

This particular morning, 13 flights arrived from Japan, with more than 4,000 tourists who were shunted off to dozens of ground handlers with names like Appreciate Hawai'i Tours, Discover Aloha and U-Me Tours.

My host was Jetour, which provided the optional bus tour of the city. When everybody was assembled and their luggage had been checked, we walked single file to the bus past our lei greeter, who slipped a fresh lei over the head of each of the visitors. Except when it was my turn, the lei greeter frowned and looked past me. Some Japanese tourist I was: I didn't even rate a lei and a kiss.

Our first stop was Punchbowl, where everyone piled out of the bus and wandered up the steps of the monument. The

National Memorial Cemetery seemed to me an odd choice for a first glimpse of Honolulu, as if we were paying our respects to a bit of old history before plunging into the world of modern-day Hawai'i.

This was our first opportunity to take pictures, and, inexperienced tourist that I was, I had forgotten to bring my camera. I watched as the rest took pictures of the monument and each other, and then I took pictures for them of themselves. To my surprise, they proceeded to take pictures of themselves with me. Somewhere in an Osaka household, there is a slide show that begins with, "And here's this strange American who followed us around all week..."

From Punchbowl, we went on to the

Pali Lookout, the King Kamehameha Statue, and then, on our first shopping break of the morning, a long stop at the Ja Ja Center on Ala Moana Boulevard. There, we mingled with a dozen other Japanese groups and browsed over a broad selection of merchandise that ranged from lipstick gift packs (\$67.50 for a pack of 18) to beef jerky to golf balls with Hawai'i insignia (\$20 for a dozen).

Over coconut bars in the parking lot, I cautiously asked a group of women what they wanted to do in Hawai'i. The answers came haltingly in their limited English and I had to ask them several times to repeat themselves. "Shooting," said one woman, and from others, "Ride dune buggy," "Jet Ski," "Tantalus."

One woman named Akiko asked me a question six times before I figured out what she was asking: "Is it dangerous to drive here?" She was planning to rent a car and drive to the North Shore, and I tried to explain that yes, it was safe, and quicker if she avoided rush hours.

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