

# **WAIKIKI - THE EVOLUTION OF AN URBAN RESORT**

**A HISTORICAL STUDY OF WAIKIKI AS IT COMPARES  
WITH THE BEACH RESORT LIFE-CYCLE MODEL**

**JOSEPH D. PATOSKIE**  
Co-Investigator and Project Director

**GEORGE K. IKEDA**  
Co-Investigator

Sponsored by the  
**JAPAN TRAVEL BUREAU FOUNDATION**  
and  
Prepared by  
**CENTER FOR TOURISM POLICY STUDIES  
SCHOOL OF TRAVEL INDUSTRY MANAGEMENT  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII**  
JULY 1993

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

## 1.0 Introduction

Waikiki, a world-renowned beach resort, is located near the city of Honolulu, Hawaii on the island of Oahu. Covering an area of approximately one square mile (1.6 sq. km.) with a 1.4 miles (2.26 km.) shoreline, it is bounded on three sides by water and by a small strip of land on its eastern side. For over a century, Waikiki has evolved into a modern urban tourism center. Recently, there has been growing concern that Waikiki might be on the verge of entering a decline in popularity because of its urban-related problems. This fear has prompted government, industry, and community leaders to begin studying ways to prevent further decline resulting in a number of studies analyzing the evolution of Waikiki and the reasons behind its current situation.

The resort life-cycle theory has been one popular approach which provides a historical perspective as a means of explaining the condition of resorts during different periods of time in their development. These periods are generally divided into discovery, growth, maturity, and decline, or some variation thereof depending on the model being used. Because urban resorts in their mature phase are especially vulnerable to urban problems (i.e., over-burdened infrastructure, pollution, congestion, and social and cultural disintegration), the theory contends that it is crucial that efforts at revitalization be made or else the resort will face probable decline.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Waikiki's past and present tourism development in the context of the resort life-cycle model, with two major objectives: 1) to review the evolutionary process that occurred in Waikiki's past as a means to better explain its present condition, and 2) to determine the utility of the life-cycle model itself as an analytical tool. The life cycle model used in this investigation characterizes beach resort evolution as a series of eight major stages: 1) Pre-tourism, 2) Second Homes, 3) First Hotel, 4) Resort Established, 5) Business District Established, 6) Inland Hotels, 7) Transformation, and 8) City Resort. These stages are grouped into four main periods - discovery, establishment, growth, and maturity. A comparison is then made between the model and Waikiki's own historical tourism development, with the similarities and differences noted and discussed.

## 2.0 The Four Periods of the Life-Cycle Model

### 1. Discovery

The period of discovery phase begins with little or no outside tourism. At this time, a small agriculture- or fishing-based settlement usually exists. A primary road connecting the area with the outside world becomes well-established. This eventually leads to increased visits by neighboring residents for rest and relaxation, followed shortly thereafter with the building of a few vacation homes. Over time, more second homes appear.

Recreation becomes a favorite past-time activity, and before long, area receives its first outside tourists (primarily explorers and adventure seekers).

Waikiki followed a pattern of resort development in its early history similar to that described by the life-cycle model. The resort began primarily as an agricultural community. Its sandy beaches and warm, sunny climate were enjoyed by local area residents - first the Hawaiian royalty, then later wealthy Americans who settled in nearby Honolulu. These day-time visitors built vacation cottages and bath houses along the beach. The declining amount of available property spawned the conversion of Waikiki's numerous ponds and wetland areas into developable land for tourism. Waikiki's ponds were drained and filled, a project culminating in the completion of the Ala Wai Canal in 1927.

## **2. Establishment**

According to the life-cycle model, the next period involves the establishment of the resort with the outside world, and begins with the development of the resort's first major hotel. Unlike prior establishments, this hotel appeals directly to high-budget travelers with expensive tastes. Accessibility to the resort improves, encouraging the development of a number of beach-front hotels. A development strip of beach-front hotels soon forms along the main street. Many houses situated along the business district are converted into small businesses, increasing employment opportunities for area residents and immigrant laborers. In the latter stages of this period, signs of pollution and congestion begin to be noticed. With little ability and/or incentive for local government intervention, these problems continue to grow, and the resort continues to be controlled primarily by the private sector.

