

Photos by Gene Sloan, USA

stubbornly resisting development: Visitors can go by mule to Kalaupapa. A ride down a cliff-hugging trail to the lush peninsula draws about a dozen people a

Molokai

This island has all of the beauty, but none of the tourist crowds

Hawaii's hideaway

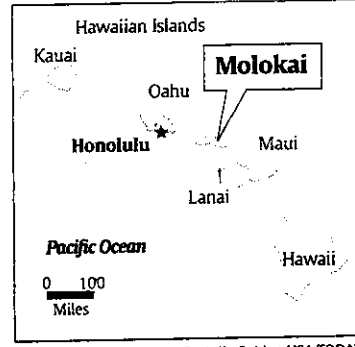
By Gene Sloan
USA TODAY

MOLOKAI, Hawaii — Mandy Pedersen, 29, of Salt Lake City, tallies the number of tourists spread across Kepuhi Beach, a near-perfect crescent of cinnamon-colored sand.

Framed by rugged red cliffs, Kepuhi is a popular beach on Molokai, one of the smallest of the Hawaiian Islands. And today is one of its busier days. Pedersen's count, including herself: four.

"It's sort of amazing how empty this island is," she says, standing near water's edge in a tank top and flip-flops as waves rumble ashore. Even Kaluakoi Villas, the condominium complex that's her home for the week, appears almost abandoned. "It's just as pretty as the other islands, but it has none of the crowds."

Indeed, 38-mile-long Molokai is not your typical tourism-dominated



By Julie Snider, USA TODAY

Hawaiian island. Unlike its neighbors, which are embracing the masses as a ticket to prosperity, Molokai is fighting to limit growth. Over the past two years, islanders beat back the cruise industry, which wanted to make Molokai a day stop for 2,000 passenger ships. And now residents are tackling a new threat: a

plan to develop the island's sunny western shore.

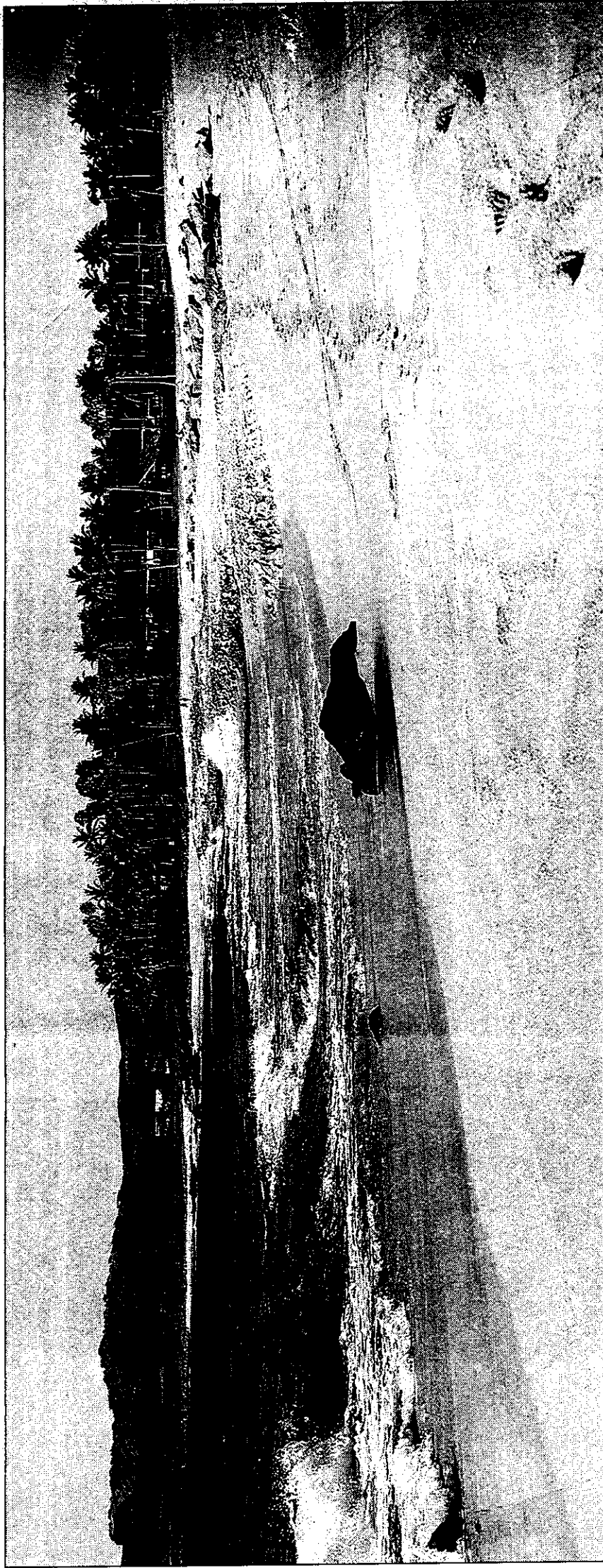
"We never, never want the masses to come here," says Walter Ritte, 59, a restorer of ancient fish ponds who has led efforts to preserve the sparsely populated island's rural character. "Mass tourism has the potential to destroy everything that we hold dear."

