

The Sacramento Bee

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Isle of contentment

Molokai has preserved its Hawaiian heritage
while keeping commercialization in check



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By Janet Fullwood
BEE TRAVEL EDITOR

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MOLOKAI, Hawaii - Raymond Leimana Naki holds court in a roadside shack above a restored fish pond on Molokai's rural east end. The thatched retreat is decorated with coconuts and frequented by roving, collarless dogs. A hand-lettered sign proclaims its mission: "Hawaiian Cultural Education Center."

I pass the place twice in my rental car before curiosity gets the best of me and I pull in. A figure on the beach waves me down. It's Naki, who is demonstrating for another visitor the use of a traditional throw net. He wears a hat woven from hala leaves and a dark-blue loincloth with a flap that flutters like a flag beneath a round, brown bulge of belly.

With a practiced flick of the wrist, Naki sends the bundle of filament in his arms sailing skyward. It unfurls like a flower, making a circular impression as it spans the water and disappears. Naki hauls the net to the sand and segues into a slow, stylized dance. He's light-footed, absorbed, graceful as a cat.

"You see, this is how hula evolved, out of the fishing, out of the taro patch," he says, incorporating net-throwing and plant-harvesting motions into his routine.

I wonder, just for a moment, if I've stumbled onto a movie set, if this drama on the beach is contrived. Naki looks, after all, like he's been plucked from Central Casting - ready, perhaps, to serve as an extra in the next "Pirates of the Caribbean" film. (Parts of the third picture in the

series were filmed here.)

He throws back his head when I suggest as much and lets out a hearty laugh.

"This isn't a *costume*," he says, plucking at the loincloth and looking me straight in the eye. "This is my *attire*. It's who I am."

As comfortable in his sun-browned skin as a Wall Street banker would be in a Brioni suit, Naki is a potent symbol of the only Hawaiian island, other than privately owned Ni'ihau, where people of native ancestry are in the majority. Many Molokai families live on homesteads established under the Hawaiian Home Lands Act of 1921, cultivating a lifestyle based on cultural traditions and the bounty of the land.

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Molokai: Development idea viewed with suspicion

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Tourism long ago took root on this 10-by-38-mile island, but it never took over the economy. For most of a century, sugar cane, pineapple and cattle ranching ruled. Even today, with agriculture focused on small-scale production of specialty products such as macadamia nuts, papayas, coffee and flowers, the island has only two hotels and a handful of condominium rentals with just 400 rooms between them. The biggest tourist attraction is a former leper colony, now a national historic site, where thousands of people were banished before a cure was found.

That Molokai so far has kept large-scale development at bay is a source of local pride. Change may be at the doorstep, but for now, with no stoplights, no Starbucks and no buildings taller than a palm tree, Molokai is a place that still moves to the rhythms of a kinder, gentler time. The reward for off-the-beaten-track travelers (less than 2 percent of Hawaii visitors find their way here) is a rare degree of authenticity.

As Naki said when we parted ways: "Hawaiian culture is not just tasting poi. You want to put your finger in it, you can't. You've got to jump in. All or nothing. That's what Molokai is. We go as deep as you want to go."

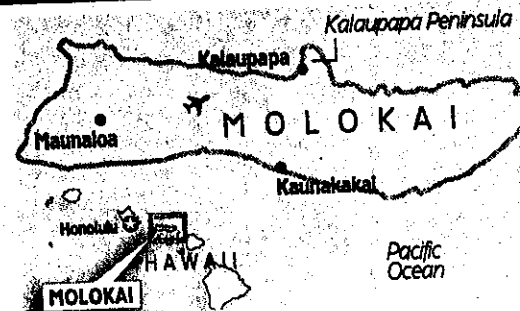
Like going back in time

I can't claim to have gone all that deep during my five days on the island, but the experience was richer, more meaningful - and more memorable - than any trip I've made to Hawaii in recent memory.

Just flying into the one-horse airport put a big smile on my face. There was no hustle-bustle, no phalanx of greeters holding signs with arriving passengers' names, not a taxi or shuttle bus in sight.



Sacramento Bee/Janet Fullwood
Anakaia Piiipo Soiatorio, above left, and Julie Kell'ikuli exchange a traditional greeting during a cultural protocol ceremony on Molokai. Below, diners feast on the scenery at Hotel Molokai. Left, a hike into Halawa Valley ends at an idyllic swimming hole fed by a waterfall.



