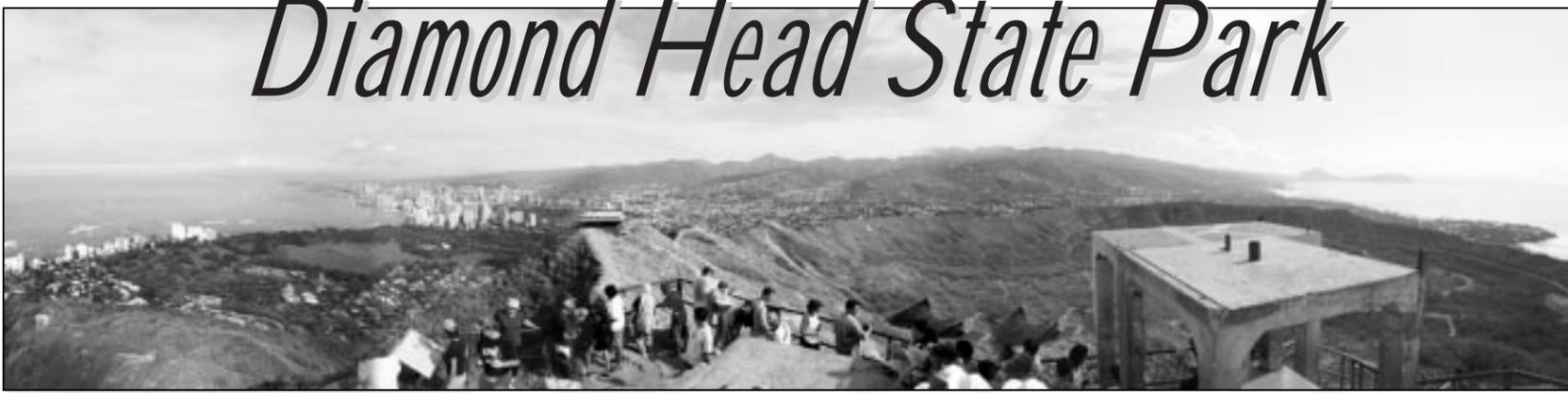


# LIBERTY CALL

## Diamond Head State Park



Composite panorama by PH2 Chad McNeeley

### A hike to the top of Oahu

By PH2 Chad McNeeley  
Pearl Harbor Family Service Center

**T**HE Diamond Head crater rises out of the sea from seemingly nowhere when viewed from beyond the horizon. Sailors and fisherman once used the crater as a landmark on their journeys to help navigate their way around the Hawaiian island chain. When viewed from the outside, the crater appears to be nothing more than a dormant volcano, a harmless mountain. But on the inside lies a series of tunnels and bunkers that were built beginning in 1908, and used for gun batteries for the coastal defense of Hawaii.

After more than 2 million years of volcanic inactivity on Oahu, a single, brief eruption created "Le ahi" (Diamond Head). The eruption occurred near the ocean only about 500,000 years ago creating a rock called "tuff" from the magma that was broken down into ash and particles by the water and steam.

The crater covers more than 350 acres and is wider than it is high. The highest point, the southwestern rim was formed from the winds blowing the ash during the eruption. The Hawaiian name Le ahi was said to be given to the crater by Hi iaka, the sister of the Hawaiian fire goddess, Pele because the summit was said to resemble the forehead of the 'ahi fish.

The other interpretation of the title comes from "fire headland", the navigational fires that were set for the canoers travelling on the shoreline. Explorers mistakenly mistook the calcite deposits in the rocks on the crater as diamonds in the 1700's, hence the common reference to the title.

The military purchased Diamond Head in 1904 after realizing that the crater's rim, which offers a panoramic view that sweeps across the entire southern shore of Oahu, was a perfect site for the coastal defense of Oahu.

