

# Treasure Island

High-end retailer Leather Soul is encouraging men in Hawaii to step out of their flip-flops. << By Jocelyn Anderson



*Leather Soul in Hawaii is adding some high-end flair to a casual culture.*

*Founded by owner Thomas Park in downtown Honolulu in 2004, the men's shoe store moved five miles to Waikiki in 2005, settling in its current 650-sq.-ft. location on the major shopping street Kalakaua Avenue last January.*

*"You wouldn't think there would be an independent high-end shoe store in Hawaii, where everyone's wearing slippers and boat shoes," Park said. "I'm proud of that."*

*In fact, Japanese businessmen have been Park's main clients, rather than the Hawaiian bankers he originally thought the store would attract. The visitors have helped the store rack up more than \$1 million in sales for 2008, his best year yet. Next up, Park said he'd like to open a store in California.*

## THE RIGHT MIX

At Leather Soul, Alden is the No. 1 seller, with the brand making up 80 percent to 90 percent of sales. The store stocks about 50 different styles of Alden, including limited editions made just for Leather Soul.

British men's footwear brands Edward Green, Gaziano & Girling and J.M. Weston also are available, as well as Rimowa luggage. Retail prices for footwear range from \$350 to \$1,600.

Park said he has purposefully focused on a select group of brands. "I've been pretty picky," he said. "Most of my shoes are really conservative, so if I was looking for another brand, [it would be] a bit flashier, maybe an Italian brand. But right now, I'm happy with the four [footwear] brands we carry."



styles become available or personally delivering orders. "For us, it's just going above and beyond," Park said. "I like to provide more of a relationship than other stores."

Park also is very involved with the store's Website, which launched in 2005. Through the site, the store has attracted customers from all over the world. "We can't even keep up with the demand now," Park said.

"[Because I don't] have every single size for everybody, I'm turning away [sales of] at least five pairs of shoes a day. It's crazy." To help alleviate that problem,

Park recently started an e-mail list and regularly informs his customers of future shipments so they can pre-order sizes.

## PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Leather Soul advertises heavily in Japanese visitor publications. Park also spends time on Internet fashion forums, which have helped spread the word about the store.

And while Hawaiian tourism has lagged

and many retailers around him are struggling, Park said December was his best month yet. "The good thing is that the yen is so strong now, and that's helping me with my customers," he said. "I want to knock on wood, but my guys are still coming."

## BY DESIGN

Park designed the interior of Leather Soul

to look more like a living room than a shoe store. Decorated in dark brown hues, the store features furniture rather than fixtures. The shoes are displayed on tables and bookshelves, with a leather couch and

chairs set up for customers. Park also added a magazine table to encourage people to come in and relax.

"I was really adamant about being an anti-department store," said Park. "I wanted [it to be] somewhere guys could come to hang out and 'talk story,' as we say here in Hawaii for 'shoot the breeze.'"

## FACING CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge the store has faced, Park said, is luring a local clientele — one of his main goals for 2009. "When we were downtown, we had a lot more locals," he said. "Now that we're in Waikiki, you don't see as many, because they tend to not want to come here."

When Park was just starting out, another issue was his age. "When I went to my first shoe show, before I even opened, nobody took me seriously," said Park, now 30. "I tried to meet with [one brand], and they wouldn't even talk to me. I still look young, but now I'm at a point where people know me and I'm running a million-dollar business, so they have to respect me."



## FEEDBACK

Nate Humble, the Pacific region representative for Alden, met Park when he worked at a shoe store that carried Alden. The then-college student told Humble he would someday open

his own high-end shoe shop.

"I thought it was so interesting that this young guy was so focused. You hear about people wanting to do things in business, and it's rare that they follow through like that," Humble said. "Now he's an excellent merchant who's very involved and hands-on."

Tony Gaziano, co-owner of Gaziano & Girling, said Leather Soul is unique because it can position his brand in two markets — Japan and the U.S. "Tom Park has a manner and an eye that not only presents the shoes to these markets but also enhances them," Gaziano said. "Also, you won't meet a nicer guy, so what better salesmanship can you have than that?"

## THE WAIKIKI SCENE

**Neighborhood vibe:** Leather Soul is located in Waikiki's Royal Hawaiian Center, an upscale mall with neighbors such as Salvatore Ferragamo and Hermès.

**Customer base:** The store caters mostly to Japanese businessmen in their mid-20s to 60s.



**Competition:** Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus are both in Waikiki, but no other stores in the area carry the same brands.

