

Quirky, laid-back Molokai is the last bastion of an older, gentler, pre-corporate Hawaii



Bay watch: Molokai's version of the road to Hana ends 30 miles east of Kaunakakai at the Halawa Valley.

THE ISLAND

tourism forgot

By John Flinn
CHRONICLE TRAVEL
WRITER

KALA'E, MOLOKAI

I'm striding to the first tee of the finest golf course on Molokai (OK, at the moment, the *only* golf course on Molokai), but before I tee up my ball there's the little matter of the green fees.

On the manicured resort courses of Maui or the Big Island, this means handing over your platinum card at the pro shop and having them ring up anywhere from \$75 to a surely-you-must-be-joking \$200. Here on Molokai, I simply step into an empty, rusting trailer, open the cigar box on the counter and leave \$15.

Hidden away at the end of a rutted, jouncy, red-dirt road, the Ironwood Hills Golf Course is admittedly a little rough around the edges. The greens are splotchy; roosters strut on the fairways. But it's friendly, unpretentious, unhurried and filled with locals rather than tourists — a throwback to an older, gentler, pre-corporate Hawaii.

It's a perfect microcosm of Molokai, the island tourism forgot.

Fed up with high-rise hotels crowding the beach? Molokai has no building taller than a coconut palm and only two properties that could properly be called a hotel. Tired of traffic jams? Molokai has no stoplights, and no need for any road wider than

► MOLOKAI: Page C12, Col. 1

Island style: On the main street of Kaunakakai, Molokai's largest town, a family sells freshly caught *kala* — unicorn fish — from the back of a pickup truck, left; below, riders on horseback explore the green grassland of Molokai Ranch.



JOHN FLINN / The Chronicle

THE ISLAND tourism forgot



ROBERT HOLMES / Special to The Chronicle

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two lanes. Can't face another Hard Rock Cafe, Planet Hollywood or Bubba Gump Shrimp Co.? Molokai has only two chain restaurants — a Subway sandwich outlet and a KFC — and it takes a bit of searching to find them.

Still need proof that Molokai is not your typical, visitor-thronged, resort-happy Hawaiian island? Consider this: Its biggest tourist attraction is an active leper colony.

What drew me here was the idea that I might find an entirely different Hawaii than I'd find on Maui or Oahu, a place that still moves to its own rhythms rather

industry. And that's exactly what I found: Molokai is one of the last remaining bastions of old Hawaii, a time capsule of the way things were 50 or 60 years ago, before the islands were colonized by Hiltons and Hyatts.

Of the 6.3 million people who visited the Hawaiian islands last year, only about 66,000 — a little over 1 percent — made it to Molokai. Half the island's population is of native Hawaiian ancestry, by far the highest percentage of any island except Ni'ihau.

"People are friendlier here because no one came and took away our lifestyle," said Tuddie Purdy, a macadamia nut grower. "The tourist industry never took over

here is the way they used to be all over Hawaii."

I found Purdy in the shed next to his orchard in Molokai's central highlands, and he immediately dropped what he was doing to show me around.

"Try this," he said, handing me a roasted nut. "The commercial nut farms cook them in oil and preservatives, but all I do is roast them with a little Molokai salt. Mine have no cholesterol and only half the calories of the commercial ones."

Purdy poured a bag of freshly roasted nuts into a coconut-shell bowl and invited me to eat all I wanted. I obliged; they were far and away the best macadamia nuts

"Have some more," he said, opening out another bag as some other visitors walked up his reddirt driveway. Purdy's farm isn't easy to find, but just about every tourist on Molokai eventually winds up there. He charges nothing for his tours, or for the prodigious amount of nuts he serves visitors.

"That's the way we do things," he said.

While family businesses like Purdy's thrive, the island has proven remarkably resistant to large-scale enterprises by outside business interests. The sugar cane industry succumbed to brackish water, the honey industry to disease, the pineapple industry to



JOHN FLINN / The Chronicle



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Molokai medley: Sleepy Kaunakakai, above, filled with general stores and restaurants with Spam on the menu, is the largest town on Molokai; Tuddie Purdy, near left, cracks open macadamia nuts at his orchard; far left, a fisherman looks across the channel to the island of Maui.

industry to bovine tuberculosis.

Nor has big-time tourism ever gained much a foothold. When I visited recently, the Kaluakoi Hotel, formerly a Sheraton, was shuttered, its 18-hole championship golf course overgrown with weeds. Its owners are hoping to reopen the golf course by 2004 as the first step in reviving the resort.)