IF YOU GO

Planning: The Molokai Visitors Association Web site, www.molokai-hawaii.com, is a good place to start. It has maps, recreation information, links for lodging and more. C good resources include www.molokai.com and www.visitmolokai.com.

Getting there: Hawaiian Airlines and Island Air serve Molokai from Honolulu & Maui, with promotional fares as low as \$ each way. The Molokai Princess ferry is another option, with two daily round trips between the harbor at Kaunakakai and Lahaina, Maui. Fare is \$40 general, \$2C ages 4-12; travel time is about 90 min. Information: www.molokaiferry.com.

Lodging: The most upscale is the Lod Molokai Ranch on the west side of the island in the village of Maunaloa. Rates at the 22-room inn are in the \$220-\$270 per night range in January, March and Sept through mid-December, higher the rest year. Two-bedroom "tentalsows" at the b village run \$155-\$198 during the same periods. Details: www.molokaieranch.com

The more centrally located Hotel Mc has rooms in the \$130-\$150 range; www.hotelmolokai.com. A good selection of condominiums, vacation rental homes B&Bs also can be found; find them on the Web sites listed under "planning."

Things to do: Outdoor activities rule. Molokai Fish & Dive (www.molokaifishanddive.com; 808-553-59) is the island's major outfitter for guided fishing, kayaking and diving trips.

The Kalaupapa National Historic Site colony to which thousands of leprosy patients were banished from the mid-1800s to 1960s, is Molokai's best-known tourist attraction but can be visited only on a tour. Reservations are required whether you hike, ride a mule or arrive by plane or boat. Minimum age is 16. Information: Mule Ride, www.muleride.com.

with warm, moist air, like a long-lost daughter coming home.

"ALOHA SLOW DOWN THIS IS MOLOKAI" read a sign at the airport exit. The childish image of a rainbow that adorned it echoed a real one in the sky.

The immediate landscape was scruffy, unmanicured. I drove into the old plantation town of Kaunakakai and wandered through an old-fashioned grocery store to pick up a few supplies. Most of the other shoppers were wearing plastic flip-flops – or slippers, as they're called in Hawaii. A few were barefoot, and some of the women were wrapped in Tahitian-style *pareos*, or sarongs.

Outside, people lingered around their pickup trucks, sipping soda and chatting under a purpling twilight sky. It felt like Polynesia in a way that precious little of Hawaii does anymore. Even the intonations of the locals' clipped, pidgin-laced speech ("Chee, brah, I tot you pau!") let me know I was far from the bright lights of Waikiki.

Ranch welcomes visitors

Base camp for me was the Lodge at Molokai Ranch, a 22-room country inn designed in the style of a 1930s Hawaiian ranch house. I fell so hard for its architectural charms that I found myself pacing off the wide verandas and photographing balcony railings and other details, just in case I should win the lottery someday and build an island home of my own.

Molokai Ranch is a 64,000-acre island institution, still a working ranch, that some time ago fell from private ownership into corporate hands. After opening the lodge in 1999, management made a bold dive into the world of ecotourism by importing an arkful of exotic animals and building three tented safari camps.

The venture floundered, and the

island seven years ago. But one of the camps survives as the Kaupo Beach Village, a cluster of canvas-side "tentalows" utterly unlike anything else in Hawaii. Positioned aside a scenic cove that frames full-on sunsets in summer, each of the 40 units includes two platform tent bedrooms connected by a deck. They feature solar-powered lights and showers.

I feasted here one evening at a lavish seaside buffet, sharing conversation with manager John Pele. Most of the tentalow occupants were families or energetic couples here to pursue mountain biking, kayaking, scuba diving and other adventure sports, all of which are offered through the ranch.

"We saw wild turkeys! And a seal!" an excited little girl exclaimed to her mud-splattered father as he joined the family at the next table.

A highlight at the beach village several evenings a week is a protocol presentation by Anakala Pilipo Solotorio, a Molokai native and longtime ranch employee who serves as the resort's cultural specialist. Dressed in traditional attire, he takes visitors through a garden brimming with plants once used for food and medicine, and gives a talk on traditional Hawaiian culture.

Then it's out to the beach for a sunset ceremony that sends tingles up guests' spines as "Uncle Anakala" chants in Hawaiian and blows a conch shell to the four directions. On the evening of my visit, the ceremony had the effect of wrapping the camp and everyone in it in a mellow, magical spell.

