



## Luxury camping on Hawaii's quiet isle

Two years ago the ranch's New Zealand owners opened an upscale ecotour/soft adventure camping complex aimed to suit the needs of both active vacationers and the people of Molokai, some of whom have resisted glitzy, large-scale tourism.

If the goal is to get back to nature, Hawaiian-style, it's a success. We heard axis deer barking at night, and almost bumped into a Hawaiian monk seal on the crescent beach at Kaupoa Camp. From a high perch at Kolo Cliffs Camp we watched a school of spinner dolphins leap and



**Low wire act:** A visitor works on her balance at the Ropes Challenge Course at Molokai Ranch.

TED STRESHINKY/PHOTO 20-20

twirl in a mesmerizing display of aerial gymnastics.

Driving on red dirt and coral roads on the high plateau toward Paniolo Camp, we saw quail and francolin skitter into the bushes. The resident gecko in our tentalow — an elaborate canvas bungalow perched on an elevated platform — introduced himself, and we formed a nodding acquaintance with some of the 6,000 head of cattle on this working ranch.

### Cowboys at home on the range

There is plenty of fauna — both wild and domesticated — in this tropical rangeland where the ocean is omnipresent, cowboys play the ukulele and the skies are piled high with clouds all day and stars all

night.

This is not your velvet green, manicured Hawaii, but a wide open and rugged expanse, rocky and even austere in places, with red earth and thorny kiawe trees more prevalent than palms. Sometimes the terrain seems surreal; sometimes, especially from horseback, it feels as if you could just gallop right off of the high plateau and into the clouds in a kind of fantasy ride into the sunset.

At the three different camps scattered around the enormous ranch are tents with queen-sized beds, daily maid service, open-air pavilions for gatherings and meals (including omelet stations at breakfast), a solar power system that provides electric lights and hot water for showers and a self-composting, flushing toilet.

Each day we could choose from activities including sea kayaking, mountain biking, a rope challenge course and herding cattle on horseback.

This is the kind of camping that might even appeal to the woman who feels undressed without make-up or the slicker who spends most of his days in Gucci loafers. Or to folks like us, who don't mind sand in the sheets as long as we don't have to sleep on hard ground and who want to enjoy the wild, far reaches of this most Hawaiian of all the islands without the rigors of packing in.

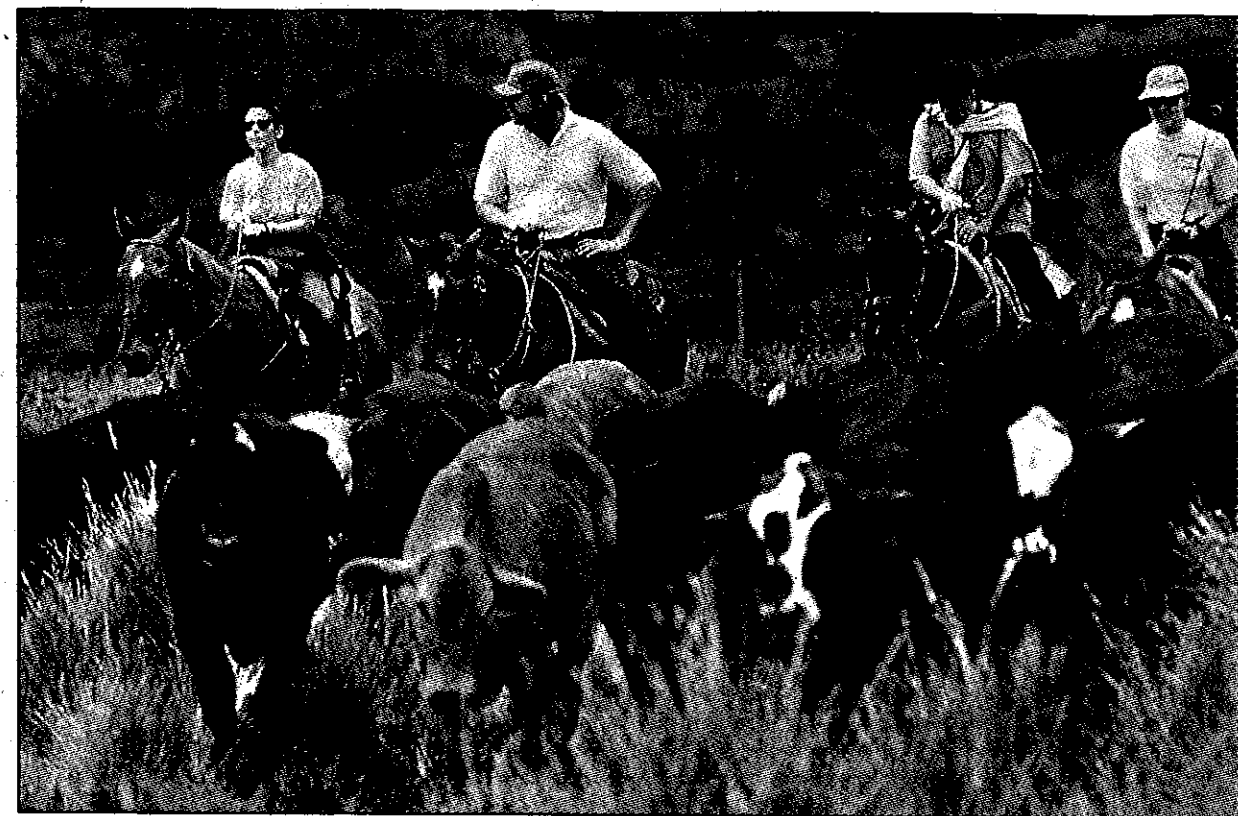
And face it, given a choice we'll go for the ahi Caesar salad every time over that other island favorite, Spam.

