

Hawaii's Hidden Island

To glimpse what Hawai'i was like before the mainlanders showed up, stop in on Moloka'i.

BY WILLIAM ECENBARGER

THERE ARE THREE WAYS TO GET TO THE KALAUPAPA PENINSULA on the north shore of Moloka'i: the modern way, by light aircraft; the dangerous way, by boat, which is possible only twice a year when the seas are calm; and the scenic way, by mule or by foot down a narrow, 3-mile trail. • For the fourth time in two decades, I have chosen the mules. I've walked in once and flown in twice, but the mules are best by far. This morning the rocks on the trail are wet and slippery from recent rains, but Haku — a marvel of crossbreeding — negotiates the serpentine trail with the surefootedness of a donkey and the intelligence of a horse.

Every day, weather permitting, the Kalaupapa mules make their way down the trail, which was carved out in 1886, probably from a route chosen a thousand years ago. The mules carry visitors and supplies to the remote village below. There used to be an armed guard at the head of the trail; today a sign merely warns that entry requires a permit from the Hawai'i State Department

ing onto the shore after an uninterrupted journey of 3,000 miles from Alaska. The rhythmic clip-clop is hypnotic, and before long I am deep in reminiscence.

I COME TO MOLOKA'I REGULARLY — THIS IS MY 17TH VISIT since 1981 — to connect with real Hawai'i. Nearly half of the 7,400 residents are Hawaiian or part-Hawaiian. On the busier islands of Maui, O'ahu, Hawai'i and Kaua'i, the ratio is about one in five. Moloka'i has missed the tourist bandwagon almost entirely, and chances are that the man you see coming out of the mountains carrying a pig or deer he's just shot isn't a sportsman from the mainland; more likely, he's a Molokaian bringing home dinner.

During one visit, I spent a day with Lawrence Aki, a Moloka'i native who can trace his Hawaiian ancestry on the island back to 650 A.D. He gave me a tour of the ancient Hawaiian archaeological sites. Standing between two basalt boulders, Aki removed his straw hat, straight-

of Health. I am heading for what, in less sensitive times, was called a leper colony, perhaps the most beautiful leper colony in history.

Soon, Haku and I enter a tropical rain forest. Guavas and mangoes are within arm's reach. To one side, I see only my denimed leg and the blue Pacific far below, rag-

The best way to see Moloka'i's spectacularly beautiful Kalaupapa Peninsula is from the back of the mules that make a daily trek down the steep cliff sides. This point of land, once set aside as a leper colony, is a national park today.

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ened his jet-black ponytail and explained. "These are the calendar rocks, and they were placed here around the 12th century. They are aligned in such a way that the an-

learned the traditions and stories from his grandmother and uncle is a walking history book.

One of the best places to soak up Moloka'i history and the scene is the

The last time I was there a bumper crop of pickups were parked in the lot, and the open-air bar was packed with locals bending elbows and the truth. In the thatched-roof bar, which

looks across a lagoon to the roiling surf, there were a dozen or so *nā kupuna*, most of them wearing straw hats, flowered blouses and kukui nut leis; blossoms were tucked behind their ears. They played and sang for an appreciative audience that included huge Hawaiian men with ponytails, Polynesian tattoos and their mouths

hooked to the edge of beer cans. The music stopped suddenly when a bride and groom come upon the scene. Then the women spontaneously burst into the *Ke Kali Nei Au* — a Hawaiian

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cient priests could tell what day of the year it was just from how they cast shadows." Hawaiian history has been passed down in chants from one generation to the next, and Aki, who

Hotel Moloka'i. Friday evening is always "Aloha Friday Celebration" — when the local *nā kupuna* (elder ladies) get together to sing, strum and dance the hula.

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wedding song. As the last melting notes faded away, the bride's eyes brimmed with tears.

Hawaiian music also lives on in the churches of Moloka'i, places of worship every bit as interesting and beautiful as the cathedrals of Europe. They are scattered throughout the island, but there is a concentration of them near the main town of Kaunakakai. Their doors are usually unlocked, as a gesture of aloha to visitors, and many of the services are conducted in the Hawaiian language.

One Sunday morning I sat in a simple wooden pew and listened to the assembled voices:

Lokomaika'i He nani no

(Amazing grace, how sweet the sound)

Ho'ola mai iau

(That saved a wretch like me)

Moloka'i is the birthplace of the

hula — probably the most performed, most recognizable and most misunderstood dance in the world. One spring evening, I watched hula on a Moloka'i beach. This was *real* hula. There were no ukuleles, no grass skirts, no coconut shell brassieres, no lascivious smiles, no flirtatious glances — and no English words. Nine young women were swaying with smooth piscine grace, their long slender fingers flickering just over their heads. They let their hands do the talking, telling timeless stories. Behind them a kneeling woman played a drum and sang in a voice softer than cobwebs.

The mesmerizing chant used ancient Hawaiian words that seemed to glide off her tongue. They described all the winds of Hawai'i. Each has a name, and each has a different impact on the islands. The chanter's voice swelled and seemed to fill all

available space, looping back a thousand years through the generations.

NOW, 14 OF US VISITORS TROT INTO Kalaupapa, guided by three muleskinners whose faces are the texture of expensive luggage. At the bottom of the *pali* (cliff), the waves are doubling their fists and pounding the shore, and the sheriff of Kalaupapa is waiting. He is Richard Marks, who is also a tour operator. He represents the third generation of his family to live here on Moloka'i. He piles us into a rusting, wheezing school bus and begins the tour. Periodically, he stops to reconnect a battery cable that keeps popping loose.

He tells us there are some 35 permanent residents of Kalaupapa, who prefer to be called "former patients." Their average age is 75, and their average stay on Kalaupapa is just

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under 60 years. Most of them were brought here as children against their will, and they have elected to stay because it's the only home they have ever known. Most of them now bear some marks from when the disease was active, before sulphone drugs controlled it.

I talk to a resident who had come here in 1954. "One of the worst things about this illness is what was done to me as a young boy," he told

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me. "First, I was sent away from my family. Then they said, 'This is your last place. This is where you are going to stay and die.' That's what they told me. I was a 13-year-old kid."

Today, the former patients are here by choice and though the peninsula was declared a national historic park in 1980, they have been promised they will be allowed to live out their days here.

By 3 p.m., we are back up on the cliffs. I am leaving for the mainland tomorrow morning, and I have developed a tradition on my last day on Moloka'i to visit the Kalaupapa Lookout perched high in the mountains north of Kaunakakai. Today, the trade winds whistle through the ironwood trees as I walk down the needled path. When I reach the protective railing, a scene describable by no known nomenclature unfolds below. The Kalaupapa Peninsula is a low tongue of lava that juts out into the vast Pacific. On all three sides, the sea pounds and froths, leaving a melee of foam in its ebb. Where the frothy white ends, the 1,600 foot pali rises almost perpendicularly. Then, the wind gets up on its hind legs and bends the ironwoods and once again I think I would like my ashes scattered here. ♦