

Maui Wowie

Audiences are applauding the Maui Film Festival's heavenly outdoor screenings.

BY IRENE LACHER



The new Seaside Cinema Music Cafe & Lounge offers filmgoers drinks, dinner and live music.

Los Angeles is certainly the center of the universe for all things cinematic, but for a transcendent moviegoing experience, you might want to look west to Maui. The Maui Film Festival boasts four breezy venues that fuse cinema with, well, paradise — screening independent and foreign films under the stars, in spitting distance of the ocean (not that you would). What could be better? Perhaps a lovely Cab and a picnic dinner to entertain the taste buds while the eyes are doing their thing? Look no farther than the Grand Wailea resort's new Seaside Cinema Music Café & Sunset Lounge, which made its debut in June.

Barry Rivers, festival founder and director, is a huge booster of the island's outdoor filmgoing experience. "We all started out hearing stories outside — either outside, if that particular tribe of cavemen had the *cojones* to tell it outside, or inside the cave — so it's a very deep, buried-in-the-DNA way of hearing stories," says Rivers, a TV producer/director and longtime Maui resident who did his doctoral dissertation on the power of imagery and its impact on culture. "There's some special magic — on some level, it's undecipherable and best left that way." The *Los Angeles Times* tried to decipher it anyway, calling the festival's 2,500-capacity Celestial Cinema venue "a star-studded theater like no other...It's the perfect place...to watch a movie."

The more intimate Seaside venue (capacity 400) may be even more perfect — if there is such a thing — because it offers wine, cocktails and picnic dinners for purchase, live music before screenings and a balmy outdoor lounge with tables and sofas. It's the latest addition to the 15-year-old film festival, which has grown into an annual draw for A-list talent, including the "It" girl of the moment — newcomer Lupita Nyong'o, this year's best supporting actress Oscar winner for *12 Years a Slave*, who will join the cast of the upcoming *Star Wars: Episode VII*. The festival added to her growing list of honors with a 2014 Rainmaker Award at Seaside, where honorees also included Emma Roberts (*We're the Millers*), Evan Rachel Wood (*The Wrestler*) and Joe Mangiello (*True Blood*).

While the *Times* called the festival "Maui's answer to Sundance" where a lot of movie business is done, the tropical alternative is infinitely more casual, infused with the gentle values of Hawaii, where the concept of *ohana* — literally "family," suggesting cohesion and cooperation — is huge. Those may not be the first words one associates with Hollywood, but then Rivers is unapologetic about the MFF's particular slant.

"My commitment is to presenting what I've come to shorthand as compassionate-vision, life-affirming storytelling," Rivers says. "It's the base upon which all program decisions are made for the festival."

Festival favorites included *Begin Again* with Mark Ruffalo and Keira Knightly — *Once* writer/director John Carney's warm and fuzzy musical drama about a record exec whose downward spiral is

reversed when he discovers a lovely singer/songwriter — which won the Narrative Feature Award; and *Magic Men*, about an Israeli magician who returns to Greece to thank the man who saved him from the Holocaust, a surprising charmer that won the Narrative Feature World Cinema Award.

Also unlike Sundance, which consumes Park City, Utah, when the festival comes to town, daylight jaunts are a natural addition to the MFF's schedule, because most MFF films are screened in the evening, when Mother Nature lowers the house lights (although the indoor Maui Arts & Cultural Center started weekend films at the earlier, but still civilized, hour of 1 p.m.). The festival hosts its own distractions, like the Taste of Wailea, which offered tasty bites from Maui restaurants and cocktails using local liquors, such as Pau Maui Hawaiian Vodka made from pineapples "far away from congestion, pollution and potatoes." There was also a Taste of Chocolate event at the Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea, which I am happy to say I can tell you nothing about.

That leaves plenty of opportunity to sip tropical drinks in plastic pineapples and whoosh down swimming pool slides at your resort of choice. You might also carve out time to lounge at one of the resort spas. During a press trip last month, I dipped into the Terme Hydrotherapy Circuit at the Grand Wailea's Grande Spa, which included a Roman tub, Swiss jet showers, a Japanese *furo* and, my favorite, five jewel-colored "specialty" baths, each infused with a different Hawaiian bath salt blend promising various therapeutic benefits.

You can also rent a car and explore the island — but do learn from my mistake. I arranged my National Car Rental loan in a hotel lobby and was horrified to learn later that the company charges customers making reservations face-to-face almost triple the cost of reserving online. So, driver, beware.

The trip doubled as a family reunion for my New York-based sister, Didi, and me, so we hit the road and visited the Iao Valley State Park, where we enjoyed an easy climb up a scenic paved path a half-mile up to see the Kuka'emoku (Iao Needle), a pointy peak that rises 1,200 feet from the valley floor. From there, we went to the Maui Tropical Plantation, which was touristy, but in a good way. We explored the grounds by tram, passing a group of intrepid zipliners on our way to groves of pineapples, macadamia nuts, orchids, coconuts and much more. We did our shopping at its huge, reasonably priced store, where I picked up locally made condiments and coffee while my sister selected Hawaiian shirts for the picky men in her family.

Maui Film Festival folk are still going over last month's event to see what they can improve when it returns in June 2015. They haven't settled on dates yet, so keep an eye on mauifilmfestival.com for developments and check out the festival packages offered by participating resorts listed on the site. ■■■