

Lessons from Covid: Kona Bay Hawaii Expands Outreach to U.S. Market After Catering to the Japan Market Since 2001

"KC" Kiuchi had to close his Waikiki aloha shirt store for 2 years – while still paying rent - when his Japanese customers disappeared during the pandemic.

HONOLULU, HI, U.S.A., March 14, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [Kona Bay Hawaii](#) has specialized in selling 1950's-inspired, made-in-Hawaii aloha shirts since 2001. Originally opened in Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii – hence, the name - Kona Bay Hawaii has been a famous destination for Japanese visitors who appreciate quality-made aloha shirts with designs from what owner Kusuo "KC" Kiuchi considers the "Golden Era of the Aloha Shirt" – the 1930's-1950's. Kiuchi relocated his store to Ena Road at the gateway to Waikiki in 2012 to be closer to his Japanese visitor market, and Kona Bay Hawaii thrived. They have been featured in virtually all of the Japanese media, and their shirts have been worn by Japanese and global celebrities. They even collaborated with French fashion brand Maison Kitsuné and created custom shirts for All Nippon Airways. Kona Bay Hawaii continued to attract throngs of loyal Japanese customers to their charming shop...and then Covid hit.

Kiuchi maintained a little wholesale business, received a small number of online orders, and received some Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) assistance from the government, but all that was gone quickly after paying his manager's salary with no meaningful income from sales. Kiuchi was struggling and considered closing. Surprisingly, although Kiuchi is now a U.S. citizen, it was his loyal Japanese customers who came through for him via crowd-funding. On the brink of permanently closing his beloved shop, a popular Japanese television show shared Kiuchi's plight



Kusuo "KC" Kiuchi at the entrance to his aloha shirt shop in Waikiki, Kona Bay Hawaii

and about \$70,000 was raised which meant that Kona Bay Hawaii would survive. Not one to just accept a handout, Kiuchi promised a Kona Bay Hawaii shirt to those who donated to help him. He did close the shop for 2 years - paying rent the entire time, and only re-opened last month on February 4th, with a hopeful new plan.

Kona Bay Hawaii will continue to sell to the Japanese market, of course, but Kiuchi is looking forward to expanding to the U.S. market and beyond. He has had some non-Japanese collectors who appreciate his aloha shirts, and he also knows there are many celebrities who love vintage and vintage-inspired aloha shirts. Musicians Kenny Loggins and Darryl Hall both own Kona Bay Hawaii shirts, and he's hoping that will catch on with other celebrities and even TV and film productions.



A male model wears a green Kona Bay Hawaii aloha shirt in Downtown Honolulu.

“

We are one of the few remaining independent aloha shirt makers that craft the shirts the original way with quality fabric from Japan...and every cut, stitch, and shell button added is done in Hawaii.”

Kusuo “KC” Kiuchi, Owner

Kiuchi is proud of the craftsmanship put into each of his garments. He started Kona Bay Hawaii out of a passion to bring back the glory of the original aloha shirts which were made by local Japanese in the 1930's-50's. His fabrics are printed in Japan using a method of dyeing called discharge painting, then shipped to Hawaii where the shirts are sewn, and genuine shell buttons are used like the old days – never plastic. Many patterns are from original designs from that era (copyrights expire after 50 years), while others are his own original designs. Being a collector of vintage aloha shirts himself – he has about 400 in his

personal collection, Kiuchi takes great pride in knowing the shirts he sells are true to the 1950's style and quality. As a matter-of-fact, world-famous Bailey's Antiques & Aloha Shirts, which is a wholesale customer, endorsed Kona Bay Hawaii shirts as the “#1 Quality Aloha Shirt in Hawaii.”

What makes Kona Bay Hawaii the best?

"We are one of the few remaining independent aloha shirt makers that craft the shirts the original way," said Kiuchi. "We import high quality rayon fabric from Japan, and then handcraft each shirt in Hawaii. Every panel cut, every stitch made, and every genuine shell button added is all done right here in the islands."

All the original aloha shirt manufacturers, including legendary labels such as Duke Kahanamoku, Kamehameha or Kahala, did it this way. Today, many "aloha shirt" manufacturers are owned by large corporations who have moved manufacturing offshore to lower costs - and lower quality. And a lot of other brands may claim to be "Made in Hawaii," but 95% of the manufacturing is done overseas, and only a final touch - such as adding a button - is done here so they can claim the "Made in Hawaii" label. This is a loophole used throughout the fashion industry. Kiuchi



A male model with red Kona Bay Hawaii aloha shirt in Waikiki with Diamond Head in background.

had many opportunities over the years to sell Kona Bay Hawaii to larger companies, but that was never his intention. He wanted to keep it local and original. It was always about keeping the culture of the aloha shirt alive, and Kiuchi plans to continue that tradition for years to come.

Kona Bay Hawaii is open daily at [444 Ena Road](#) in Waikiki, and their English website - which will be replaced with a user-friendly shopify site soon - is now at us.konabayhawaii.com. The company's English digital media will also be going into high gear as Kona Bay Hawaii expands its reach to new target markets. They will also continue their wholesale business and orders for original prints and collaborations with businesses and organizations. Promotional events are planned for the coming months, as well.

And as for Kiuchi's collection of [400 vintage aloha shirts](#)? He's willing to part with them for serious collectors. The shirts are from the 1930's to the 1950's, and range in value from \$100 to \$10,000. Anyone interested may contact Kiuchi at Kona Bay Hawaii at 808-223-3390, to arrange a private showing at the shop.

About Kona Bay Hawaii

Founded in 2001 on the Big Island of Hawaii by Kusuo "KC" Kiuchi, Kona Bay Hawaii is a unique aloha shirt company with a passion for the 1950's "Golden Age" of the aloha shirt. We preserve the culture of the aloha shirt from this era by using the same methods and quality materials, printing the fabrics in Japan, and making the shirts right here in Hawaii with genuine shell buttons. We are truly proud to offer our beautiful, quality aloha shirts and aloha wear for the whole family at Kona Bay Hawaii. E komo mai...please visit us today!

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