

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

THE WATER ISSUE

This Side of P A R A

More than a century after the first tourists arrived on Kauai, the Hawaiian island is luring modern travelers with a return to tradition—and a mission to give back.

BY GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BAILEY REBECCA ROBERTS

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Napali Coast
State Wilderness
Park, on Kauai's
North Shore.





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▲ A wiliwili flower, one of the endemic Hawaiian species grown at Limahuli Garden & Preserve.

HE SKY BLUSHED rose gold and lavender as dawn broke over Hikinaakala Heiau, on Kauai's eastern shore. This sacred place, where the Wailua River spills into the Pacific, was once home to an ancient temple. It's where the first rays of light shine on the island, and for centuries, the Kauaian people have come here to celebrate the sun's return each morning.

My 19-year-old daughter Stella and I had been invited to greet the day with Kumu Leinā'ala Pavao Jardin and three of the students from her hula school, Hālau Ka Lei Mokihana o Leinā'ala. Standing on the shore, the women—heads crowned with leafy lei po'o, wrists and ankles wrapped in beaded lei kukui—began to clap. Their hands set the beat for the chant, beckoning the sun to rise from the depths of the ocean. "With the sun rising, there is a new day ahead," Jardin said. "What is our purpose on this land? What is our kuleana, our responsibility?"

As the sun climbed higher, the women started another chant, this one telling the story of Hi'iaka, the youngest sister of the volcano goddess Pele, who traveled to Kauai to fetch Pele's lover. When her canoe reached the Wailua River, she began to chant, requesting to be welcomed ashore.



Native Hawaiians cherish this ancient legend, which conveys the deeply held principle of asking permission to enter a place that does not belong to you. "We are kamaaina," Jardin continued, using the word for longtime Hawaii residents, "but we, too, are guests of this land, stewards of this land. It is our responsibility to share that idea with visitors, in the same way we teach our children."

▲ The sacred Makana Mountain looms over the terraces of Limahuli Garden & Preserve.



◀ Lei Wann, director of the Limahuli Garden & Preserve.

▶ Hanalei Initiative's Joel Guy and his children on the North Shore.



▼ Signs for freshly picked fruit along the Kuhio Highway.

▶ Ke'e Beach, a popular spot in Haena State Park.



It was the first morning of a nine-day adventure around Kauai—our first trip outside New York since the world had shut down 14 months earlier. We had gone there to hear the islanders' stories and to instill our travels with the Hawaiian concept of *malama ka aina*—meaning to care for, or preserve, the land. Jardin and her students had gifted us with the perfect start.

BROCHURES FROM Hawaii's fledgling tourist days in the early 1900s flaunted images of orchid-laden Polynesian beauties reclining beneath coconut trees and strapping Native Hawaiian boys on surfboards. Intrigued by notions of a warm, aloha spirit, vacationers flocked to the islands, first on steamships and later by jet.

By the time Hawaii gained statehood in 1959, travel had begun to rival its roughly

\$250 million plantation economy. While high labor costs spurred a decline in sugar and pineapple production in the mid 1970s, tourism earnings ballooned to \$1 billion. In 2019, a record 10.4 million people traveled to the state and spent more than \$17.75 billion. On Kauai alone, about 27,700 visitors were on the island on any given day, compared with just 72,300 residents.

Our visit last May came at a pivotal moment. As with many overtouristed destinations, the pandemic gave Kauai a much-needed reset. Residents returned to beaches that had previously been overrun with visitors; spinner dolphins, turtles, and endangered Hawaiian monk seals returned to previously crowded bays. The pause also offered the travel industry a chance to reconsider its role. At the end of 2020, tourism officials mapped out a plan that aims to place Kauai at the forefront of the regenerative-travel movement by protecting the island's natural resources and nurturing Native Hawaiian culture.

THE EVENING BEFORE we met Jardin, Stella and I landed at Lihue Airport, picked up a rental car, and joined the stream of traffic on the Kuhio Highway, which links the island's North and South Shores. To our west, the emerald ridges of Mount Waialeale—one of the rainiest places on earth—stood shrouded in mist. To the east, surfers rode swells toward the beach. Just past Kapaa, the road veered inland and the landscape turned rural. Hand-painted signs hawked fresh eggs, papayas, and apple bananas. Lush hillsides rose above swaths of iron-rich soil where we glimpsed feral chickens foraging for dinner. Albizzia trees studded with pink flowers towered over the Kalihiwai Bridge, framing a view of the North Shore in all its botanical splendor.