Ritte is chatting over a scoop of macadamia-nut ice cream at Kamuela's Cookhouse, a no-frills, six-table diner that is about as fancy as eateries get on this largely undeveloped island. Nestled between Maui and Oahu, two of the most-visited beach destinations in the world, Molokai has none of the polish of its sisters: no manicured resorts with \$500-a-night rooms, no flashy restaurants serving Asian fusion cuisine



Kalaupapa: This mosaic memorial honors Father Damien, who ministered to those afflicted with leprosy.

See COVER STORY next page ▶



Photos by Gene Sloan, USA TODAY

Few footprints in the sand: Despite its popularity, Kepuhi Beach is rarely crowded. In the distance is the now-closed 144-room Kahuakoi resort. Molokai Ranch, the island's largest landowner, hopes to reopen it.

Molokai cocktail: Fresh air, stunning vistas, few people

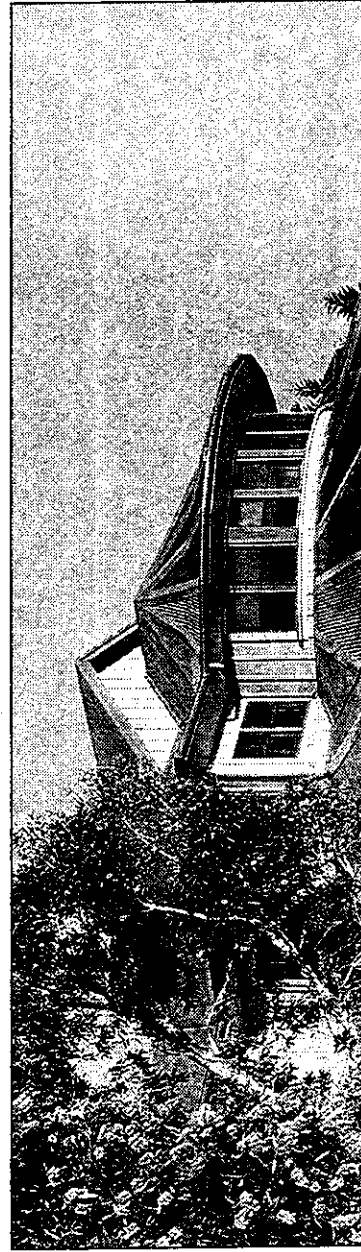
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no glitzy towns full of name-brand stores.

Nor does it want it. The 7,000 residents are perfectly happy to keep tourism at its current level of around 90,000 visitors a year, a fraction of the more than 2.1 million a year that visit Maui.

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Cover story



If you go . . .

Getting there: Several commuter airlines fly to Molokai from Honolulu, or you can fly from Maui; Island Air dominates the 25-minute runs. A 90-minute ferry from Maui is \$40 one way. A rental car is a must for getting around.

Where to stay: The crown jewel is **The Lodge at Molokai Ranch** (888-627-8082; molokairanch.com), a 22-room hideaway in the upcountry; rates start at \$220 a night. The ranch also is home to **The Beach Village**, an upscale eco-camp along an isolated

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Cover story

Still, Molokai isn't entirely opposed to visitors. And for a traveler looking to slow down — really slow down — this rectangle-shaped tropical hideaway is a dream come true. Laced with untrammled beaches, including Papohaku, which is the longest in the Hawaiian Islands, a handful of quiet resorts and friendly, laid-back, unpretentious people, Molokai is a time capsule of the era before mass-market tourism.

"Molokai is what Hawaii used to be," says Duke Wagner, 58, a psychologist from Honolulu who visits almost yearly to escape the bustle of the big city.