Molokai Ranch, which opened three up-market tented camps to great fanfare between 1998 and 2000, has since quietly closed two of them to the general public. (They occasionally open them for corporate retreats and other big-group events.)

out of the airport was a hand-painted sign: "Aloha. Slow down. This is Molokai." It was obviously meant for newly arriving visitors like me. For the locals, who drive so languidly you sometimes think they're parked, there were signs along the highway posting *minimum* speed limits.

I drove 10 miles from the airport to Molokai's fanciest hotel and saw precisely two other cars en route — both happily ignoring the speed minimum. The landscape, bleak and dry around the airport, transformed into lush grassland as I climbed into

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Molokai's western hills. Cattle appeared alongside the road, trade breezes blew waves through the tall grass, and the green hills tumbled down to the distant sea. I could have been in the Scottish highlands.

Maunaloa is a tiny, tidy, hilltop plantation town, and it took me two trips around it to find the Molokai Ranch Lodge (which recently changed its name to the Sheraton Molokai.) Tucked away unobtrusively on a side street, it's a grand and gracious place, built in the style of a 1930s Hawaiian ranch house.

A fire was crackling in the three-story stone fireplace in the grand room, where one of the ranch's sweet-voiced *paniolas* was strumming a guitar and singing Hawaiian cowboy songs. Out on the expansive lanai, guests were sipping wine and watching the sunset from wicker chairs. This is as luxe as Molokai gets — or is likely ever to get — but I found the hotel to be low-key and in the spirit of the island.

My accommodation the next night, while priced the same, was a little more rustic. A shuttle drove me down to the ranch's one remaining tented camp — Kaupoa Beach Village, located between two sandy crescents.

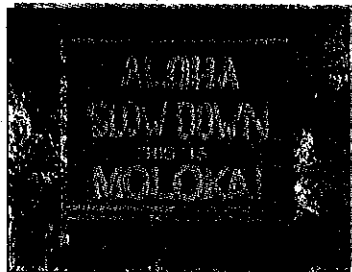
My room was a semi-permanent canvas tent erected on a wooden platform, a fancier version of the Curry Village tent cabins in Yosemite. The private bathroom was partially open to the sky — a bit of an inconvenience when it rained — and the solar-powered shower delivered only a tepid rinse.

Wild surf pounded the beaches, making swimming impossible. The sea was particularly rough during my visit, but this is a problem all over Molokai: it has fewer swimming beaches than any other Hawaiian island.

Adventure sports, priced separately, are the main attraction of the beach village. I went on a pleasant-enough two-hour kayaking tour, but the real lure, I discovered, is mountain biking. At the end of the day I'd see the bikers coming back into camp, their shirts speckled with red dirt, their



Molokai Visitors Bureau



JOHN FLINN / The Chronicle

Slow ride: Mountain bike paths take riders to the top of what are said to be the world's tallest sea cliffs, above; left, advice for newly arrived visitors.

that they'd discovered something sensational before the general public did.

"It's world class," raved David Guettler, a bike shop owner from Portland who, along with his wife and young daughter, was spending 10 days at the tented camp so he could ride all of Molokai's 125 miles of trails. "I'd say the biking here is comparable to Moab, Durango or any of the great mountain biking meccas." Not everyone I talked to was



JOHN FLINN / The Chronicle

Leprosy patient Richard Marks, who doubles as sheriff and tour guide in Kalaupapa, exits Father Damien's St. Philomena Church.

Imprisoned in paradise

Kalaupapa's leprosy patients now free to leave, but few do

By John Flinn

CHRONICLE TRAVEL WRITER

KALAUAPAPA, Molokai — At the edge of what are said to be the highest sea cliffs in the world, a sturdy metal gate marks the start of a trail that switchbacks steeply down the cliff-face to the beach. Once the gate served to imprison the lepers of Kalaupapa; today it keeps gawkers away.

Forty-one elderly leprosy patients still live on the isolated peninsula at the bottom of the trail. They've been free to leave since 1970, but have chosen to live out their lives in Kalaupapa. It's an achingly beautiful place, and it's the only home they've known for almost half a century.

The site is now a National Historical Park. To obtain permission to enter, I phoned Richard Marks, the sheriff and tour guide of Kalaupapa, and signed up for one of his tours. Most visitors also sign up for a thrilling, tooth-jarring mule ride down the path, but I elected to save \$120 by hiking.

