

A photograph of a dense grove of tall palm trees, likely coconut palms, under a clear blue sky. The trees are leaning slightly to the right, suggesting a breeze. The ground is sandy and covered with shadows from the trees.

BORN **TO THE**

Molokai is a half-forgotten vestige of the old Polynesia, the only island in Hawaii where the natives form the majority and its indigenous language is gaining speakers. You don't come here looking for a curtain of high-rise hotels along the beaches—there isn't a single building taller than a palm tree. And that's likely the way it's going to stay.

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MY SON JONATHAN RACES DOWN THE GENTLE palm-fringed slopes of Papohaku Beach on Molokai's west shore, scanning the horizon for the largest wave. He finds it, and as the wave starts thundering towards shore after breaking on the nearby coral reef, Jonathan dives into its crest. Then he disappears under the churning water for what feels to his father like an eternity.

I recall my first experience with the Hawaiian surf 30 years ago, realizing that 12-year-old Jonathan could snap his neck, as he was now likely somersaulting uncontrollably in the riptide. Suddenly, he is hurled back onto the beach, sliding sideways on his back and bowling over one of the local boys. Surprised, they both lie in the sand laughing until they can't breathe and the bubbly white surf around them recedes.

Jonathan's new acquaintance, Don, gives him an impromptu lesson in reading and riding the waves.

"You have to dive into the base of the wave, that way you won't get dragged to the bottom."

More of Don's friends gather, curious about the white kid from the mainland. After some small talk the group melts away into clusters of young bodies diving into waves as quickly as they appear. A few grab their surfboards and soon Jonathan is getting his first surfing lesson.

Jonathan quickly finds out that a 15-second ride is a good ride, learning that the right surfboard is a combination of weight and height. Moving back and forth on the surfboard Jonathan leans forward to increase his speed, and abruptly steps back near the crest of a wave to slow down. With the surf crashing around him Don yells out, "Be a driver, not a rider."

"Be a driver." You could say that about Molokaians. They're drivers. After suffering the suppression of their native culture, and the exploitation of their lands, they are now steadfast when it comes to controlling their own destiny. They have forgone the mall culture that has made deep inroads on the other Hawaiian Islands, accepting a lower standard of living for a higher quality of life, one that embraces a traditional Hawaiian culture which has mostly disappeared from the neighbouring islands.

FAR LEFT: Kapualwa coconut grove on Molokai bends gracefully in the wind.



The Halawa Valley, just inland from the tallest sea cliffs in the world on Molokai's northern side.

WE CAUGHT OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF MOLOKAI as the cloud cover broke beneath our plane, revealing the tallest sea cliffs in the world, bathed in sunlight, jutting out of the deep-blue depths of the Pacific Ocean. Then, as if swallowed up by some ancient Hawaiian god intent on protecting the island from prying outsiders, we disappeared back into heavy grey rain clouds. As the plane dove beneath the clouds, one major contrast from neighboring Maui became apparent: there isn't a single building on the island taller than a palm tree.

Molokai is the fifth largest of Hawaii's 132 islands, shoals and exposed reefs. Thirty-eight miles in length and 10 miles wide, Molokai's principal landmarks are two dormant volcanoes at its eastern and western ends. The leeward side of the eastern volcano rises majestically heavenwards, catching the dense moisture-laden trade winds that sweep across it and taking from them the rains that nurture the lush, emerald green vegetation of its steep slopes and tropical shoreline, making the eastern third of the island pretty close to heaven on earth.

Comprising only 260 square miles, the island is as complex as it is compact. Its western two-thirds, on the windward or dry side, is arid and its depleted, scrub-like vegetation is the result of decades of cattle grazing and failed pineapple cultivation. The largest landowner on the island is Molokai Ranch; with 70,000 acres the company owns most of the western and central regions of Molokai. But not all is bleak on the island's western half, for it's there one finds Papohaku Beach, the stunning two-mile long beach of fine coral sand where Jonathan gets his surfing lesson.

