

East meets West conference for tech startups returns

East Meets West is Hawaii's largest gathering of tech companies, startups, venture capitalists and investors, founders and entrepreneurs. And after disappearing off the calendar during the pandemic, it's returning as an in-person conference May 18-19.

The world changed in many ways since the last gathering in 2020. But East Meets West has seen even more evolve since the first one was held in 2014.

As the name implies, it was a cross-cultural event focused on connecting Asian, U.S. and Hawaii markets.

East Meets West is organized by Blue Startups, a technology accelerator founded only two years prior by mobile gaming entrepreneur Henk Rogers (played by Taron Edgerton in the new semibiographical Apple TV movie "Tetris"), his daughter Maya Rogers and Chenoa Farnsworth, the program's managing partner and managing director of Hawaii Angels, a local investing group.

"This will be our eighth East Meets West over 10 years," Farnsworth said. "Typically, the event happens in January every year, and when January came around this year, everybody kept asking me about it, so even though it's spring I figured we had to do something. I think there's definitely a lot of pent-up demand. People are really excited about it, and that's a good thing."

COVID-19 disrupted every facet of life, but disruption is the name of the game for startups and investors.

The last time this group of international innovators got together, videoconferencing giant Zoom had not yet become a household name (its user base growing by 2,900% over the next two years), Mark Zuckerberg had not yet gone all-in on the metaverse and renamed his company Meta (which then lost \$650 billion in market value). Bitcoin was trading at \$9,000, had not yet come anywhere near its \$60,000 high — before falling back to Earth, followed in 2022 by the collapse of some of the biggest names in cryptocurrency.

JUST LOOKING back could fill hours of analysis and commentary, but each East Meets West remains a forward-looking affair.

Artificial intelligence will be a hot topic this month, from its impact on work and productivity to its potential for turning industries inside out. And while "cryptocurrency" has been battered and bruised, the agenda will still cover the decentralized, blockchain-based promise of "Web3" and the growth of token-based gaming, organizational leadership, access control and ownership.



East Meets West will again be a two-day affair, the first being a high-level and more exclusive gathering for industry leaders, conference speakers, successful founders and sponsors. Thursday is already sold out.

The second day, Friday, is the larger, open conference, with speakers, panels, breakout sessions and roundtables. In addition to AI and Web3, topics will include the circular economy (the vital challenge of achieving sustainability and minimizing waste), esports, travel technology and more.

Featured speakers include Khizer Khaderi from Stanford University's Institute for Human Centered Artificial Intelligence, Gov. Josh Green and, of course, Rogers.

EVEN THOUGH East Meets West is organized by Blue Startups, the event provides a great opportunity to celebrate every facet of Hawaii's tech industry. And this year I was excited to have the opportunity to help promote that larger community.

After Thursday's program, before the VIPs scatter across Honolulu for hosted dinners, there will be an Innovation Ecosystem Showcase. A dozen interrelated and complementary organizations will help show the world the broader support system that has evolved to support Hawaii startups and entrepreneurs.

This showcase includes many great groups I've written about before: the Hawaii Technology Development Corp., the Pacific Asian Center for Entrepreneurship at University of Hawaii, and the Elemental Excelsior, Mana Up and Hawaii Foundher accelerator programs. Attendees will also get to learn about the ThriveHI and UXHI networks (focused on remote work opportunities and design careers, respectively), and about the tech scene on the Big Island from Startup Hawaii and HiloJan.

The innovation economy in Hawaii has grown so much since the first startup founder meet-up I attended in 2007 — where four people sat around a table at Starbucks in Maunaloa. And that growth will be on proud display at East Meets West later this month.

For more information or to register for East Meets West 2023, visit EastMeetsWest.co.

Ryan Kawailani Ozawa publishes *Hawaii Bulletin*, a free email newsletter covering the Hawaii tech scene.