"If you see a car coming slowly down the road, get out of the way," Marks warned us as he picked us up at the bottom of the trail. "We got a lot of blind drivers here."

Much to the chagrin of Hawaii's Department of Motor Vehicles, Marks refuses to cite them. "Our roads don't connect to the outside

on them is our own business."

His desiccated earlobes are the tip-off that Marks, too, has the disease. He does not extend his hand until I offer mine first; a lifetime of being treated as an outcast has made him leery of the reaction of strangers. But despite a fearful reputation going back to biblical times, leprosy is one of the least communicable of human diseases; today it's easily treated. We saw other leprosy patients from the bus, but under Kalaupapa's rules we were not allowed to approach or photograph them.

Kalaupapa is without doubt the loveliest place on Molokai, perhaps in all the Hawaiian islands. Misty ribbon waterfalls tumble down the green sea cliffs, and rainbows seem to be etched permanently into the sky. But an almost palpable sadness hangs over the place.

Since 1866, Kalaupapa is where Hawaii banished any citizen thought to have leprosy. Bounty hunters took suspected lepers from their homes, schools and taro fields. They were locked in cages, put aboard ships, ferried to the choppy waters off the peninsula and pushed overboard with sticks. Those who made it to shore lived in an almost feral state, without law, government or any sort of medical care.

Things improved dramatically

named Joseph de Veuster — Father Damien — in 1873. Damien bandaged their oozing sores, brought them water, built churches and more than 300 permanent homes and dug their graves — an average of one a day, by his count. Working virtually without sleep for years, he wore himself down to the point that he contracted the disease and died from it, the only outsider ever to have done so at Kalaupapa. In recent years, Marks and others have tirelessly lobbied the Vatican to bestow sainthood on Damien. He was beatified in 1995, and Marks expects he'll be canonized before long.

Marks drove us past the town, with its tidy-looking infirmary, store and cottages, to a museum. There I found a 1952 picture of the Kalaupapa Dodgers looking proud in their baseball uniforms — despite the fact that some players had to use rubber tubing to tie the bat to their arm stumps. Down a rough road was St. Philomena Church, built by Damien with holes in the wooden floor so those in advanced stages of leprosy could expectorate without stepping outside.

Over the years, about 8,000 leprosy patients were exiled to Kalaupapa, the last arriving in 1968. Marks is the youngest, at 68; his 94-year-old aunt is the oldest.

"I'll stay here until I die," Marks

Molokai's pleasures haven't been sanitized for tourists

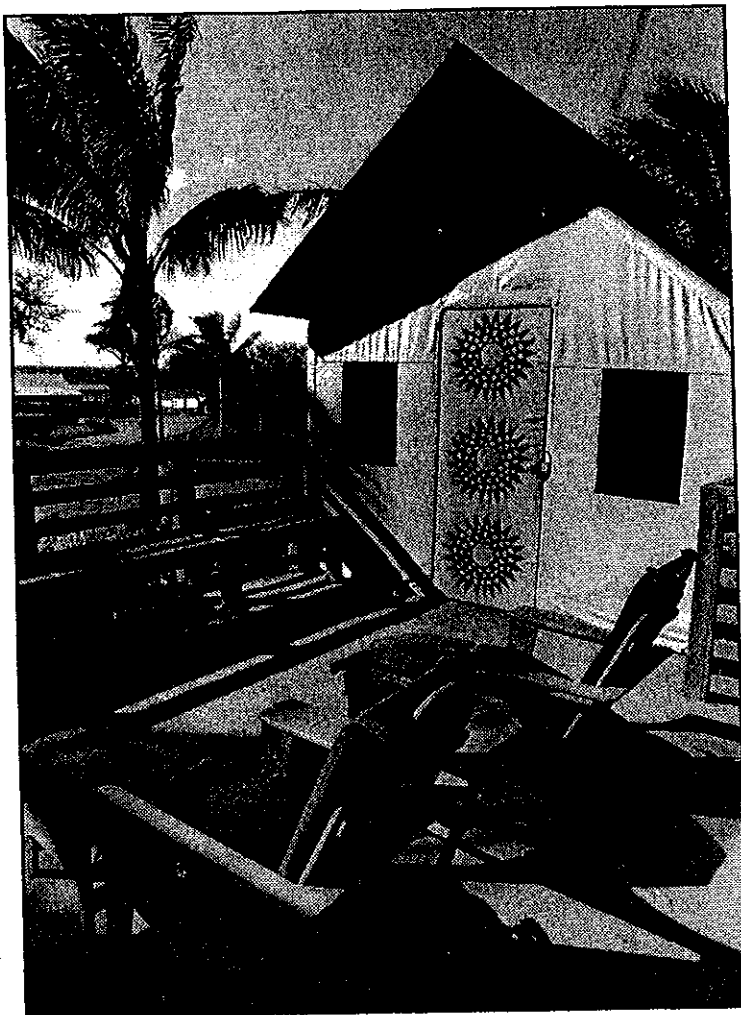
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ored, and saw a man standing out on the reef tossing a fish net, exactly the way the ancient Hawaiians did. The road hugged the shoreline in places, staying so close to the water that a rogue wave splashed into my window.