A half-forgotten vestige of old Hawaii, Molokai is a comparatively unspoiled sliver of Polynesia. Its 7,000 inhabitants are primarily of Hawaiian ancestry, making it the only island in the state where natives form the majority. The Hawaiian language has managed to survive here, after almost being eradicated when the

Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour made it "un-American" for Hawaiians not to speak English. In fact, Hawaiian speakers on Molokai have tripled over the past decade.

"Molokai is a Hawaiian Island trying to remain a Hawaiian Island," said Clifford Nae'ole, a well-known Hawaiian historian who I spoke with during a stopover in Maui. "On Molokai people don't look to be wealthy, they look to be content. They have learned from the mistakes of the other islands in their quest for development."

The people of Molokai are called "Kanaka Maoli"—born on the land. "They practice being Hawaiian every day. They are able to work with the tools and create the ancient beads of their ancestors of hundreds of years ago. They are practicing life the way it was."

Upon landing at Ho'olehua Airport, we're met by our driver, a jovial middle-aged woman known to us as "Auntie," a general Hawaiian term used out of respect. As she delivers us to our hotel for the first night, she advises us that "there no use driving faster than 30 miles per hour on Molokai. It won't get you there faster than you need to be."

In Molokai, "Time is whenever you decide to show up." At least according to a local saying.

Located at Mile Marker 3 on Route 450, the Hotel Molokai is one of the island's seven hotels. After dropping us off, Auntie makes sure that we settle into our room quickly and that we take possession of our rented four-wheel-drive Jeep, a necessity on Molokai's dirt side roads and steep mountain passes.

Nearby to our west, nestled on Molokai's south shore, is Kaunakakai, a sleepy town of around 2,000 people. It's the Rome of the island in that all roads lead to it: to the west is Route 460, to the north is Route 470 and running to the east is Route 450. Rush hour only lasts for a few minutes and to handle it there are a half-dozen stop signs. There are no traffic lights in Kaunakakai—in fact, there

The wharf remains the island's primary lifeline, and the fact that almost everything arrives by twice-weekly barge defines the way things happen on Molokai. If you need something that's not in stock, you'll have to wait.

are no traffic lights anywhere on the island. As Molokai's only major settlement it is simply referred to as "the town."

The town's business district, which runs along Ala Malama Street, is a mere three blocks, populated by about two dozen locally owned businesses. Constructed during the 1930s, it reminded me of streetscapes on New Zealand's South Island: rich in character and devoid of the bland sameness of North American strip malls, each store-front reflecting its owner's idiosyncrasies.

"If you need a frying pan, band-aid, hardware and maybe some fuel for a camp stove, you're going to find them in the grocery store," says Franklin, a transplanted mainlander I bump into on the strip. "There isn't any Home Depot. There is only one franchise, which is a Subway. There was a Kentucky Fried Chicken for a while but that didn't make it. What can I say, it's perfect."

Native Molokaian mix easily with former mainlanders like Franklin, most of whom are from California and have set up shop as fishermen, scuba instructors, tradesmen and craftswomen. For these migrants the island's unique, old-fashioned priorities appeal to them. Visiting the shops in town, for example, it's apparent that conversations about family issues can take precedence over serving customers. And it's not for lack of trying that the cruise ships don't make stops at Molokai—the islanders steadfastly refuse them, and almost any other attempt at large-scale development is opposed.

The wharf remains the island's primary lifeline, and the fact that

mitsu Bakery. The bakery is the center of the town's nightlife when the local burghers gather at its backdoor around 10pm to get slices of bread with melted butter and jam.

Standing under an intense mid-day sun, Jonathan and I order from Cory's Lunch Wagon, a Hawaiian take-out which operates out of an old metal camping trailer with a couple of picnic tables under a canvas canopy. We both dig into a plate of Kau Yuk, a Hawaiian dish of pork, red plum sauce and long rice noodles. Although both picnic tables are packed with locals, everyone pushes over, enabling us to squeeze in. The local cuisine tastes as good as it smells. "People come back to get island food," says Tasha Kaholoaa, one of our fellow diners and a life-long Kaula resident. "My brothers live in Utah, but they always come back here to visit. They miss the food and the way of life it represents. It draws many islanders back home. Even Cory himself moved back here from Arizona."

