

The Flavor of North Kauai

North Kauai is –
mellow.

Sophistication is a rare commodity here. World affairs do not penetrate the atmosphere — the Columbine Colorado High School tragedy didn't make anything higher than a short, page 4 mention in the local daily Kauai paper, the Garden Isle.



Small Waterfall on the hike to the Sacred Falls

If you are looking for Hawaii as it once was, before Waikiki became a downtown Chicago lookalike, the northern part of the Garden Isle of Kauai is the place you want to visit – but hurry before it becomes downtown Seattle!

Right now, the words sophistication and North Coast Kauai cannot be used in the same paragraph. No MacDonalds, no Burger King, no Ben and Jerrys – just places like Bubba Burgers and Zelo's Beach House. This is not Tori Richards Hawaiian print shirts and Tommy Bahama silk pants, this is cut-offs and go-aheads. A shiny new car immediately identifies you as a tourist – probably staying in a luxury hotel on the southern part of the island forty minutes away. Unless you intend to visit only the tourist places, you really do not want to look like a tourist – locals get better prices!

The Southern part of the island has the Marriott and other fine hotels. This is the sophisticated part of the island, but a Marriott at Poipu is just like a Marriott at Palm

Springs, which is the same as a Marriott at Miami... To get the flavor of Hawaii you need to stay at a vacation rental on Annini Beach, or in Hanalei or Haena.

There is sophistication on the northern part of the island, but if you avoid Princeville you will miss it entirely. Avoiding sophistication is a good thing to do, unless you want to play a round of golf at the very pricey Prince Course, or get a massage or a good workout at the Princeville Gym. Avoiding the Princeville Hotel, a bastion of informal sophistication is not a good idea...it is beautiful.

The nice part of the “North Coast” is that, while there are no stoplights, there are many “one-way bridges” and life is just a whole lot slower than either the South Coast, or most of the rest of Hawaii. Honolulu, for example, looks and feels like a warm Chicago! Maui is fully tourist oriented.

Part of the Kauai culture is driven by the native Hawaiian population who have a laid back attitude that makes Mexicans look like army ants. Slow is an art form, well-practiced. Hawaiians never had to worry about tomorrow...they knew that tomorrow would be sunny, there would be fish in the nearby ocean or stream. They knew their

crops grew 12 months a year. What was there to think about saving, or preparing?

The other part of the Kauai equation is the flower children who have populated this island from



Fiery Sunset over the North Coast

the mainland. Hippies can live easily here – they cannot starve and they cannot freeze...even the rain is warm! Jerry Brown would be elected Mayor of Kauai by acclimation should he beam over to the island.

Unfortunately for Jerry, most people would simply not show up to vote, unless the voting booth was at General Delivery of the Post Office, where the hippies show up for their mail. They have no money for post office boxes, and no set address for mail delivery — assuming there was mail delivery on the North Coast, which there isn't.

Hippies are crazy, but they are not stupid, so they have historically congregated here where they can never freeze or starve regardless of their lack of contribution to society through work. The island has always attracted those who worship crystals, teach meditation, “Visualize Peace”, commune with nature, and, in general, hold hands and hum. The state has always been a Democratic Party stronghold, and liberal and union in philosophy, and the children of the hippies who populate the Kauai schools in large numbers continue the philosophic trend.

This general philosophic bent is reflected in an underlying anti-business atmosphere that exacerbates a recession that was caused by weather and the demise of the Japanese economy. The most recent trend is more positive, as tourists from the mainland more than replace the loss of Japanese tourists.

There is also a strong “native” influence from some of the native Hawaiians and they oppose everything that is not fishing or growing Taro. Some here on the island favor “sovereignty” for Hawaii, a movement of long-standing but with emphasis recently based upon President Clinton’s 1993 admission that the United States illegally annexed Hawaii in 1877, and his public Presidential apology for it.

Like most places, there is no common cultural thread, and Kauai is a delightful mixture of people. The island appears to be about a third Native Hawaiian (or a mixture), a third Asian (or a mixture), and a third Caucasian (or a mixture). What little racial conflict appears to be the impression that Hawaiian judges let native Hawaiians off lightly in sentencing (anecdotally true), and Hawaiian claims that they should have more rights than others in schools and jobs because of their native and aboriginal

position. That question actually has been accepted by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1999-2000 court session in a case where only native Hawaiians can vote in elections for certain positions where tax monies are collected from the general population but distributed only to Hawaiians. The Court agreed that if common money was used, it must go for the common good, Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian alike.

More about that attitude, and the general “brain drain” in due course.

The Most Beautiful Place on Earth

The thing that will probably impress you most about the North Shore is green. Unlike Kermit the Frog, Kauai finds it easy to be green. Every shade of green you can imagine is in every scene. Green is simply punctuated with the color of flowers, red, white, yellow and orange.

I have tried to think of a description of the local architecture, and I think I have it: A two-story wooden box. In Kapa’a with an outside staircase it is a commercial building. In Hanalei, with an inside staircase, it is a quality home. The architects who design the local buildings appear to be untrained. They were students at Cal Berkeley School of Architecture in the 60s, and, because they were altar boys in the Church of the Perpetually Stoned, they flunked out after the first semester. They moved to Kauai, stayed as practicing members of the Church, and designed what they had nearly learned in Architecture 101 – boxes. They have duplicated the standard wooden box throughout the northern part of the island.