Our home for the next few days was to be the Cliffs at Princeville, where we settled in to one of 202 breezy suites scattered across a bluff. There we found a dreamy setting for our first Kauai sunset. Right on cue, a rainbow arced across the sky. A pair of nenes, Hawaii's state bird, doddered across the lawn. I plucked a plumeria blossom, inhaling its sweet fragrance before tucking it behind my daughter's ear.

The Cliffs prioritizes sustainability, generating more than half its power from solar panels, using low-flow systems to minimize water



▲ A Hawaiian moorhen on the grounds of Timbers Kauai.

▶ A guest room with views of the Pacific Ocean at the resort.





▲
Horses graze at
the foot of the
Hanalei Mountains.

consumption and, in the guest rooms, swapping air-conditioning for the trade winds. But perhaps most noteworthy is the resort's partnership with the Surfrider Foundation, a national organization dedicated to the preservation of the world's oceans. In November 2020, the Cliffs became the island's first property to join the Kauai chapter's Ocean Friendly Visitor Program, an initiative that educates guests about their impact and encourages them to lend a hand.

"People come to Kauai to hike the trails, swim in the ocean, and just soak in the island's beauty and culture," Surfrider volunteer Barbara Levin, who created and oversees the local program, told me. "So we asked ourselves what we could do that would allow people to enjoy what Kauai has to give them, but also to leave it just a little better than they found it." For Stella, a biology major with a passion for marine science, Surfrider's work held special appeal.

The simplest option would have been to grab a cleanup bucket from the Cliffs' concierge and bring it with us to the beach. But Stella and I wanted to dive deeper into Surfrider's efforts, so we signed up for one of its weekly Net Patrols to remove lost and abandoned commercial fishing gear from Kauai's shores. "Just so you know, this is an adventure cleanup," volunteer coordinator Barbara Wiedner cautioned. "It's for really fit people who can handle rocky coastal cleanups and the Kauai sun."

"We're really fit people," I said to Stella as we pulled into the parking lot at the Nawiliwili Small Boat Harbor in Lihue. "How tough could this be?"

We grabbed work gloves and followed Joshua Nipp, a Surfrider veteran, to a small motorboat

waiting to ferry us across Nawiliwili Bay. From the jetty where we disembarked, we edged along a jagged cliff for about a mile, bushwhacking through thick naupaka shrubs and waist-high guinea grass. Though Nipp and another volunteer had cleared a single-file trail a few days earlier, the fallen grass had turned to hay in the hot sun, and we slipped and slid along the path.

Our destination was a rugged crescent framing Unulau Bay, where saltwater-smoothed volcanic stones had trapped caches of plastic. I unearthed a cracked flipper, a tangle of polypropylene rope, and a rocket-ship beach toy. Near the shoreline, Stella struggled to free a frayed fishing net from beneath a pile of driftwood logs. In three hours, 17 volunteers bagged 840 pounds of flotsam and jetsam that otherwise could have snared fish, turtles, seals, and fragile coral heads.

Sweaty and scratched, we returned to the jetty, where we stripped down to our bathing suits and dove into the channel to cool off. Once dry, Stella and I fist-bumped Nipp and bade farewell to the others, then made a beeline to Hamura Saimin, a hole-in-the-wall ramen joint in Lihue. We took seats at the low counter and were soon stuffing ourselves with steaming bowls of dashi heaped with vegetables, roast pork, and fish cakes.

TOURISM ON KAUAI'S North Shore was changing even before the pandemic hit. In April 2018, 50 inches of rain drenched the region in about 24 hours, triggering more than a dozen landslides and causing the Hanalei River to break its banks. The Haena region, which encompasses popular sites like Haena State Park, Ke'e Beach, and the Kalalau Trail, was cut off from the rest of the island for more than a year. Next came COVID-19, which essentially halted whatever visitor flow had remained. Then, just weeks before we arrived, another landslide occurred, dumping thousands of pounds of red earth onto a short section of the Kuhio Highway between Princeville and Hanalei, the North Shore's two primary resort hubs.

Some were ready to cry uncle after this trifecta of disasters, but a silver lining emerged. During the lull, Hui Maka'āinana o Makana, a nonprofit started by several ancestral families from Haena, teamed up with North Shore leaders and state park personnel to create a blueprint to better manage visitors and restore the region's rich cultural landscape.

The next morning, Stella and I set off for the North Shore to find out more about Hui Maka'āinana o Makana's work. We arrived in Hanalei, a classic surf town brimming with natural



▲ Kumu Leinā'ala Pavao Jardin (right) and her students on the beach in Wailua.

