

Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa: The Magic Begins

by Elaine Masters, PassPorter Guest Contributor

□ The ancient island of Oahu holds a new treasure for travelers -- the unique Aulani destination Resort and Spa has finally opened.

□ From the first step into the lobby, Disney magic bathes the senses with a soft palette of natural hues and sounds.

□ Aulani is no gleaming white modernity looming over the coast. There's a sense that it's been part of the landscape for some time. Built on the southwestern shore of Oahu, seventeen miles from the Honolulu Airport, the resort is a trifecta of pale brown buildings. Its two modest towers with a central, steeply pitched lobby pay homage to a heritage of island architecture.

□ The resort lies in the quiet Ko'Olina neighborhood. There are few other hotels nearby. It's a peaceful contrast to the manic pleasures of Waikiki, a half-hour drive away. Approaching from the freeway, a rolling golf course lies across from the Aulani towers. Traditional Tapa patterns decorate each tower, running up nearly fifteen floors. It's clear from the first glimpse that this is a resort like no other.

□ The driveway rises up past low waterfalls and terraced Taro plants with their broad leaves reaching into the sunlight. At the entrance, tall wood-beamed arches lead into another world.

Disney would have it no other way. In the three years since a blessing ceremony and ground-breaking, plus years spent planning with local artisans, historians and architects, the Disney Imagineers have created a cultural wonderland. Because this is Disney though, vacationing at the Aulani is no academic outing.

□ Enter the lobby and on the left, the Feminine side, stands a tall, wooden sculpture still reflecting the tree it was shaped from. The faces carved into it nearly speak in greeting. A slow, gentle stream burbles behind it in an open courtyard. Beyond, corridor walls are alive with storytelling murals.

□ The name Aulani in the Hawaiian tradition means "Messenger of a chief -- one who delivers a message from a higher authority." The resort was built to reflect the vibrant culture that surrounds it, a connection to tradition and deep storytelling -- and its roots are in this land right here," Joe Rohde, senior vice president, Creative for Walt Disney

Imagineering has said. "We committed our skills in design to put guests into these stories," says Rohde.

□ Nearly every surface in the tall lobby ceiling relays that mission. It sweeps up covered in wide, illustrated bands depicting sea, earth and sky painted on traditional Tapa cloth. A huge window of stained-glass sparkles on the far side of the lobby. Its patterns brightly mirror the Tapa designs in a play of color. Low couches and gourd-shaped pendant lights beckon visitors to sit and savor the beauty.

□ On the western side of the lobby stands another tall wooden statue. It's also accompanied by a stream, this one rushing rapidly. More designs and murals cover the ceiling which wraps around to the front desk.

□ Just behind the check-in desk is a rainbow sculpture of pictures, the Keiki Wall. The layered photos were taken by keiki, Hawaiian children. Each image is vibrant with deep blues, violets and reds, blending through to bright yellow. It's a sweet delight and just one of the few color bursts designed into a lobby where brightly dressed visitors resemble tropical birds in paradise.

□ Opposite the front entrance, a veranda opens to the wonders of the seven-acre Waikolohe Valley water park. Koi ponds, a gentle floating water course, and a volcanic replica several stories high, wait within a sculpted tropical jungle. The volcano holds secret tube and tunnel water slides with Hawaiian faces sculpted into its walls. Streams and pools wind towards the sea, mimicking the flow of lava.

□ The resort also features an eighteen thousand square foot spa and fitness center, with Hawaiian healing traditions as well as more familiar indulgences to choose from.

□ A brilliant tropical sky watches over all, and beyond lies the ocean. The Rainbow Reef snorkel lagoon holds promise of close encounters with brilliant Hawaiian fish, and a conservation pond features a sting ray experience. Proceeds from that reservation-only activity go to the Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund, which helps support local research and conservation efforts throughout the Hawaiian isles.

□ Besides all the Hawaiian cultural detail and natural beauty, there are several restaurants with beachside dining, and buffets offering foods unique to Hawaii. Visiting keiki and their families can also meet their favorite characters over breakfast. It's easy to imagine the Little Mermaid frolicking in this unique oasis of Disney magic along the Ko'Olina coast.

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