Wagner has just hopped off a mule after a bumpy, 3-mile ride to Kalaupapa, a lush peninsula that's home to the island's best-known tourist attraction.

In 1866, Hawaii began to exile victims of leprosy to the isolated area, cut off from the rest of Molokai by a 1,700-foot cliff. Many were forced to swim ashore, and conditions were deplorable — at least until a Belgian priest arrived.

Now a candidate for sainthood, Father Damien (born Joseph de Veuster) cared for thousands of patients before succumbing to the disease in 1889.

'It was a life sentence'

The mule ride down the cliff-hugging trail to Kalaupapa draws about a dozen people a day, which on Molokai is a crowd. And the day-long outing is typical of the intimate experience visitors find.

After riders dismount in Kalaupapa, one of the 35 remaining patients, Richard Marks, 74, leads a tour of the peninsula, which once housed 1,000 sufferers. (Marks and others no longer carry the disease and are not contagious, thanks to drugs available since the 1970s, but they still are being treated for its after-effects.)

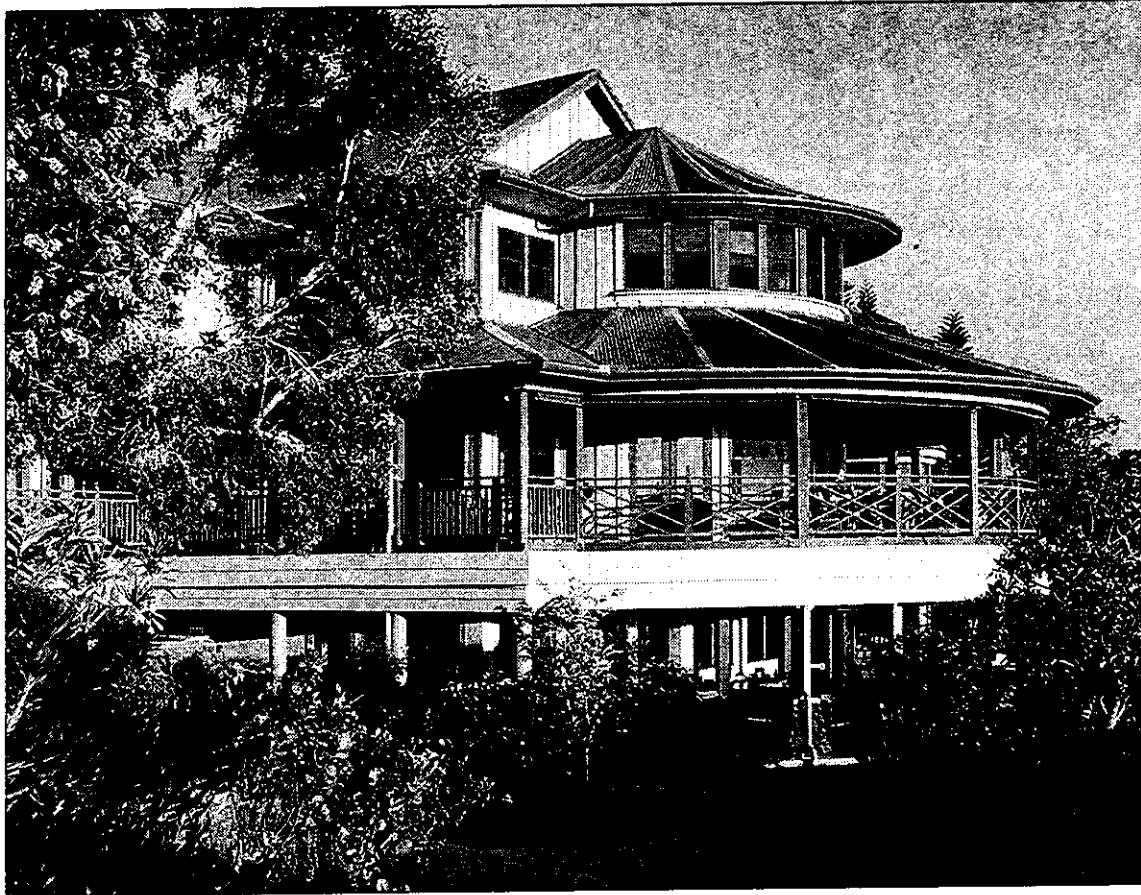
"In those days, it was a life sentence," he says, showing off the remnants of the village where he was banished in 1956. "There was an armed guard at the top of the trail to stop us from getting out."