▶ Surfrider Kauai volunteers show plastic collected from the beach.



beauty and plenty of soul. We were there to meet Joel Guy, executive director of the Hanalei Initiative, a nonprofit that works to address the needs of the North Shore's community and environment. We found him in the line spilling out of the Hanalei Bread Co., where we grabbed coffee and breakfast burritos before finding a seat at a picnic table on the lawn.

Guy is a force in Hanalei, a lifelong North Shore resident who has lent a hand to countless community initiatives. But his contributions to the Haena State Park Master Plan seemed to be a particular source of pride. "I'm so lucky to be able to do this in this place I grew up in, which has been so good to me," he said. "You talk about kuleana, about responsibility? That's mine. If you grow up on the beach of Haena, that's a gift. You'd have to live to be 500 to give back enough to validate having a childhood out there."

After the 2018 floods, North Shore residents saw an opportunity to improve the area's quality of life. They implemented a reservation system for Haena State Park, reducing the number of daily visitors from 2,000 to 900, and launched a shuttle program to alleviate traffic. "It's all been better than we ever could have expected," Guy said. "Haena is probably one of the most treasured, sacred, beautiful places in Hawaii, and it's just really feeling good out there right now."

Later, Stella and I walked along the park's new boardwalk and then followed the path into a forest of Java plum and false kamani, their spindly trunks ensnared by massive philodendron vines.



Then the jungle opened up onto the soft sands of Ke'e Beach, and as we waded into the warm Pacific, I understood exactly what Guy had meant. This place was a gift.

THE KUHIO HIGHWAY narrowed past Hanalei, crossing several valleys en route to Haena—the gateway to the Napali Coast. Toward the end of the road, the fin-shaped peak of Makana Mountain soared into view. The mountain, which featured prominently as part of the mystical Bali Ha'i in the 1958 movie *South Pacific*, remains sacred to the people of Haena. It also overlooks Limahuli Garden & Preserve, where Stella and I were due to meet the garden's director, Lei Wann.

Amid crowing roosters, we wandered terraces filled with canoe crops, the plants brought by

▶ Kilauea Lighthouse, on the North Shore.

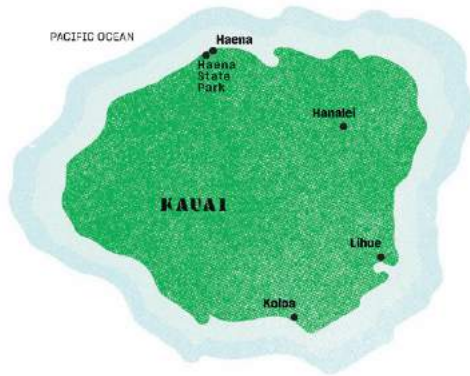




▲ An ahi-tuna poke bowl at Timbers Kaua'i.



◀ The Clubhouse, a gathering place at the Lodge at Kukui'ula.



Polynesian voyagers more than a millennium ago. Lava-rock walls surround the garden's loi (taro patches), where 64 varieties of wetland taro flourish in nutrient-rich ponds. "Limahuli is a window into old Hawaii," Wann told us. "What's unique about it is that it's still alive, just as it was when our tatus—our ancestors—left it."

As Wann led us up a hillside, she explained that her own ancestors once called this land home. But in 1848, King Kamehameha III eliminated the Hawaiian (Continued on page 122)

Getting to Know the Real Kauai

WHERE TO STAY

Cliffs at Princeville

Guests at this North Shore resort, known for its sustainable ethos, can leave Kauai a little better than they found it by volunteering for a beach cleanup. cliffsatprinceville.com; suites from \$400.

Lodge at Kukui'ula

This hotel—made up of 39 cottages and bungalows on the South Shore—offers excursions on its own outrigger sailing canoe. lodgeatkukuiula.com; cottages from \$1,340.

Timbers Kaua'i

At this oceanfront resort, a former golf course has been turned into a 17-acre organic farm. timberskauai.com; doubles from \$2,200.

WHERE TO EAT

Hamura Saimin

Hawaiian noodle soup is the signature dish at this no-frills restaurant, which also serves a must-try liliko'i chiffon pie. 2956 Kress St., Lihue; 808-245-3271; entrées \$8–\$13.

Hanalei Bread Co.

Locals line up for the coffee and hearty breakfast burritos at this popular café. hanaleibreadco.com; entrées \$9–\$14.

WHAT TO DO

Kauai Museum

This Lihue institution's mix of artifacts, paintings, and modern crafts showcases the island's cultural heritage, with a particular emphasis on the royal family. kauaimuseum.org.

Limahuli Garden & Preserve

Located in one of the most biodiverse valleys in the Hawaiian Islands, this 1,000-acre expanse spotlights native plants and flowers. ntbg.org. —G.D.V.



