

TRAVELAGE

EXPLORING TRAVEL FAVORITES AND FRONTIERS

WEST

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aqua's evolution

Location, service and an urban vibe come together at Aqua Palms & Spa Waikiki

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Aqua Palms & Spa

Hawaii hotelier Mike Paulin pulled out all the stops when he introduced Aqua Palms & Spa into the Waikiki market. One of Aqua Hotels & Resorts' three AquaSPA properties, Aqua Palms is the only member of the Aqua Boutique Hotels portfolio featuring all "Seven Pillars" of the company's branding newly renovated accommodations, kitchenettes, spa, fitness center, complimentary in-room high-speed Internet and/or Wi-Fi, complimentary daily continental breakfast and 24/7 hotline access to Paulin.

I had stayed here when it was operated in the late 1990s as the Waikiki Parkside. While Aqua has completely gutted and reconstructed the boutique

hotel in a stylish, retro-Hawaiian motif, one of the things I appreciated most has remained the same.

Located at the entrance to Waikiki on Ala Moana Boulevard, the Aqua Palms is ideal for those preferring to avoid a rental car. And that was my case on this most recent visit. The property lies directly on both The Bus and Waikiki Trolley lines, and is also an easy stroll to Ala Moana Shopping Center. The Hawaii Convention Center and Waikiki Beach are nearby, as well.

Under Aqua's flag, the AAA Three-Diamond hotel features 262 tastefully appointed studios and suites. Studios are decked with silk and sand wallpaper, vibrant artwork and the trademark aqua touches in this case, the aqua headboards.

"Waikiki's evolution into an unabashed, fun urban resort complements Aqua's theme of 'Beach Life Urban Vibes,' and Aqua Palms has been our lab test," said Paulin. "It was the first Aqua of three to consistently be in TripAdvisor's Top 10. So I believe we're fulfilling our mission." If a guest disagrees, they have access to "the boss" via phone around the clock.

"Our 'Seven Pillars' are geared to the Gen X and Y market with the amenities and services appealing to this segment most," Paulin said. "Our Aqua Promise allows guests to contact me 24/7 with any problems. It's aimed at supporting the travel agent's decision to call out Aqua for their clients."



Guestrooms have been renovated.

From an accommodations standpoint, all studios are a spacious 325 square feet. What differentiate the three studio categories are the views. I landed in a deluxe room with a wonderful panorama of Diamond Head, Fort DeRussy Park and the Pacific. Pleasant and bright, it featured a king-size bed, sleeper sofa, pair of nightstands, three-drawer dresser, desk, small table with two chairs and private standing lanai. In spite of being so amply furnished, it felt far from cramped.

I especially enjoyed the AquaKIT Pillar, which equips with a microwave, mini-refrigerator, coffeemaker and coffee. Other amenities included a

safe, flat-screen television with DVD player and 77 channel access, clock radio, complimentary local and toll-free phone calls, plush Aqua robes and custom bath amenities.

Each morning, guests can venture down to the lobby for a continental breakfast comprised of fresh fruits, pastries, tropical juices, coffee and tea. Since the lobby is somewhat small, some opted to enjoy theirs on the second level pool deck or ventured back in their studio to eat on the lanai. Although I missed the Wednesday evening manager's reception, it was nice to note that daily newspapers, coffee, tea and apples were always available in the front lobby. According to Paulin, the property will add a restaurant with room service this fall.

I also viewed a one-bedroom suite, which is a luxurious upgrade for those preferring more space and upscale touches. This beauty was lushly designed with a complete kitchen that sparkled with stainless steel appliances, marble countertops and vanities, plasma-screen television, separate dining area in the living room, desk and large closet.

Perhaps the highlight of my stay, however, was a Hawaiian-style lomi lomi massage at the hands of an exceptional therapist named Kipapa. Just off the pool area, the modest cabana-style spa is perfectly fitted to the boutique concept of the property.

While it doesn't have all the bells and whistles of larger spas, the two-table haven is ideal for those simply seeking a treatment and even those who may be intimidated by the trappings of a mega spa.

A combination of long, smooth moves and scents of orange, eucalyptus, tea tree and lavender blended for such a wonderful escape that I knew I'd be back for another treatment whether staying at the Aqua Palms again or just being in the neighborhood.

THE DETAILS

Aqua Palms & Spa

866-406-2782

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www.aquaresorts.com

Rates to Dec. 21: Studio Moderate \$220; Studio Superior \$235;
Studio Deluxe \$255; Junior Suite \$305; One-Bedroom \$395

The hotel's Spa-licious Special includes accommodations and two spa treatments (Swedish, lomi lomi, shiatsu, sports or reflexology), from \$160 per night based on a minimum three-night stay.

Commission: From 10 percent

ABOUT AQUA HOTELS & RESORTS

In October 2005, Michael Paulin launched Aqua Boutique Hotels, a select group of properties responding to the sense of style and attitude of today's sophisticated traveler. Naturally, all feature the "Seven Pillars" of the Aqua Hotels & Resorts brand and key lifestyle amenities, such as free in-room high-speed Internet and daily continental breakfast. Aqua Boutique Hotels include Aqua Palms & Spa, Aqua Bamboo & Spa and Aqua Waikiki Wave & Spa.

With 94 rooms and suites, Aqua Bamboo is an intimate Southeast Asian-inspired boutique hotel on Kuhio Avenue. Its lush outer sanctuary is home to AquaSPA facilities, a saltwater pool with waterfall, jet spa, sauna and cabana.

Also a block off the beach on Kuhio, Aqua Waikiki Wave is a new boutique hotel with spacious rooms in a hip-hop décor. AquaSPA

facilities will open this late this summer.

Through December 21, respective rack rates at the two properties begin at \$195 and \$220.

Other Aqua collections, Aqua Lite and Aqua Elite, were named as two new groups to differentiating Aqua's growing product inventory. Featured as Aqua Lite Hotels are Aqua Coconut Plaza, Aqua Continental, Aqua Island Colony and Aqua Marina.

As the name implies, Aqua Elite Hotels is reserved for properties with exceptional amenities and service. Aqua's future plans call to have several properties in this classification available to consumers.

According to Beth Churchill, Aqua's Vice President of Marketing and Guest Services, Aqua's concept is to address travelers tired of paying additional fees for amenities they feel should be part of their daily hotel rate.

"We understand our guests want incredible service along with upgraded amenities to enhance their overall travel experience," said Churchill. "Based on this, each of our Aqua collections offer everything the smart traveler wants without paying the luxury tag."

Last year, the company invested over \$26 million upgrading Aqua Hotels & Resorts' properties throughout Waikiki as part of Paulin's AquaFRESH brand promise for like-new accommodations. Worked scheduled for completion in 2007 totals over \$8 million.

Paulin noted how this Aqua investment in refurbishments and product improvements has positioned the company well, especially in light of a recent Oahu Visitors Bureau campaign initiative to promote a revitalized Waikiki in 2007.