

Surfing on Oahu's North Shore

Surf Bus a great way to go

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Oahu, Hawaii

IMAGE: 1 OF 5



A family enjoys some shave ice in Haleiwa Town on Oahu's North Shore. LORI KNOWLES PHOTO

They call it The Surf Bus -- a groovy, Scooby-Doo-like Mystery Machine that chortles up to our hotel, the Hilton Hawaiian Village in Honolulu.

A flip-flop-clad local surfer named Sam -- our Shaggy -- hops out and invites us aboard, where we encounter seats full of affable travellers from the United Kingdom, South America, Australia and Brandon, Man. We may feel -- and look -- as though we've hooked up with Mystery Incorporated, but I assure you we're not splitting up to search for clues. The Surf Bus (northshoresurfbus.com) is taking us on a tour of Oahu's fabled North Shore, the Hawaiian home of professional surfing.

It's part of a quest for my 10-year-old son and me to learn more about the one sport that appears almost as much fun as our beloved skiing and snowboarding. Riding a wave looks as smooth as slipping through high-alpine powder. Where better to check out surfing than the place it was invented by ancient Hawaiians?

Historians tell us surfing in Hawaii was once a symbol of social status and power. Only royals and other elites were permitted to hit the surf, using the sport to stay in shape and prove their prowess to the common people. During the 1800s, missionaries discouraged Hawaiian language and traditions, and surfing all but died out.

It wasn't until the early 1900s that Duke Kahanamoku, an Olympic swim champ and actor, helped bring it back to life along Honolulu's Waikiki Beach. The Duke is considered the father of modern surfing, commemorated by a lei-draped

bronze statue on Kuhio Beach at Waikiki.

While Waikiki is a popular spot for novice surfers, the North Shore is where the pros head each November. The North Shore is the rugged side of Oahu, about 40 minutes from Honolulu, and as different from that city as the moon is from Earth. Where Honolulu is busy -- according to Sam, it boasts North America's greatest number of highrises next to New York and Chicago -- the North Shore is quiet. There are few huge hotels, no shopping malls and few condo developments. What the North Shore does have, especially in November and December, is really big waves.

"Why do surfers come here?" my doubtful son asks Sam as we approach the understated North Shore.

"Because," Sam answers simply, "the waves here are taller than trees."

The Surf Bus drops us at the north edge of Oahu where the Pacific Ocean comes crashing in. The waves -- which can reach heights of more than 12 metres -- are thundering onto the beach. Surfers are everywhere, on foot and in trucks, but also on bikes and mopeds. They carry their boards under one arm and steer with the other. Many are on their way to iconic surf spots such as Sunset Beach and the Banzai Pipeline, which are just minutes away.

At the North Shore Surf Shop, Sam offers us a set of bikes, and we follow the beachside Tree Tunnel Bike Path, which snakes past several of the world's most famous surf breaks. And that's how we spend our morning: Pedalling, pausing, snapping photos and pedalling some more. The beaches we pass are steep and rough, with soft deep sand, high winds and surf so huge and loud it's hard to have a conversation. For novice surfers, this is no place to learn but it is a spectacular place to watch.

It's late November, the month of the most humungous surf, and pros Kelly Slater and Joel Parkinson are out there practicing for the upcoming Pipeline Masters. The North Shore is surfing's most famous stage, and our bike ride along its rim is akin to walking into the Super Bowl and scoring a pair of free tickets on the 50-yard line.

Back at the surf shop, we trade bikes for snorkels and flap down to the ominously named Shark Cove. We're assured the natural tide pool is shark free, so we spend an hour skimming over jagged black volcanic rock, spotting prickly sea urchins and fish. While we don't spot any, spinner dolphins often put on a show off-shore.

Exhausted, we reboard Sam's surf bus for a short drive to Turtle Beach, where an 81-kilo sea turtle named Brutus is resting on shore. His Hawaiian name, Nalukai, means one who has endured the storms of life. We creep as close to the beautiful creature as we safely can while a volunteer stands watch. But we can't stay long. Paddle-boards are waiting for us on the Anahulu River. Stand Up Paddleboarding (SUP) is several notches down from surfing and just our speed -- a smooth, silent way to explore one of Hawaii's prettiest, jungle-like rivers. The crystal-clear Anahulu is filled with slow-swimming sea turtles my son says are larger than party pizzas.

It's late afternoon when the bus pulls into Haleiwa (pronounced HALL-A-eva). The North Shore town is low and slow, with pretty galleries, cafes and surf shops.

Tomorrow it's back to Waikiki (Wai means fresh water, kiki means splash) where, for this mother and son, the waves are far more manageable for surfing.

But for now, until Sam picks us up in The Surf Bus, we're happy to search for more clues along Oahu's North Shore, home of the Super Bowl of surfing.

BEST 5 BITES

Don't leave Oahu without sampling the following:

1. A shrimp plate, a spectacularly delicious Hawaiian food truck tradition.
2. Another tradition: Shave ice -- an ice-cold, rainbow-coloured dessert and kid-favourite.
3. Malasadas, a yeast doughnut of Portuguese origins.
4. Loco Moco. There are many variations but the classic consists of white rice, topped with a hamburger patty, a fried egg

and brown gravy.

5. A cup of local Joe. Hawaii is the only state in the U.S., where coffee is grown.

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