On my way back I stopped in what passes for a big city on Molokai. Kaunakakai is a one-block collection of wooden, false-front buildings with rusted tin roofs. The shops are mostly general stores, selling everything from log leashes to bicycle tires to vacuum cleaners. The bulletin board advertises pigs for sale; the restaurants feature Spam on their menus. Pickup trucks rumbled slowly down the street, the drivers wagging the thumb-and-pinkie "hang-loose" sign to friends on the sidewalk. A family sold freshly caught *kala* — unicorn fish — from the back of a truck. Just about everyone under the age of 20 went barefoot.

At 10:30 that night, on the advice of a friend who grew up on the island, I ventured down a darkened, cobwebbed alley next to Imamura's General Store. I could see several others shuffling furtively in the blackness. It looked, frankly, like a place to score crack. I followed the others down the alley to the back door of the Kanemitsu Bakery. We pounded on the door, a young man came out to take our orders, and a few minutes later we were tearing into steamy-warm, fresh-from-the-oven loaves of "hot bread" filled with whipped cream, strawberry jam and cinnamon, a Molokai specialty. A teenage girl smiled at me with her mouth half full; I grinned back with stuffed cheeks. No words needed to be said.

Like so many pleasures on Molokai, the experience hasn't



JOHN FLINN / The Chronicle

Canvas: The view from a tent cabin at the Kaupoa Beach Village.

been sanitized and commodified for tourists. And that, I realized, is the secret to enjoying the island: The locals aren't terribly interested in trading their hang-loose lifestyle for a busboy job at a Ritz-Carlton or Four Seasons. If you want to enjoy Molokai, you've got to do it on their terms.

Nowhere is that more true than at the place I spent my last two nights — the Hotel Molokai.

Built on the beach a couple of miles east of Kaunakakai in 1966,

it's a funky, low-rent, vaguely Polynesian-style hotel that looks as if it has never been updated (although I was assured it was, in 1999). My room had no air conditioning, there were rust stains under the tub faucet and the toilet rocked when I sat on it. But it was only \$60 a night — the cheapest hotel room I've ever found in Hawaii.

I only used the room to shower and sleep; I spent every other waking moment in the hotel's restaurant/bar — my favorite on Molokai, very possibly in all the Hawaiian islands.

Located a few feet from water's edge, with a moonlit view across the channel to Lanai, it's open to the soft trade breezes. Tiki torches

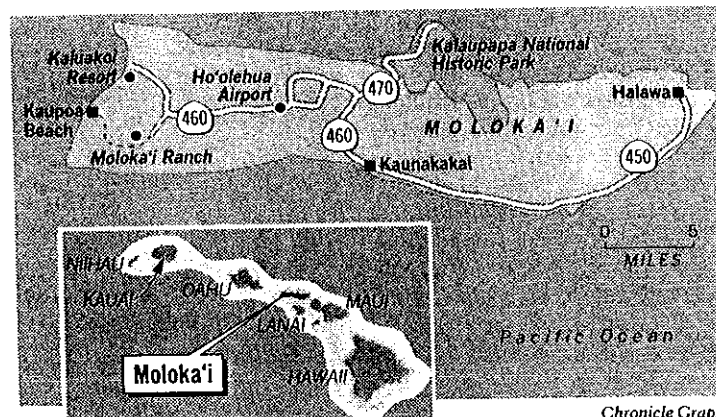
If you go:

► **GETTING THERE:** There are no direct flights from the mainland. Hawaiian Airlines flies there from Honolulu and Lanai; Island Air flies from Honolulu and Maui. The Maui Princess ferry shuttles between Lahaina, on Maui, and Kaunakakai daily. The schedule is set up for commuting hotel workers, but could work for visitors. Phone: (808) 667-6165; Web: www.mauiprincess.com. One-way fare: \$40, adults; \$20, children.

