



INTO THE

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THE UNEXPECTED ALLURE OF MAUI'S PUBLIC POOLS



“This is like holy water — jump in and taste the water!” lifeguard Dennis Campos urges a pool-browsing couple. Though they prefer surfing and the ocean, they’re here because one of them has injured her hip and needs a gentler form of exercise. So they’re visiting pools across the island to find a small, quiet place to swim. Built in 1958, Coach Spencer Shiraishi Memorial Pool is Maui’s oldest public pool.

It’s also the island’s only saline pool. Swimmers are accustomed to getting water in their mouths, and hence Campos’ exhortation to fully experience Shiraishi: True to his word, it tastes less salty than seawater and feels less harsh on the skin than regularly chlorinated pools. (It does still contain chlorine, albeit produced through the electrolysis of sodium chloride.) “Everybody loves this pool. Look how pristine it is. Look how clear it is. ... It feels silkier,” Campos insists, along with several regulars who chime in. “You feel more fresh, skin not as dry—like you’re in mountain spring water!”

“You have a utopia of pools on this island,” a group of consultants once told Duke Sevilla, who oversees Maui’s public pools. Usually, they told Sevilla, municipalities plan one aquatic facility for every 150,000 residents. Maui County’s total population—which includes the islands of Maui, Lāna‘i and Moloka‘i—is a bit more than 166,000, yet it has eight public pools. Not only that, admission is free, which almost everyone I talk to mentions at some point with a mix of awe, gratitude and outright glee. Other common refrains: “It’s my home away from home,” and, less cheerfully, “Don’t give away our secret!”

For even though Maui might seem to have a surplus of public pools, peak times at certain spots can resemble “a piranha pit,” says one lifeguard—such as when forty or more high schoolers unload into a twenty-five-yard pool and circle-swim right on each other’s kicking heels, churning the water into a froth. The Kīhei and Upcountry pools, among Maui’s busiest, each draw about five hundred people a day, and the eight pools combined—seven on Maui and one on Moloka‘i—accommodate



Maui’s public pools have a diverse and devoted following, including 86-year-old Tommy Duarte (pictured on the opening spread) who is one of a group of recreational divers that practices in Kīhei each week. Much of the credit for the popularity of Maui’s pools goes to the county’s aquatics specialist, Duke Sevilla (seen above), and his cadre of lifeguards, which includes Dennis Campos (seen on the facing page and at top).

more than 2,300 people daily. What goes on in Maui’s public pools: Zumba, deep water aerobics, shallow water aerobics, rehab, fireman recruit training (long story), pilot training (even longer story), diving, water polo, swim lessons, high school swim meets and practices, swim club practices, off-season training for the Stanford and Harvard University swim teams and the occasional friendly debate among regulars as to who bakes the best butter rolls.

O‘ahu, where I live, has a number of great pools as well. But overall, Maui’s are better equipped, offer more programs and maintain more regular hours. When I ask swimmers why the island is so blessed,

the answer is often “Linda Lingle.” During her two terms as Maui’s mayor in the 1990s (after which she served as Hawai‘i’s governor, from 2002 to 2010), Lingle swam more than a mile almost every morning. The Lahaina, Kīhei and Upcountry pools were all built during her mayoral administration and are Maui’s largest aquatic complexes, each offering at least one fifty-meter pool and a shallow keiki pool.

Sevilla is like the lifeguard of all the pools. He has been the county’s aquatics specialist for twelve years, the longest stretch anyone has held the position. His mother named him after the legendary swimmer, surfer and waterman Duke Kahanamoku. “Wow, what a hard act to

follow,” Sevilla says. “He’s six-foot-something, and I’m only five-foot-six.” Not only that, but when Sevilla joined the Marine Corps and was sent to water safety survival training, he realized he couldn’t swim properly: Despite being born and raised on Maui, surrounded by the ocean, he flailed in the water. He wanted to quit, but his instructor said, “You better not make us Hawaiians look bad.” So he learned and eventually became a swim instructor in the marines. He left the corps, went on to teach swimming to all ages at the YMCA and then, in 1993 while working at Maui Youth and Family Services, helped initiate the island’s first junior ocean lifeguard program. These days the program has a competitive bent, but originally Sevilla intended it to be about personal development. “Everyone has different values, different personalities,” he says. “But lifeguards need to get along with each other. So we build character first.”