The stigma of leprosy is one reason tourism was slow to get going on Molokai. But residents also have a long tradition of blocking development. Many fear a repeat of what happened on Maui, a once-quiet island that erupted with high-rise resorts, strip malls and bumper-to-bumper traffic seemingly overnight.

"They worry about being overrun, and it's understandable," says Mike Holmes, 62, a charter-boat captain in Kaunakakai, Molokai's blink-and-you'll-miss-it main town, where there isn't a building taller than a coconut palm.

Lounging on the back of his 27-footer, The Ahi, the Oahu native says he fled here 11 years ago after Honolulu mushroomed in size and lost its Aloha spirit. Molokai, the only island other than privately held Niihau where more than 50% of residents are native Hawaiians, is the last piece of Hawaii that it'll

entirely opposed to visitors. And for a traveler looking to slow down — really slow down — this rectangle-shaped tropical hideaway is a dream come true. Laced with untrammled beaches, including Papohaku, which is the longest in the Hawaiian Islands, a handful of quiet resorts and friendly, laid-back, unpretentious people, Molokai is a time capsule of the era before mass-market tourism.



Private paradise: The 5-year-old Lodge at Molokai Ranch, overlooking the Pacific, has 22 comfortably elegant gue



Faith: St. Philomena's Church at Kalaupapa, where Father Damien was the priest.

The lonely isle

The Hawaiian Islands lured more than 6.3 million visitors in 2003, but few set foot on Molokai. Island-by-island visitor totals:

Island	Visitors (in millions)
Oahu	4.07
Maui	2.14
Big Island (Hawaii)	1.21
Kauai	0.97
Molokai	0.09
Lanai	0.09

Source: Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism.

By Julie Snyder, USA TODAY



Discover the untouched beauty of Molokai through photos at travel.usatoday.com

tain biking and hiking. It's a haven for kayakers and snorkelers; the barrier reef off the southern coast is Hawaii's longest.

Most activities are based at sprawling Molokai Ranch, which covers 40% of the island, including most of the undeveloped western shore. Home to 500 head of cattle, the ranch turned to tourism in the late 1990s to boost income. It's the

grander plans. In 1998, Singapore-based B.I.L. International began sprinkling the property with 14 upmarket tented resort camps, threatening to flood the island with tourists.

After protests from locals and, perhaps more important, slow business, the company built just three. One remains open, the 40-campsite Beach Village.

Mending fences

Now the ranch is pinning its future on another expansion plan. The company wants to develop 200 luxury home sites on the southwestern tip of the island and reopen the 144-room Kaluakoi resort, the island's only big hotel. It closed in 2000.

This time, the company is embracing islanders' views. In a plan unveiled last month, the ranch proposes to turn over about 26,000 acres, nearly half of its land, to a community land trust. And it is offering to place easements on another 25,000 acres so that it can never be developed. The moves, offered in return for community support for development plans, would guarantee that tourism remains limited.

Ranch CEO Peter Nicholas, brought in three years ago to mend fences with the community, says it doesn't make sense to try to turn Molokai into a mega-destination when the biggest thing that sets it apart from nearby islands is its pristine, undeveloped nature.

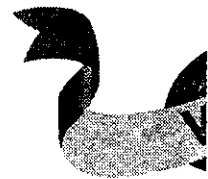
"You have to play to your strengths," he says.

Barreling around the empty Kaluakoi resort in a golf cart, pointing out the dilapidated buildings that he plans to refurbish, Nicholas, 55, says he wants to tap the island's reputation as the last slice of old Hawaii by refocusing the property on Hawaiian culture. He envisions locals teaching visitors how to throw a fishing net or leading classes in authentic hula dancing.

"You have to ask what is going to make us different? Why would people come here?" he says.

Still, Nicholas isn't ignoring traditional tourist lures. Last month, the ranch reopened the island's only 18-hole golf course, which closed with the resort in 2000. It's a beauty that overlooks the ocean with trees perched atop cliffs.

Magi Fair



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"Sooner or later the world is going to encroach, but they're trying to hold it off as long as they can."