► **WHERE TO STAY:** **Sheraton Molokai** (formerly the Molokai Ranch Lodge), P.O. Box 259, Maunaloa, Molokai, HI 96770; phone: (877) 726-4656; Web: www.molokairanch.com. Rack rates, according to the Web site, start at \$265, plus a \$10 resort fee, but I got my room in February for \$169 without much dickering. **Kaupoa Beach Village**, same contact info as Sheraton Molokai. Rack rates are \$260 a night, based on two adults sharing a tent; for that you get a platform with two tent cabins and a bathroom. (I got my tent for \$169.) A sensational buffet-breakfast is included; lunches and dinners run \$6 to \$26. **Hotel Molokai**, P.O. Box 1020, Kaunakakai, Molokai, HI 96748; phone: (808) 553-5347 or Castle Resorts' toll-free number: (800) 367-5004; Web: www.hotelmolokai.com. Published rates start at \$80 a night (Internet specials start at \$52); I got my room for \$60. There is a smattering of **condos and B&Bs** around the island, some at the Kaluakoi Resort at the western end, some around the town of Kaunakakai. For information, go to visitmolokai.com/visitor-center.html and click on "Lodging."

flickered in the warm night. Carved Polynesian figures festooned the beams and columns; palm trees seemed to grow out of the floor. If you go there — and you should — order the coconut shrimp and thank me later.

At the thatched bar, locals from town — enormous Hawaiians with



Chronicle Graphic

► **WORD TO THE WISE:** No alcohol is sold at the Beach Village, but you can bring your own. Don't make the mistake I did of buying it at the Molokai Ranch Lodge store, where they charge \$2.50 for a can of Coors; walk 50 yards to the Maunaloa General Store, where prices are only slightly higher than you'd pay at home.

► **WHAT TO DO:** Most of the **mountain biking** on Molokai is on land owned by the Molokai Ranch. Bicycle rentals are \$25 to \$35 a day, but available only to guests of the Sheraton Molokai or Beach Village. A full-day guided ride with lunch is \$80 for guests, \$100 for nonguests. **Horseback rides** range from \$80 to \$125 for guests, \$105 to \$150 for nonguests. Guided, two-hour **sea kayaking** excursions are \$45 for guests, \$65 for nonguests. To get to **Purdy's Macadamia Nut Farm**, follow Highway 470 to the town of Kualapu'u, turn west on Farmington Avenue and then right on Lihi Pali Avenue, just before the high school. Look for the hand-painted sign on your right. He's generally there from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Polynesian tattoos peeking out from their T-shirts — were strumming ukuleles and singing bawdy songs, the lyrics of which everyone in the place but me seemed to know. All it took was an appreciative smile for me to be waved over to the bar. The ukulele players taught me the chorus to one song,

weekdays and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays. No phone, but he has a Web site: www.molokai.com/eatnuts. Free. To get to **Kalaupapa**, the leper colony, you can sign up with Molokai Mule Rides (800-567-7550 or 808-567-6088); the ride costs \$150 (\$130 if booked through the Internet: www.muleride.com) and includes lunch and Richard Marks' tour (see sidebar). If you want to hike, phone Marks' Damien Tours at least one day in advance (808-567-6171; call between 4 p.m. and 10 p.m. California time). The cost of his tour for hikers is \$30. Bring your own lunch. Note: Tours run daily except Sunday; no one under 16 is allowed into Kalaupapa. To get to the **Ironwood Hills Golf Club**, follow Highway 470 past Kualapu'u and look for the sign on your left. Phone: (808) 567-6000. \$15 for nine holes, \$20 for 18. Club rentals, \$7.

► **FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Contact the **Molokai Visitors Bureau**, P.O. 960 Kaunakakai, Molokai, HI 96748; phone: (800) 800-6367; Web: visitmolokai.com.

— their long-necked Buds and my mai tai with paper umbrella. "This," said the man next to me, "is what we do for fun on Molokai." If we're smart, that's what the rest of us do for fun on Molokai, too.

E-mail John Flinn at

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