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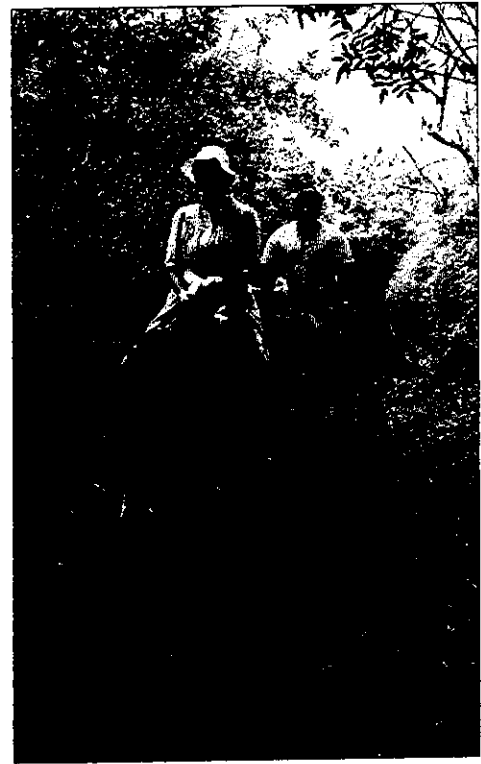
Photographs by Monica Almeida/The New York Times

ABOVE Graveyard near Molokai's north shore at Kalaupapa National Historical Park, home to a former leper colony. BELOW On a mule ride to the colony.

IT was described as a remote and stunning drive to the east end of Molokai. It might more accurately have been described as a drive to the end of the earth.

On a staggeringly beautiful morning in February, the soft sunlight shimmering through the Hawaiian mountains, we set off on the 26-mile drive to the trailhead of a hike through the overgrown Halawa Valley, where low stretches of stone walls stand as the only archaeological evidence of the seventh-century settlement of temples and the taro patches that once thrived there. Our Jeep followed a road that snaked along the beach, practically hugging the surf, before lifting us into the mountains and dropping us in the valley. We never encountered another vehicle, and just as well: For the final seven miles, the road dwindled down to a narrow single lane before just conceding to nature and turning into a dirt trail.

There we were greeted by Lawrence Aki, a guide who would be taking us and six other visitors — an unusually large group, Mr. Aki said later — on the four-mile round-trip hike, a gentle climb up to isolated Moaula Falls. The Halawa Valley is a patchwork of private land, and you are prohibited from



hiking to the falls without the escort of a paid guide, typically a local property owner. It was an assignment that Mr. Aki took quite seriously.

We were almost at the falls when Mr. Aki heard the rustle of another party scuffling up the rocky trail. Trespassers! Mr. Aki, a man of considerable girth, directed a member of our party to turn his video camera up the trail. "Evidence," he said somberly, and I do not think he was kidding. He and an assistant went back to talk to the five interlopers, and after a conversation that lasted 10 minutes, convinced them of the wisdom of paying the required \$75 apiece to join our tour.

The sound of water rushing 250 feet down a sheer cliff and crashing into a pond, sending a cool, moist breeze through the woods, signaled the end of our trek. We broke out of the forest and into the clearing, leaving the mosquitoes behind, and everyone — including Mr. Aki, for whom this is a daily trip — paused in silence at the sight. Peering up into the sky, you could just make out the top of the waterfall streaming out of the boulders and trees at the top of the ridge, and follow its path as it tumbled into the

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even pretend to compete with, say, the surfing on Oahu's north shore or the snorkeling on the north coast of Kauai. Instead, it offers a nearly complete retreat from tourism and crowds, with vast stretches of dense wilderness, miles of hiking trails and rutted dirt roads leading through forests and along volcanic mountains, and a coastline with cliffs soaring thousands of feet out of the ocean.

Which is precisely why my partner, Ben, and I came here. There are no traffic lights on Molokai, no buildings higher than two stories, one elevator, no Starbucks, just two

Miles of trails, volcanic mountains and soaring cliffs dropping to the sea.

hotels and three gas stations, one of which closes at 1 p.m. every day. On morning jogs, the only competition for space on the road comes from wild roosters announcing the approach of dawn.