Holmes is one of two charter-boat captains who take vacationers a half-mile offshore to fish for marlin, tuna and mahi-mahi. And that's just one of many adventures awaiting visitors. Molokai may have only a few paved roads (and no stoplights), but it has miles of trails for horseback riding, moun-

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Small and cozy, the Lodge takes full advantage of the unspoiled countryside that is one of Molokai's great charms. Located in the tiny ranch town of Maunaloa, it's surrounded by lush grassland that slopes eight miles to the sea. Other than trees and bushes, there's nothing but cattle, horses and the occasional gobbling turkey.

Ranch owners once had far

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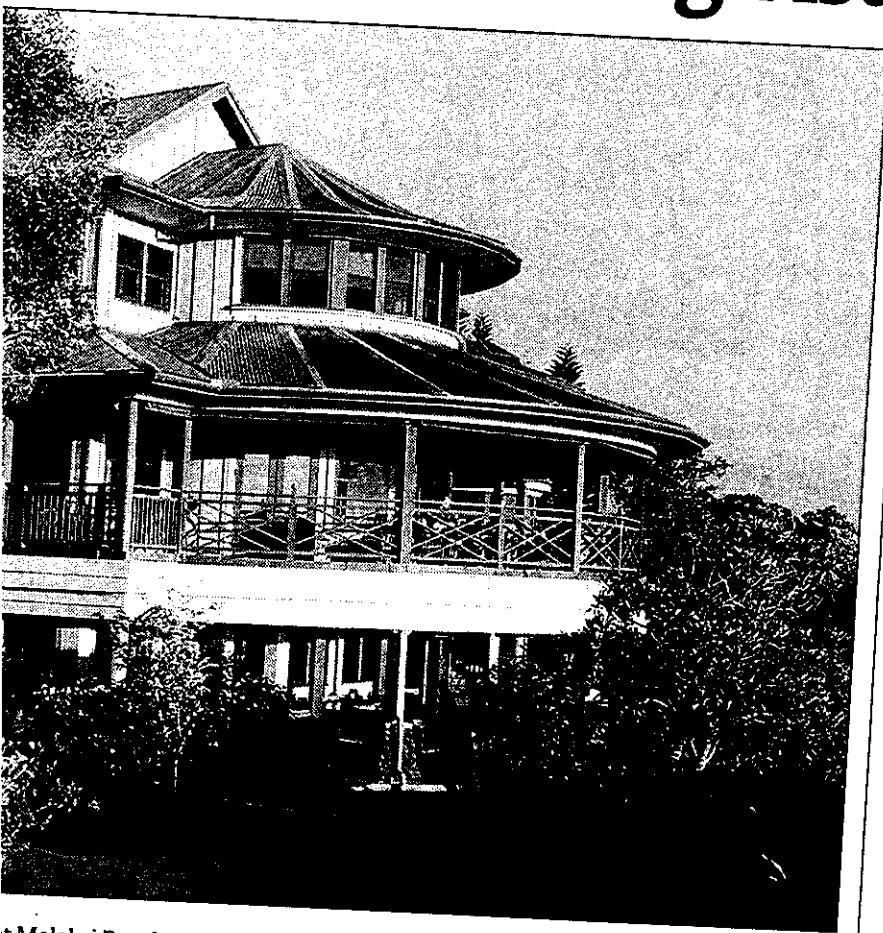
Not that golf will ever be a big draw here. Even when the resort reopens in full in 2006 at the earliest, boosting the number of rooms in Molokai by 50%, the island still will be about getting away from tourist slickness.

"Molokai will never turn into another Maui. Never, ever," Nicholas promises.

As the sign outside the island's tiny airport instructs visitors: "Aloha. Slow Down. This is Molokai."

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Where to eat: Food is the island's weakest link. The only fine dining is at The Lodge at Molokai Ranch, where the pricey **Maunaloa Room** (entrees, \$20-\$30) offers Hawaiian-themed specialties such as **Mai Tai Mahi-Mahi**. Other options are limited to about half a dozen small, paper-napkin places such as **Kamuela's Cookhouse** in Kualapuu and **Paniolo Café** in Maunaloa, where fried cutlets with macaroni salad and a scoop of rice is the local fast food. **Molokai Pizza Café** in Kaunakakai also serves burgers and sandwiches as well as pizza. Don't miss **Kanemitsu's Bakery**, which sells melt-in-your-mouth Krispy Kreme-like glazed doughnuts.

Information: Molokai Visitors Bureau (800-800-6367; visitmolokai.com)

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