### Choose from different camps

Each camp is distinctive: Paniolo nestles into a hill, on a plateau 1,100 feet above the sea. It is near the rodeo arena, which from a distance looks ethereal, as if it is perched on a billow of clouds, with ocean glinting silver in the far beyond.

Paniolo is the camp favored by horseback riders, families and mountain bikers. The trailhead for biking tours is close by, with terrain tough enough to challenge the zealots and an easy eight-mile downhill trek suitable for beginners and children — especially with a van at the bottom to haul them back up to camp.

Kolo Cliffs Camp is carved into a bluff on the south shore and looks straight out to sea toward Lanai and Maui. Its yurts are round versions of the tentalows; from December to April, the decks double as whale-



MOLOKAI RANCH

**Herd mentality:** Ranchers can join traditional Hawaiian paniolos on a cattle trail drive at Molokai Ranch.

watching stations. At Kolo, solitude comes with the sunscreen; it is for getting away from it all.

Kaupoa Beach Camp, where we stayed, cozies up to two crescent beaches on the west shore — one just fine for swimming and snorkeling, the other carpeted in lava rock to create a tidepooler's dream.

Spread out under transplanted palm trees are 40 pairs of tents — two on each platform deck, each with an open-to-the-sky shower and a bathroom. One tent in each pair has a queen-sized bed, the other twin beds — just right for two couples or a family. Each unit comes with a ceiling fan, a cooler full of icy cold drinks, flashlights and a can of Raid in case a bug or two finds its way past the zip-out screened windows.

After dinner on our first evening, a cultural program went on for too long (I can only absorb so many ancient artifacts on a full stomach). But then Gina, wife of camp director Kawika Sasada, was coaxed to do a hula that was not nearly long enough. Without any prompting at all, their 3-year-old Lia joined in, moving with such charming grace that we understood instinctively why Molokai produces so many ex-

traordinary hula dancers.

At about 9 p.m., when it was thoroughly dark, a professional star-gazer appeared with a 12 1/2-inch telescope, and told us what we had already figured out: Molokai is one of the best venues on this planet for viewing the heavens.

### A night of star-gazing

We turned off all the lights (except those seeping in from Honolulu, 22 miles away across the Kaiwi Channel) and took turns looking at Mars, then at Cassiopeia — which the Hawaiians call Iwa Kelii, which translates to "frigate bird."

We needed a flashlight to make our way back to the tent and, not quite willing to give up the darkness, sank back onto the deck chaise lounges to peer up at the night sky without straining our necks. That night, drunk with stars, I Velcroed my window flap into the open position and spent another happy hour gazing at a sky spangled with more stars than I ever imagined.

Private cars are not allowed into the ranch. The roads, many of them newly cut, call for four-wheel-drive vehicles. Until recently the ranch operated a rather complicated schedule of shuttles, managed by ra-

dio phones. To get from one activity to another you needed to make reservations on a shuttle, which usually involved a half-hour drive.

The morning after our stargazing binge, we were late catching the shuttle that would take us to Kolo Camp and the Ropes Challenge Course, and those already inside the van were visibly annoyed with us. We didn't blame them; it probably wasn't the best way to start an event that was supposed to develop communication, cooperation, trust and confidence in a group.

Most had booked other activities for the afternoon and were eager to get hooked up to a 935-foot-long zip-line, a stainless steel cable that would send them flying out over a ravine for a three-second ride someone described to us as "all thrill, no skill."

The course includes 23 low elements — balancing on a moving log, for instance — and 13 high elements, one of which was the so-called "moon walk" that involves rappelling down a rope to experience weightlessness. Finally came the celebrated (and, if the nervous talk between several people in the group

[See MOLOKAI, T-5]

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was any indication, feared) zip-line.

