bounce in between Hawai'i, Colorado, and a variety of other spots for work, travel, and outdoor adventures. No matter where I am in the world, I maintain a little of the inner Aloha spirit with me to help me stay present and grateful.

#### Practicality:

- The best option for outdoor climbing is to contact/show up at The Arch Climbing Center or Volcanic Rock Gym as soon as you arrive OR reach out to one of the few Hawaiian climbers through Instagram to inform them of your arrival and desire to climb outside. Just look for #boulderinghawaii to find the main climbers. Guiding is officially offered on Maui— through [mauirockclimbing.com](http://mauirockclimbing.com). They also rent pads here!
- On Oahu, the boulders at Waimea Bay and Ka'Ena Point are easy to locate, however you will need many pads if you want to climb at the Arch on the Point so that is best to do with a group. All other boulders are so difficult to find its best just to ask a local.
- The rope climbing on Oahu is also easy to find and is completely legal access as long as you sign a waiver (<https://www.hiclimb.org>)
- In Maui, if you get good directions you could find the rope climbing area of PK and possibly the main bouldering sector. For all other climbing areas on the island you will either want a guide or to reach out to one of the local climbers for location beta.
- When in doubt of access issues or exact location, it's best to always ask a local and connect with them for the first time you go to the boulders. As climbing is still so new and the amount of outdoor climbers is growing at a slow pace, the Hawaiian islands definitely has not grown into a "climbing destination"
- The Arch Project (Waipio, Oahu): <https://www.archprojectclimbing.com>
- Volcanic Rock Gym (Kailua, Oahu): <http://www.volcanicrockgym.com>