The nights are as still as any you can imagine, save for the sound of rolling waves, and so dark that the skies blaze with stars that I had never known existed. And since it is something of a rogue island, Molokai has been largely, though not completely, spared from what has become the biggest blight on the Hawaiian wilderness over the past 10 years: the assault of tourist-bearing helicopters. (There are no helicopter charter companies on the island; those who want to tour Molokai by air have to charter one in Maui or Oahu.)

From the moment you arrive here, you will have no doubt that you are in the middle of the Pacific Ocean — though there might be moments when you forget that this is now the 21st century.

None of this is by accident. It is, rather, the result of a resolute attempt by some islanders to shut out the very tourism that has shaped the economy and, many Molokians would argue, corrupted the culture of other Hawaiian islands over the past half century. In 2003, Molokai activists blocked the landing of cruise ships, dispatching a few canoes out into the harbor in a colorful protest that

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we've seen what's happened to Maui and what's happened to Kauai and what has happened on the Big Island and we want no part of it," said Walter Ritte Jr., a Hawaiian activist who has led many of the protests. "They've given our best resources to the tourism industry and asked us to change the sheets. We've lost our cultural resources all because of this huge money-making thing called tourism."

So it is that tourism has been on a steady decline for a decade: 74,082 visitors flew to Molokai last year, a 20 percent drop from 2003, in a year when Hawaiian Air abolished its jet service here, according to the Molokai Visitors Association. (Now, the only way to get to Molokai is by prop plane or ferry.) By contrast, Maui had 30 times as many visitors as Molokai last year.

The cost of this resistance can be seen in the big resort property on the northwest corner of this island, which has been vacant since 2000; the anemic main street in Kauhakakai, which comes as close as there is to a downtown here; and the all-too-common tales of island residents who must get up every Monday morning and fly to Honolulu for a week of work, because of the lack of jobs on Molokai.

Sandy Beddow, until recently director of the Molokai Visitors Association, while in



the midst of talking about the considerable allure of this island, sighed as she all but acknowledged that the job title she held represented the victory of hope over reality. "There is resistance here — we don't deny that," she said. "We get a lot of bad press, I've got to tell you. Any time there's a protest against a cruise ship or a building development, that's the kind of press we get. It puts people off."

For all that, if "kapu" is the message that some people are sending, it is certainly not the sentiment of the whole island. And in any event, you would be wise to ignore it. By the time Ben and I reluctantly decamped from the island, we had decided not only that we would come back but also that we would stay longer next time.

We settled on Molokai after considering it and Lanai in search of a Hawaiian destination we could explore without bumping shoulders with a deluge of tourists in Hawaiian shirts, tropical drinks in hand. We came by turboprop on Island Air from Maui, having boarded without going through any kind of security at all, our first suggestion that we were stepping back in time.

We spent our first two nights at the Hotel Molokai in the central part of the island. After checking in late on a Monday afternoon, we headed for dinner at the hotel restaurant, by the pool and overlooking the ocean. We had the good fortune, if you could call it that, of being there on karaoke night. I would recommend the food there — we had a grilled mahi-mahi smothered in a butter-

lemon sauce, and a tough slab of pork loin — only if you are nostalgic for the cuisine of your college dorm cafeteria.

But no matter. The next morning we got up early for a six-mile hike along the cliffs of Kalaupapa Peninsula, a trip that would take us to perhaps the island's most famous institution: a leper colony created by King Kamehameha V in 1865, and still active today.

To go — and it's definitely a journey worth making — you have to make a reservation. Only a limited number of visitors are allowed to enter the park each day. Some people take a very short flight from the other side of Molokai to a landing strip just outside the colony. Others ride in a procession of mules that slowly winds its way down the cliff to the shore. We hiked the trail, and

NO MAINLAND NEWSPAPERS. NO HIGH-SPEED INTERNET. NO PROBLEM.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Molokai is not the first Hawaiian Island to head for if you are in search of snorkeling, surfing or swimming. Its selection of beaches is limited. And if you want a few days of resort luxury, look elsewhere. Cellphone service is agonizingly sparse. There are no mainland newspapers to be had, at least that I could find. Easy-to-find high-speed Internet service? Please.