ILLUSTRATION BY DONOUGH O'MALLEY



(Kauai, continued from page 121)

system of communal land, dividing Haena into parcels for sale. A collective of 38 families, known as the Haena Hui, purchased 2,500 acres to be shared equally.

Wann noted that the transaction was counterintuitive, as Native Hawaiians did not consider land a commodity. “The word for land, *aina*, means “that which feeds,” she said. “I don’t own the land, it feeds me. I care for it and it returns.” The Haena Hui dissolved in the 1960s, and a portion of its holdings was used to create Haena State Park. Under a 1999 agreement, the Hui Maka’āinana o Makana has restored and maintained about 15 acres of ancestral land within the park.

AN ARCADE OF broad-canopied monkeypod trees welcomed us to the Lodge at Kukui’ula, a collection of 39 cottages and bungalows set on the grounds of the former McBryde Sugar Co. on the South Shore. The name Kukui’ula harks back to the tradition of using kukui-nut-oil lanterns to guide seafarers back home. Historians believe that three of these ancient beacons once shone from points nearby, including Kukuiula Harbor. Early the next morning, we met Captain Jason Dameron there, along with the crew of *Kailele*, Kukui’ula’s outrigger canoe.

“This is the little sister to all those voyaging canoes,” Dameron said, pushing *Kailele* away from shore. Stella and I positioned ourselves on the canoe’s trampoline as the sail caught the wind. We cruised past Spouting Horn, an underwater lava tube where Hawaiian legend says a clever boy trapped a lizard spirit, or *mo’o*, that was eating all the fish. “You know it’s still in there because you can see it breathing,” Dameron explained as a geyser of surf burst into the sky.

“Hawaiians kind of lost their knowledge of wayfinding,” Dameron said, dipping his paddle to steer, “but then this guy Mau, who knew all about celestial navigation, came from Micronesia to teach them.” He was referring to Pius “Mau” Pailug, the navigator who led the famed sailing canoe *Hōkūle’a* during its 1976 maiden voyage from Hawaii to Tahiti. Two centuries of colonization had suppressed Native Hawaiian language and culture, including the ancient art of navigation. *Hōkūle’a* helped Hawaiians reconnect with their maritime legacy and inspired a new generation of wayfinders who, like Dameron, were carrying that heritage into the future.

Kauai’s farmers have begun spearheading another type of renaissance—one that taps into the island’s deep agricultural roots. The next day, we joined Cody Lee Meyer at the Farm at Hōkūāla, a 17-acre organic garden on the grounds of Timbers Kaua’i. At the oceanfront resort near Lihue, Meyer has transformed an overgrown golf course into an agricultural Eden, planting hundreds of fruit trees, vegetables, and herbs.

“What we’re doing here is a total turnaround from the monocropping that took place during the

plantation days,” Meyer told us as he led us through the garden where lush greens—kale, tatsoi, mizuna—grow alongside rows of turmeric, ginger, and dryland taro. “It’s called *ohana* planting, which brings many different plants together.”

The hope, he explained, is to grow a variety of crops while regenerating the soil. He even figured out how to grow garlic, which rarely thrives in a subtropical climate. “We’ve planted bananas, breadfruit trees, citrus, mangoes, guavas, sugarcane—you name it. If we can grow it here, we’re gonna grow it.”

In the orchard, Meyer plucked a ripe guava, and I bit into its green skin like I would an apple, revealing the bright-pink pulp inside. A few swift thwacks of the machete cracked a coconut; Stella sipped its water through a straw Meyer fashioned from a papaya stem. “Almost ninety percent of food in Hawaii is imported,” he told us, “so how can I, as one farmer, decrease that by one percent? That’s my goal.”

WE SPENT OUR last morning at the Kauai Museum, traveling back to the days of the island’s 18th- and 19th-century monarchs with Charles “Chuck Boy” Chock, the museum’s executive director. Standing beneath the gaze of the royals, he shared tales of fierce independence, of Kamehameha and his failed invasions, and of Kaumualii, the island’s beloved last king. Each time he came to a climactic moment, he paused and started to laugh. “I’m just cutting to the chase here,” he said, eyes twinkling. “There’s so much more to learn.”

We thanked Chock for his stories and shared a few of our own—of learning about kuleana and malama and the people who helped to teach us about them. Before we left, I asked him if he thought more people had begun to travel to Kauai with a similar intention of understanding more of the island’s culture and history. “Oh absolutely,” Chock said with a smile. “We are moving in that direction. We’re all getting into the same canoe and going to the same place.” 🌐

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