The mood held all the next day as I drove up to "topside" Molokai and Palaau State Park at the end of the road. From a lookout atop one of the world's highest sea cliffs, I could see the Kalapapa Peninsula, site of the notorious leper colony, sticking out like a flat

green thumb. I'd like to see it again. I'd visit it another day, by muleback, but that's another story.

Development ahead?

Driving around is my favorite thing to do on all the Hawaiian islands, but it was especially pleasant here, where I wasn't just one in a parade of rental cars driven by looky-loos.

My favorite excursion was along a twisty, two-lane road – Molokai's version of Maui's Hana Highway – that hugs the southern coast. I followed it east from Kaunakakai past miles of rural homes, beach parks and fish ponds. The last section, narrowing in places to one lane, climbs up into the impossibly green mountains and down again to idyllic Halawa Bay, where a lazy stream carves an "S" in the landscape on its way out to sea.

Another day, I explored the west end's Papohaku Beach, a three-mile strip of golden sand beautiful to look at, if too rough for swimming much of the year. Neighboring Kaluakoi is a sleepy resort center and site of a former Sheraton hotel that, along with a championship golf course, was shuttered almost a decade ago, greatly contributing to the island's tourism decline. The Singapore-based corporation that owns Molokai Ranch and controls much of the west end wants to reopen the hotel, but its master plan also calls for development of 200 lots for high-end "farm homes" in a culturally revered district at the island's southwest corner known as La'au Point.

You can't spend any time on Molokai without seeing signs, tacked to trees, fence posts and houses, screaming "No to La'au" in protest of the development scheme. The complicated deal involves a land trade that would return tens of thousands of acres to the Hawaiian Land Trust, but many islanders view it

as a Pandora's box that would open the door to unstoppable change.

Even a casual visitor can sense the issue has divided the community.

"It's already a war and it's going to get worse," acknowledges Todd Yamashita, 32, who grew up on Molokai, moved away and returned to become editor-in-chief of the Molokai Dispatch, one of three weekly newspapers on an island with a permanent population of less than 10,000.

"Bringing in 200 millionaires and their money and voting power would change things," he mused over lunch. "Up to this time in Hawaii, it's been development and tourism that have stimulated the economy. But what we have here on Molokai is a community small enough to call family. We control our own destiny, and we're largely undeveloped. Put that all that together and there's room to do other things. We have the potential to become a model of sustainability."

Supporters of the La'au development hail the job creation and economic boost it would bring. As it is, scores of Molokai residents commute by ferry to jobs at resorts on Maui, the neighboring island. A final decision on the matter is due early next year.

A new Eden

There was one more place I wanted to see during my limited time on Molokai: Halawa Valley, one of Hawaii's true Edens. A verdant, fertile gorge cradling some of the oldest archaeological sites and taro fields in Hawaii, Halawa was populated for more than 1,000 years before a 1964 tsunami destroyed ancient terraces and washed out the last of the homesteaders. In the 1970s and '80s, pakololo (marijuana) growers moved in, and the hiking trail through the valley became a hippie thoroughfare.

More recently, landowners have reclaimed stewardship, restarted taro cultivation and restricted access to the spectacular waterfalls at the valley's end. One of the landowners, Lawrence Aki, leads guided cultural hikes starting at the homestead once occupied by his grandparents.

I joined a small group to trek the two-mile tropical fantasyland of a trail leading upvalley. The crumbling walls and foundations it passed whispered of a mysterious, bygone time. The path ended at a white cascade pouring over a cliff into a deep, cold pool. We ate our lunch there, swam and contemplated the culture of the people who came before.

That evening, I stopped (for the third time, ahem) at a popular local hangout, the Hotel Molokai, a Polynesian-inspired, old-school kind of place with an open-air bar and live music almost every night. By now my face was familiar enough for regulars at the bar to greet me with a friendly "howzit."

I took a table and ordered dinner just as a row of waterfront tiki torches was being lit. A few minutes later, four husky guys in aloha shirts took the stage, ukuleles and guitars in hand. The audience, which appeared to be made up largely of family and friends, responded enthusiastically to the island sounds that poured forth.

These musicians weren't singing for tourists, they were singing for themselves, for Hawaiians, for a Hawaii that hardly exists anymore except on Molokai. I might have been an outsider looking in, but I was happy to be there.

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Bee travel editor Janet Fullwood can be reached at (916) 321-1148 or jfullwood@sacbee.com. Back columns: www.sacbee.com/fullwood. For more travel and outdoor news, check out the blog sacbee.com/goingplaces.

Moloka

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