When he assumed his current position, Sevilla started a similar training program for pool lifeguards. In Hawai’i the spotlight tends to shine on ocean lifeguards and their heroics in temperamental waters, but Sevilla says pool guards are just as important. “In the ocean they’re saving a life in the moment. Here we’re saving lives by teaching people how to swim — we’re teaching kids survival skills for the rest of their lives.”

But swimming is about more than just keeping one’s head above water. “There are a lot of kids out there — they’re not basketball players, they’re not football players,” he says. For Sevilla it’s a sport for the underdog, which is a view that comes from personal experience: He went through drug rehab to become, among many things, a social worker and youth counselor. He also applied for his aquatics specialist position four times before he got it. “What’s one more ‘no’?” he recalls thinking before that fourth, successful, try.

Being the underdog is also part of Maui’s swim history. Sevilla’s office is next to Coach Soichi Sakamoto Pool, named after the elementary school science teacher who couldn’t swim, but nonetheless trained Olympic champions in the 1930s and ’40s. His first swimmers were skinny, impoverished plantation kids, and they practiced in Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Company’s irrigation ditches. He vowed they would become Olympians in three years, hence the name of the group: Three Year Swim Club. In the first year they won every Hawai’i competition they entered,



Maui’s warm waters lure swim teams from as far away as Vancouver, BC, (above top) for annual training camps. They also draw old and young from throughout the island: Naomi Mark (middle right) was a competitive diver in college and is part of the regular crew that meets each week at Kīhei; Stacy Dugan at Com-Wood’s keiki swim classes (middle left) and water aerobics sessions (bottom) are also wildly popular

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and by the second year they had captured a national swimming title. The war canceled the 1940 and 1944 Games, so it wasn't until 1948 that Sakamoto saw any of his protégés capture gold medals—that year, Thelma Kalama was a member of the winning 4x100-meter relay team, and Bill Smith, part of the original Three Year Swim Club, won the 400-meter freestyle and 4x200-meter freestyle relay. Smith, who was of mixed Hawaiian and Irish ancestry, would ultimately go on to hold world records in all of the freestyle swimming events between 200 and 1,000 meters.

Each pool has its own personality. The walled-in Sakamoto Pool (fifty meters long, eight lanes wide and up to thirteen feet deep) in Wailuku town attracts downtown workers and Department of Parks and Recreation employees on lunch break. Anyone can use the one- and three-meter diving boards when there are three lifeguards on duty, though the pools are often short-staffed. Kokua and Shiraishi, the other town pools in Kahului, also tend to draw locals. The New Wailuku Pool isn't really made for swimming—shallow, edged with handrails and kept warmer than the others, it's considered the therapeutic pool.

The Lahaina, Kihei and Upcountry pools attract transplants and transients—winter snowbirds, summer visitors and year-round retirees who live nearby. The Lahaina Aquatic Center's competition pool is fifty meters by twenty-five yards and up to six-feet deep (no one has yet been able to give me a convincing reason why American pools use both metric and imperial measures). It is the island's only tiled pool (as opposed to plastered), making it especially beautiful in the afternoon, as the setting sun ignites the tiles and seems to wash the Maui mountains in honey.

The Kihei Aquatic Center is the newest and largest of them all. It opened in 1999 with three pools: a fifty-meter competition venue, a twenty-five-by-thirty-yard warm-up pool and a shallow keiki pool. There are also one- and three-meter diving boards, from which kids as young as seven topple and twist. The center has hosted multiple Junior Pan Pacific Swimming championships, a proving ground for swimmers under 18 from the United States, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. Daniela Ryf, a four-time Kona Ironman champion, also trains here to escape the pre-marathon madness on Hawai'i Island.

Wednesday mornings at Kihei typically begin with their own kind of madness: The



Each of the Valley Isle's pools has its own character: Kihei Aquatic Center (above top) is the island's newest and largest facility, and it hosts major competitions; the Coach Soichi Sakamoto Pool in Wailuku (above middle left and right) is a popular lunch-break spot for downtown workers; the Lahaina Aquatic Center's competition pool (bottom), Maui's only tiled pool, is a favorite of visitors and residents alike.