At present there are just two hotels on the island, though there are four B&B's and a range of condos and rentals. And while there has been a seismic improvement in the quality of food in places like Maui and Kauai in the past few years, that culinary evolution has so far bypassed Molokai. Even Roy's — the otherwise ever-present chain of Pacific Rim restaurants that pioneered high-end dining in Hawaii since 1988 — has no outpost here.

You can find Budget Rent a Car and Dollar Rent a Car at the Hoolehua Air-

port. Reserve in advance, and think Jeep if you wanted to explore some of the island's back roads.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Lodge and Beach Village at Molokai Ranch** in Maunaloa, (888) 627-8082, www.molokairanch.com, on the west end of the island, provided one of the best nights I have ever spent in a hotel room — if you would call a canvas tent built around a frame on Kaupoa Beach, using solar power and a pull-down handle for a shower, a hotel room. The 40 canvas bungalows are \$268 to \$358 a night, double occupancy. The ranch's more traditional Hawaiian Lodge has 22 spacious ocean-view rooms at \$398 to \$478 a night. A special package through June 15 offers rates from \$138 a person at the Beach Village and \$178 at the Lodge, with breakfast and one activity (golf, trail ride or round-up, or choice of therapies at the spa).

Hotel Molokai, on Kamehameha V

Highway (Mile Marker 2), (808) 553-5347, www.hotelmolokai.com, is funky if serviceable, though it has seen better days, if not decades. Ask for a room by the ocean; it's worth the extra cost. Rates are \$90 to \$150, double occupancy.

WHERE TO EAT

Paddlers Inn, 10 Mohala Street, Kaunakakai; (808) 553-5256. Up the street from the Molokai Hotel, by a parking lot, the inn has indoor and outdoor seating. The brightly lighted dining room is a little short of atmosphere but the food — your standard island menu of seafood, steak and salads — is more than adequate. The restaurant, open daily, shuts down by 9 p.m. Dinner for two, about \$100.

Kanemitsu Bakery and Coffee Shop, 79 Ala Malama Street, Kaunakakai; (808) 553-5855. They bake lavosh here, a crisp, light flatbread in a variety of flavors (try the sesame or cinnamon), and Molokai bread, a round white loaf — definitely

worth a detour. The coffee shop is open 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. daily.

TOURS

Halawa Valley/Falls Cultural Hike: Contact Lawrence Aki at (808)-553-9803. The price is \$75. Information on this and other hikes: www.molokai-aloa.com/hikes.

Kalaupapa National Historical Park: A trip to the island's leper colony is by reservation only — best to book before you arrive on the island — and most people take a mule down or hike in. The mule ride is \$165, which includes a tour of the colony with a Damien Tours guide, entry fee to the park and lunch. However, even if you want to hike down yourself, you need to reserve a spot on the tour, and space is limited; \$40. No tours on Sunday. Contact the Molokai Mule Ride, (808) 567-6088, www.muleride.com, or Damien Tours at (808) 567-6171; damientours@aol.com.

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word and tale, Mr. Marks told us the story of the colony, a searing indictment made all the more powerful by his understated tone. He drove us on an old school bus to the small cottages that he and the other residents call home, and to the church with holes drilled in the floor that allowed lepers to spit during services without having to leave.

Our second day took us out to the east end of the island and that hike up the valley to the Moaula Falls. Our guide, Mr. Aki, a landowner who has planted taro on land that was once abandoned, and a former director of the Molokai Visitors Association, has a decidedly more welcoming view of tourism than some of his fellow islanders. "People have been hurt economically by this," he told me, mentioning that his son-in-law was one of those who were forced to commute to Honolulu for work.

We spent our third night at the Lodge and Beach Village at Molokai Ranch at the western end of the island. The ranch consists of a main lodge at the top of the hill, with expansive Western-theme rooms, many offering sweeping views across the bluffs looking out to the ocean. We chose to stay at the remote beach village that was a seven-mile drive along a severely rutted clay road, 1,200 feet down and behind a locked gate.

At the end of this jarring drive was a quiet colony of 40 two-bedroom canvas bungalows, most of them unoccupied. Instead of a refrigerator in the room (we're talking solar power here), there was an ice chest. We looked out at Kaupoa Beach through the screened windows of the tent, from the deck or from the hammocks that hang from trees around the property.