Twelve-year-old Erin Mason of Oahu was the first to run down a small hill and fling herself out and over the chasm, screaming to the wind, "Hey guys, it's incredible."

### Shuttle service offered

The ranch seems to have resolved its logistical problems by scheduling hourly shuttle service. For the first two years, all activities were included in the price. This seemed to make guests feel they had to try everything. A kind of competitive urge settled in and the result was scheduling chaos.

Since then the ranch has lowered its daily rate and now charges for most of the activities. The result: occupancy is up and the activities schedule has settled down nicely. Those who insist on kayaking in the morning and taking a trail ride in the afternoon can do just that, while others stick close to the camps, snorkeling or scanning the horizon for whales.



PHOTOS BY TED STRESHINKY/PHOTO 20-20

I opted to stretch out in the hammock in front of our tentalow to read Jack London, who would have experienced a Hawaii not so very different from Molokai Ranch. Then I

joined a few others at the pavilion for Gina Sasada's "hularobics."

In each camp, the pavilion seems to be placed where the soft trade winds can blow through and they

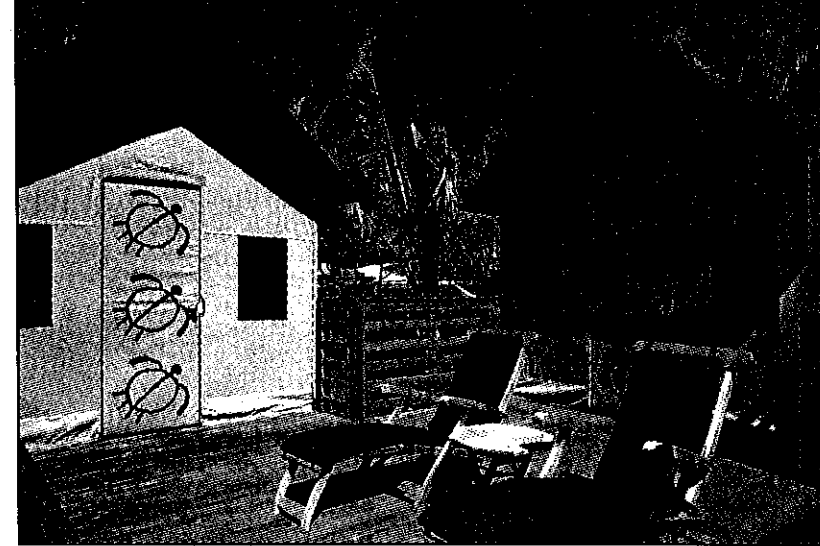
are social centers.

With lodging and meals starting at \$128 per person per day and activities starting at \$15, the ranch is a good value for anyone who likes to work up a sweat on a trail bike or in a kayak, or anyone who wants to enjoy an empty beach or a nature trail without having to deal with grocery stores, restaurants or crowds of any kind.

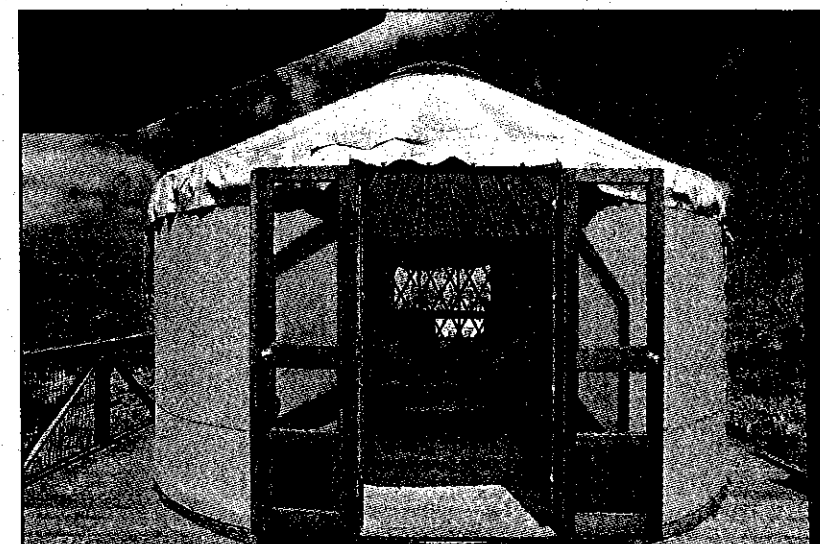
### Big changes ahead for island

For most of this century Molokai Ranch was owned by the Cooke family, which traces its Hawaiian roots back to the missionary days. Brierley Investments Ltd., of New Zealand bought it in 1991 for tourism and real-estate development. The ranch and a new lodge and spa in Maunaloa Village — opening this weekend — will, they hope, attract buyers for the 1,200 new homes the company plans to build.