Cash is king on Molokai as many businesses do not accept credit cards or travellers cheques. Of the major amenities, everything is represented in twos: two banks, two gas stations, two internet cafes. Retaining their traditional culture is taken seriously on Molokai, even if it means accepting a lower standard of living than that enjoyed on neighbouring islands. It's even taken in stride. There's a popular T-shirt that locals here like to wear: "Molokai Status Symbol: Any 4WD vehicle that runs."



LEFT: One of the many spectacular lookouts on the way up into the rainforest of Kamakou Preserve. RIGHT: Remains of a centuries-old stone fishpond on Molokai's south shore, a testament to Hawaiians highly-developed aquaculture methods and one of the reasons the island was so coveted by chieftains.

almost everything—except for some meat and fish—arrives by twice-weekly barge defines the way things happen on Molokai. If you need something that's not in stock, whether a nail or a frying pan, you'll have to wait for the barge to bring it. Nonetheless, it's a reliable system, even if it doesn't work with the swiftness one would expect on the mainland or even on the more populated Hawaiian Islands.

Wandering down Ala Malama there is a mélange of enticing aromas, ranging from the mahogany scent of coffee to the sweet dough of freshly baked bread and cakes wafting out of the Kane-

ROUTE 450 MAY BE THE MOST SCENIC ROAD in Molokai, but it also boasts some of the most intriguing archeological finds of all the islands. Lacing together the villages and beaches of the eastern half of the island's south shore, the road passes numerous stone fishponds, a testament to ancient Hawaiians' highly developed aquaculture methods.

These pens were created by building enclosures in the shallow ocean, usually stone walls that could stand a metre above the high tide (natural formations such as reefs would also be used). Openings in the pond were sealed inside with wooden lattices, which

allow small fish to get in, but after growing to adult size, they are unable to leave. One of the reasons Molokai was so coveted by Hawaiian chieftains was this source of pristine wealth. In a mere 20-mile stretch it's been estimated there were more than 50 pens, some of them as large as 500 acres. Many of these pens have been submerged by sediment that washed down from the hills, but attempts are now being made to preserve some of them for educational purposes.

Under the hot sun we meander slowly along the road, past shaded cottages and small farms with lush gardens. At Mile Marker 20 rather than street addresses the areas outside of town use mile markers as reference points we stop for a wade in the water.

Jonathan heads out first, slowly sliding into the warm waters of the Pacific. Sitting down in the shallows he leans back on extended arms and closes his eyes as he soaks up the Hawaiian sun. The waves gently breaking on the shore behind us is all we can hear.

"Are there any sharks around here?" he asks.

"Probably white tip reef sharks and hammerheads beyond the barrier reef. You can see the reef about a kilometre off shore. See where the waves are breaking? That's where you'll find them."

Preparing his skin diving gear, Jonathan looks for reassurance. "Are you sure that nothing will come through the reef?"

"Fairly sure. But there are no guarantees in the ocean."

He spits into his dive mask and rubs the saliva onto the glass. "Okay," he says. He submerges the mask to wash it clean before fitting the rubber frame snugly over his face.

Slipping below the ocean's surface at the same time, we dive into a school of brightly coloured tropical fish, possibly butterflyfish. They dart around rocks and coral-head trying to avoid us.

In the shallows, waves toss us about over a field of sea urchins, with their long black, sharp quills coming within inches of our exposed skin as the ocean surges rock us back and forth. Jonathan, leery of being pricked, swims out to deeper water and pursues a couple of trumpet fish and a school of squirrelfish. I pick up a grey sea urchin with short, stubby quills and motion for Jonathan to extend his hand. As the urchin sits in his flattened palm, he feels a light, prickly sensation and laughs through his snorkel, oblivious to some of the larger fish swimming around us.

Swimming out to the reef, Jonathan was mesmerized by the brightly coloured coral. Throughout the afternoon Jonathan proves to be a natural diver. Heading into deeper water he swims toward the bottom, and upon reaching it, somersaults. He pushes off from the sandy bottom and races upwards to the surface against a slight current. The feeling of weightlessness and the sensation of flight grab his imagination.

At the surface he says, "This is what it must feel like to be an astronaut."