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floodgates open at 9 a.m., and the waiting crowd pours in for water aerobics and lap swimming. Within the hour, hearts and music (blasted over loudspeakers) are pumping. But in the calm winter dawn hours, regulars staying in shape for open-ocean races slip in through a side gate cracked open for early morning lap swims. This is when I find Bettina Robinson, who says, "This pool healed me." After an accident, doctors told her she might never walk normally again. They wanted to open up her back and insert pins — instead, she took to the pool, gently exercising while watching dragonflies dip in the water. Now she's well enough to walk and ride horses again.

In Pukalani, the Upcountry Swimming Complex sits on the slopes of Haleakalā at 1,400 feet, welcoming swimmers with a view across a flat expanse, once covered in sugar cane, all the way to the ocean. It's made even more beautiful with the plants and orchids that senior lifeguard Sirena Lacour brings from home to set up in the reception and locker room area. "This is weird," she admits, "but [the poolgoers] are like my flock of sheep, and I'm the sheep-dog. I like creating a safe environment. And I like having an athletic environment. I like seeing the older aerobic people prove everybody wrong."

If you've ever wondered what a water-borne, swaggering bunny hop — done to the beat of the Supremes' "Baby Love" — looks like, this is the scene at the Upcountry pool on a recent Wednesday morning: About twenty seniors trickle into one side of the main, fifty-meter pool for the morning aerobics class, shrieking about joining the Polar Bear Club. This though all of Maui's pools are heated and kept right around 80 degrees in winter, which is not the case for all pools in Hawai'i. (Summer sees the opposite problem, and aerators cool the pools to keep the temperature below 86 degrees.) Jean Brooks, the oldest in the group at 87, shows up to class looking like a gangster granny in a baseball cap, huge, dark sunglasses and crimson lipstick. Four generations of her family use Maui's public pools: her daughter, for daily laps; her granddaughter, as part of the Maui Swim Club; and her great-granddaughter, who has grown up here, beginning in the one-foot-deep keiki pool. Brooks ultimately leaves early from the hour-long class. "After 85 you can do anything you want," she says. "I figured it all out twenty years ago: Who's going to tell me what to do?"

"I really thought this place was going to close forever. I was getting depressed," a regular at the Shiraishi pool tells me. It had been closed to fix a water main break, and because it's a sixty-one-year-old facility, people worried other problems would surface. They feared Shiraishi would go the way of pools of Maui's past, like 'Īao valley pool, where the cold (some say refreshing) water came straight from the Wailuku river, and the Pu'unēnē pool, located in a former sugar plantation camp. But to the relief of swimmers from across the island, Shiraishi Pool reopened after only three down days.

The pool is named after coach Spencer Shiraishi, who helped build it and began the Maui Swim Club in 1958. He trained thousands of swimmers over four decades and started the county's free learn-to-swim program for youth. Graduates of the classes now teach them, and parents are required to stay for their children's lessons, to discourage a drop-off culture. Shiraishi was known to give his swimmers hot chocolate and doughnuts after practice, so perhaps he would appreciate that one of the pool's regulars is thinking today of the box of warm butter rolls she'll pick up from Four Sisters on her way home, remembering the last time she ate them, dripping butter all over her lap as she drove. She and some of the other patrons spend as much time chatting beside the water as they do swimming in it. "This pool has a mom-and-pop shop versus a Walmart kind of feel," says senior pool guard Joshua Gibbins. When the pool consultants came a few years ago, they proposed replacing the aging pool with a new, large aquatic complex to accommodate more people — Gibbins says if so, he'd find another pool to work at.

The pool-shopping couple and I finish a few laps. I didn't bring goggles, and though the water doesn't sting my eyes, Campos tosses me a pair to show off the water's clarity. Campos is known among the aquatics administrators for being fanatical about the pool's cleanliness. Normally, the lifeguards clean the pool twice a week, but not so Campos. "I do maintenance every day," he says. "I'm diving in this pool with a net, scooping all the rubbish out. In my goggles, with my snorkel, like I looking for fish. You never going to see rubbish in the pool. I could take a Sharpie and draw a dot on one side of the pool and you going to see that from the other side." I ask the couple what they think. "I like this one," the woman says. They might have found their pool. **HH**