The fortification of the crater was begun in 1908 with the building of numerous gun emplacements and a tunnel carved through the north wall of the crater to what then was called Fort Ruger. There were a total of five gun batteries constructed between 1910 and 1943. A fire control station was built at the summit and contained all of the instruments and material to manage the artillery fire from the numerous batteries located in the crater.

The trail to the summit was built in 1908. After driving through the Kahala tunnel on the eastern face of the crater, the trailhead begins a few short steps from the parking lot on the crater floor. That is the last flat portion of the hike, as the trail climbs the steep interior walls of the crater and quickly rises 560 feet in 0.8 miles.

Due to the uneven and tricky terrain of the crater, proper footwear is required to navigate the narrow path that accommodates climbing and descending hikers at the same time. The hike, depending upon the time of day can be a hot one. Carrying a bottle of water is highly recommended, since no water or restroom facilities are available anywhere along the trail.

The semi-arid climate in the crater mostly supports low shrubs and herbs. It is believed that a dry-land forest once inhabited the crater. Until the early part of the 20th century, rainwater collected in the bottom of the crater creating a small lake that provided habitat for native ducks, coots and gallinules.

The trail was originally designed for mule and foot traffic, carrying construction material along the numerous switchbacks for the building of the fire control station. The dirt trail, which is now concrete, continues upward at a steady pace until the first lookout. This lookout was constructed to help lift larger materials that couldn't be hauled by mule or man off the crater floor. The winch that was used is still there, providing a look into the past at how the gun batteries were constructed.

The view from the lookout extends out over the entire crater and offers a peek at the forth-coming view from the top of the Pacific Ocean to the south and the Koolau mountains to the north.

After catching your breath at the lookout, the trek continues upward along another pair of switchbacks until coming to a set of 74 concrete steps leading to the first tunnel. The 225-foot long tunnel has no lights and is virtually pitch black shortly after entering it. Bring a flashlight to help guide your way.

Shortly after exiting the first tunnel, a second set of (99) much steeper steps rises in front of you. Beckoning your strength and endurance at this point can be a challenge, but the stairs are not nearly as difficult as they appear. Using the provided handrail, they can be climbed very quickly with minimal exertion.

At the top of the stairs lies another tunnel, (again very dark), that leads to the lowest level of the fire control station where the observation equipment was housed for Fort DeRussy at Waikiki. A narrow, iron spiral staircase leads to the four upper levels of the fire control station. Again these spaces are all quite dark and you will need to use your flashlight to navigate.

After exiting the crater through slits that once covered the now non-existent guns, the climb continues upward along 54 metal stairs up to the observation deck. About one half hour after you start your hike, you will be standing on the summit of the crater on the observation deck at an elevation of 761 feet - ready for a well-deserved break and accompanying view of the entire panorama from Koko Head to Waianae.

The trail became a designated national landmark in 1968, and sees thousands of tourists a year.

The Diamond Head State Monument can be accessed by driving east on Kalakaua Ave. through Waikiki and Kapiolani regional park. Follow the road through the park until it turns into Diamond Head Road. Follow Diamond Head Road until you see the signs for the park on the left. The park is open daily from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.



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(Top) A panoramic view from the top of Diamond Head allows an uninterrupted view from Waianae all the way around to Koko Head on the windward coast. One of the two tunnels (above) that carves its way through the center of the crater along the hike is very dark and flashlights are recommended. The tunnels were originally built for mule and regular foot traffic in the early 1900's to aid in the construction of the fire control station.

(Left) After a lengthy hike a set of 99 stairs is the last obstacle on the journey to the top of the crater. The stairs seem like an unsurmountable conquest but with aid of the handrail can be climbed swiftly with minimal effort.

(Below) A view from the top of the crater overlooking Kapiolani Regional Park, Waikiki and the entire south shore stretches along the distance. One and a half to two hours is recommended for a safe and leisurely trip including time to stop and take in the entire view after arriving at the summit of the crater.

(Background) Looking straight south from the top of the crater is the Diamond Head lighthouse and the Diamond Head State Beach Park down below.



PHAA Casey James photo