He was being a boy.

FOUR-WHEEL-DRIVE JEEP IS THE ONLY WAY to travel into Kamakou Preserve—2,774 acres of lush rainforest that scales the slopes of 5,000-ft Mt. Kamakou. At Cory's Lunch Wagon in town we rendezvous with our guide, Bob Livingston of the Nature Conservancy of Hawaii. Livingston transfers his sleeping four-year-old daughter to our jeep and we begin the hard drive along a double-track dirt road.

During our stay on Molokai we've already experienced the hard rains the island typically receives, and this happens to be the wettest spring in 20 years. But the precipitation is even heavier at Kamakou, at the summit of which it's almost always raining. It's the wettest and wildest region of Molokai and the only road through it is the one we're on, which is flooded in many parts and barely safe. But the moisture is what makes this place so rich—of the roughly 250 plants found here, 219 of them are endemic.

It takes us an hour and a half to reach the Waikolu Valley Look-

out, normally a 45-minute trip. The fog is thick and we only catch glimpses of the majestic valley when openings appear briefly in the rain clouds far below. As we contemplate whether to proceed onto the even narrower track that continues into the preserve, an even darker rain cloud envelops us.

Livingston halts the jeep along the way at points of interest. Beside an oddly shaped man-made hole, he explains: "This was dug by Hawaiians to replicate the hull of a 19th-century sailing ship. It was used to measure a full load of sandalwood."

The sandalwood trade is one of the darkest periods in Hawaiian history. "The Hawaiian monarchy almost enslaved their own people to capitalize on the sandalwood trade," Livingston says. "In their desire to acquire American, European and Chinese goods, such as alcohol and guns, they forced their own people to toil in the mountains cutting down sandalwood trees. Within 40 years they had depleted the forest of sandalwood, shipping it primarily to China.

"Life was so harsh that parents would cut down sandalwood saplings or pull the shoots out by the roots in order to kill the trees, just so their children wouldn't have to cut them down one day."

The more elevation we gained, the heavier the rainfall. In places the track was so washed out that deep narrow grooves were carved down the center of the tracks, making it difficult to control the Jeep's steering. And the slippery mud frequently left the jeep's tires spinning, unable to gain any traction. Occasionally the jeep slid sideways and backwards, until the drive turned into a roller coaster ride that induced nervous laughter and increased the chances we'd roll the Jeep.

Fearing the risk to Jonathan and Bob's daughter was too great, we stopped the Jeep. At about three-quarters of the way up to the top of Kamakou we left the jeep to walk down a rainforest trail so we could view some of the work being carried out by TNC.

It focusses on native ecosystem conservation where the rainforest is still intact; it doesn't do single species conservation or restoration of severely altered areas. In Hawaii, that means much of their work is restricted to higher elevations, where the rainforest has largely escaped the impact of humans. And the ecological function of the mountain rainforest is critical—Kamakou's is responsible for 60 percent of Molokai's fresh water.

The main threats to the mountain ecosystem are feral animals, especially goats, deer and pigs, but hunters are airlifted into the interior by helicopter to help control their spread. The harvest is evidently bountiful as evidenced by the deer antlers and boar tusks that adorn the fences of homes along Route 450.

The rain gets heavier as we descend, at one point it pours in sheets and we are almost swept off the track as we round a bend. But the scenery is hauntingly beautiful—dark green vegetation, highlighted by light, lime-green moss, shrouded by rain clouds. The forest thins out as we descend until it is reduced to scrub. We arrive back in town, our jeep covered in red mud.

WHILE WATCHING THE SUN SET from the veranda of our beach house, KB, the caretaker, drops by for a chat. Philosophical as always, he muses about the many different reactions that the island provokes.

"Molokai is not for everybody. Some people come here for brief periods and enjoy it. Some come here and absolutely hate it because they don't like to be away from normal tourist activities. And some people come to Molokai thinking that they're going to want to stay and love it, and they discover that they don't like it at all. Others arrive and become hooked. It really isn't for everybody.

"The chief thing is that Molokai has a spirit of its own. You're either going to be compatible with it or you're not. In a way it may be up to the island whether you get to stay or not."

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