Even with this development, Molokai is just about as close as you can get to the old Hawaii. The island's 6,700 residents — many of Hawaiian descent — guard its history and spirituality with a passion. They are proud that the island has no traffic lights or high rises. Local people buy their fish from a truck parked on a street in town and stop their pickups in the middle of the



Tentalows and yurts: Among vacation options at Molokai Ranch are relaxing in a hammock at Kaupau Camp, left, lounging by "tentalow" units, above, or one of the yurts, below.



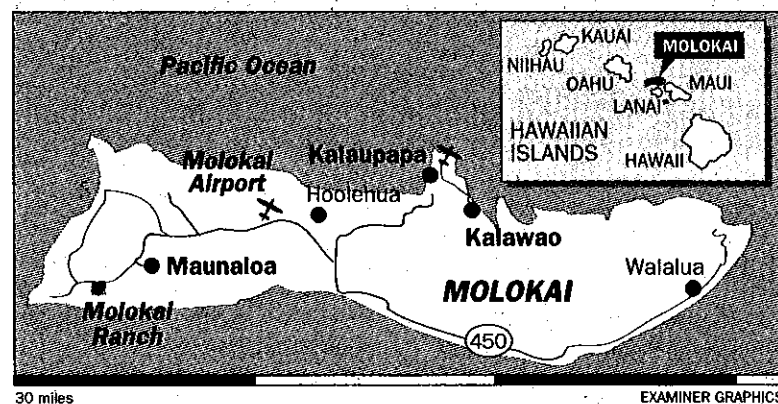
## IF YOU GO

► **GETTING THERE:** There are no direct flights from the mainland to Molokai; connect through Oahu. Someone from the ranch will pick you up at Molokai's funky airport and deliver you back again.

► **RATES:** Prices are per person, per night, and cover tents, meals, all transportation while on the ranch, gratuities and state taxes: Paniolo Camp, \$128; Kolo Cliffs, \$138; Kaupoa Beach, \$148.

► **ACTIVITIES:** For those staying on the ranch or in their fancy, just-opened (Aug. 27) Lodge at Maunaloa Village (where a guest room is \$350), adventures are extra: A full day of mountain biking costs \$45, a cattle trail drive, \$55; an easy cultural hike, \$15; a more difficult half-day hike, \$30; sea kayaking, outrigger canoeing and the ropes course, \$15 each. Stargazing happens two weekends a month, and there is no charge. No charge for snorkeling from the beach, either. Those not staying on the ranch can sign on, but should count on paying more. For example, a \$135 Outdoor Adventure Package runs from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. and includes mountain biking, sea kayaking, the ropes course and lunch.

► **RESERVATIONS:** Phone 1-877-726-4656 or visit [www.molokai-ranch.com](http://www.molokai-ranch.com).



► **OTHER MOLOKAI LODGING:** After our stay on the ranch we drove to the green, leafy eastern side of the island, about 10 miles east of the main town of Kaunakakai, to Kumueli Farms B&B, run by Dorothe and David Curtis, 25-year-residents of Molokai. David, an architect, designed the house that sits at the base of the island's highest mountain. The grand shower in their elegant guest room was the perfect place to scrub off all the red ranch dirt that had become engrained and their 75-foot lap pool was perfect for winding down from adven-

ture mode. We queried the authoritative Dorothe about the ancient trails of Molokai (her book on Historic Hawaiian Trails of Molokai is soon to be published) and all the hidden, secret places on this island, about which she knows a great deal. Cost is \$100 for one or two. Phone: (808) 558-8284; e-mail: [dcurtis@aloha.net](mailto:dcurtis@aloha.net); Web: [www.visitmolokai.com/kumueli/](http://www.visitmolokai.com/kumueli/)

► **FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Contact the Molokai Visitors Bureau; phone: 1-800-800-6367; Web: [www.visitmolokai.com](http://www.visitmolokai.com).

— Shirley Streshinsky

street when they want to visit. Some island people see the ranch as the enemy; someone bombed a water pipeline on ranch property and a house at Kaupoa Beach was burned. But most Molokai residents seem to agree that some change is inevitable, even necessary. Nearly 30 percent of the island's residents are on government assistance and 12 percent are unemployed. The ranch is a major employer and the new owners have made a point of hiring local people as staff.

Uncle Billy Buchanan, who manages the Paniolo camp, loves the old ways as well, but he is convinced that for the island to maintain its schools and such services as electricity, it needs to grow.

Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Billy (the title is honorific) say they hope the rural character of the island can be preserved, and Jim Mozley, president and CEO of the ranch, says he wants the same thing. Thirty years from now, he says, he expects Molokai to be a rural island still. Traffic lights no, spa yes.

Bay Area-based Shirley Streshinsky last wrote for the Travel Section about Sarasota, Fla.

But he says tourism can bring the