Waikiki's period of establishment lasted from 1927 to 1958 and began with the opening of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. This exclusive large-scale hotel was Waikiki's first to especially target shiploads of international affluent passengers known as the carriage trade. This era ended suddenly with the onset of the depression followed by World War II. Yet after the war, tourism growth continued. Kalakaua Avenue became the focus of an emerging business district, bordered by a strip of hotels along Waikiki's shore. Many resident homes were converted into businesses. By the end of this period, several major transitions had occurred: 1) the mode of transportation (from ship travel to air travel), and 2) the type of visitor (from carriage trade to a budget-minded tourism market).

## **3. Growth**

Once successfully established, the urban beach resort experiences a period of phenomenal growth. In the model, this period is marked by the location of new resort hotels inland. Furthermore, a secondary road is built inland parallel to the coastal road to provide better access to new areas of development. A new type of tourism - mass tourism - appears, accompanied by less-expensive hotels (built inland) and low-budget accommodations. A "built" environment begins to overtake the landscape resulting in higher land values, greater densities, higher building heights, inadequate infrastructure,

and environmental and social problems. Prosperity at this stage overshadows over-development concerns, with few planning attempts managing to be implemented.

Waikiki experienced a growth period with similar characteristics as that described by the model. With the arrival of jet service in 1959, the resort became more accessible to the predominantly untapped U.S. mainland middle-income traveler. Crowded high-rise development moved inland, visibly altering Waikiki's physical landscape and creating traffic congestion, excessive building densities, and loss of open space. While Kalakaua Avenue had long since established itself as Waikiki's primary road, a secondary road appeared, along with more small businesses and shops. Waikiki's traditional neighborhood districts continued to dwindle in size. High-rise condominiums and apartments towered over what little neighborhood pockets remained. During this phase, a series of planning studies were undertaken, most of which attempted to curtail Waikiki's uncontrolled development. However, private-sector prosperity took precedence, and few of the recommendations were implemented.

#### **4. Maturity**

The final period as described by the beach resort life-cycle model is one of maturity, reflecting a leveling off of tourism development and increased attempts at planning. At this phase, different land-use zones have become more distinct. Traffic circulation changes and clean-up measures are imposed to relieve congestion and pollution, respectively. Private sector versus public sector disagreements (as well as inter-governmental disputes) over control and spending of tax revenues becomes more commonplace. The life-cycle model suggests that the scars from such conditions begin taking the resort into a decline making revitalization attempts therefore necessary to sustain the resort into the future.

By the mid-1970s, Waikiki was able to curb the tide of development that had overtaken it during the previous decade. Property renovation projects became the order of the day, and once again, a number of major planning studies were undertaken. Like their counterparts of the preceding decades, many of the same measures were proposed. This time, however, the measures had greater success at being implemented, including sidewalk widening and street beautification projects. Nevertheless, Waikiki still awaits the approval of much needed improvement projects, including a proposed master plan and a planned convention center.

### **3.0 Analysis**

This study analyzes the degree to which Waikiki's growth and development over the years has resembled the phases outlined by the resort life-cycle model, a relation which helps clarify the impacts relating to Waikiki's lack of planning and extensive tourism development. This comparison also provides valuable lessons for other urban beach resorts as to the amount and type of planning that should or should not be imposed at various stages in their development.

Although the life-cycle model has been helpful in providing a valuable historical perspective, it also has its shortcomings. It fails to satisfactorily address questions which arise over the future of urban beach resorts - that is, sustainability or decline. Such an analysis requires a detailed understanding of external factors (i.e., changing visitor markets, competition, etc.) which are not considered under the life-cycle model approach. Furthermore, in addition to being too simplistic, the model is descriptive, not predictive. Extending its application to explain the complex variables involved in analyzing the future of urban resorts is therefore beyond its intended scope. The limits of the model, however, should not preclude opportunities for expanding its application beyond urban beach resorts. Not only do opportunities exist to gain a better understanding of the evolutionary processes of other resort types (i.e., master planned beach resorts), but such studies would in themselves be helpful in defining and refining the true potential of the life-cycle model itself.