This is an island of massage therapists, meditation specialists, surfers, and crystal worshipers. As a keen observer of beauty in all of its forms, I noted that the girls who were dancing in class at the Princeville Gym ballet class were both stronger and more beautiful than the girls who worked out in the gym. I asked the gym manager if the girls who danced were stronger and more beautiful because they danced, or if strong and more beautiful girls were just more attracted to dance rather than the gym? “It’s cosmic” she answered. Huh?

My wife and I have spent about half the year on Kauai for each of the past eight years, and we do so by exchanging our home in San Diego for vacations with an Island

resident. The owner of the Kauai home we exchange for, who shares the general philosophy of the island, says she had a small problem getting the home painted: “There was good surf, and we had a problem getting the painters to focus.” During a visit, we waited more than two weeks for the stove to be fixed.

Actually, the whole thing works well if you accept the island culture, and it is an easy thing to accept. People should not come over here to “get things done.” Good thing, because if they wanted to do something they would get really frustrated. The visitors bring their culture, and it is difficult for them to decompress and change in the week or two they are here, but their constant pressure ratchets up the island naturally slow circadian rhythm. Tourists expect things to be fixed, brought, delivered — right now. “Right now” in Kauai time means this week – or even later. If you are only here for a week, that can get pretty frustrating.

Sacred Falls...a Kayak and a Hike Away



There is no Southern California car craze visible here. On Kauai, cars are for transportation, not ego gratification. A car wash would be out of business in a week, because residents simply don't care what their car looks like. It rains daily anyway. If it runs, that is all that counts – but there were many cars rotting in front yards that had not run in 20 or more years. An article in the Wall Street Journal changed all of that and embarrassed Kauai into action.

There is obvious but incremental change. Newspapers cover the “problem” of abandoned cars, but only because a Wall Street Journal article made a negative remark about this pollution of Paradise. The slight increase in the car craze is being driven by the new cars rented by tourists. When we came in the early 80s, there was not a Mercedes, old or new, on the island, and most cars had obvious rust damage. In 1997 we started noticing a lot of new cars, primarily small Toyota and Neons. In 1998 it was a bunch of new SUVs and some really new Jaguars, Mercedes, and even a lot of Explorers. In 1999 it was Lincoln Navigators, Lexus RX300, and Mercedes M320 vehicles. Ford Mustang convertibles have shown up in numbers. Every newer car, particularly if they are washed and shiny, certainly indicates a tourist. On the south part of the island, tourists are the norm. On the North side, they stick out like a streetwalker at a DAR meeting.

I hope the north part of the island, which has no stop lights, is not too badly invaded. So far it is a slow movement, and a planned “shopping center” project (with a stoplight!) has been abandoned. There is simply not enough population to support a shopping center – yet.

In the past few years there was a Wal-Mart built on the south side of the island, and a Wal-Mart is about as sophisticated a store as the island will support. There is a Home Depot going in on the south side in October, 2003 – really a good thing because when disaster hits this island, whether hurricane or tsunami, repair is a HUGE priority.

Because every sunrise, every sunset, every beach, and every turn in the road is a picture postcard, the island will change. Only the reputation for constant rain protects the northern part of the island, but that reputation is spread by people who live up here. Someday, that will be seen for the canard it is but meanwhile ...

Have I told you about all the rain? It rains an average of 450 inches a year...

(O.K. that rain is in a very special place just a few miles from the coast, high in the mountain, and we don't get much of it at all in the populated areas, but it successfully keeps the tourists away. It's like earthquakes in California...)

Kauai was the First Hawaiian Island

Kauai is where Hawaii began – some 7 million years ago a volcano rose from the ocean floor. It was the first sign that a string of islands would appear over the years. The growing of the islands has not yet ended as new land appears daily on the Big Island with the eruption of Kilauea.

Over the ensuing millions of years, Kauai cooled, and the island received seeds by air and land, until, at a average rate of a species each 50,000 — 70,000 years or so, the island became a garden. Because there were no animals or birds, the plants did not develop protections like thorns or nettles.

About 1 million years ago, the volcano activity of Kauai went dormant, a few birds came on long flights, and more plants arrived by air or floating on the seas. Located at the northernmost of the developing islands, with a high mountain in the center of a 25 mile diameter landmass, a unique garden developed.

Moisture bearing tradewinds blow from the northeast. They hit a warm earth's mass, and sweep upward to the volcano cone, forming clouds and raining almost constantly. Averaging some 450 inches of rain a year, a rain forest of great maturity developed around the highest point on Kauai. Twelve miles to the south is Poipu Beach area – a virtual desert. Twelve miles to the north is Hanalei and Princeville, a beautiful area with rain, but not too much, and usually at night. Actually, regardless of the direction of the winds, the upsweep causes the clouds to develop over the top and make a rain



forest. The “wettest place on earth,” as it is called, once logged a reported 750 inches of rain in one year.

About 1,500 years ago, the first humans arrived on Kauai by

longboat. These South Sea Islanders were very large and powerful individuals – necessary attributes for the long passage with little storage for food. Those physical characteristics can be seen to this day in the “Native Hawaiians” – who currently comprise only 2% of the population of Kauai. (Some of the 15% of the mixed Hawaiians also carry the “huge gene.” These large Hawaiians have made quite an impact on the National Football League.)

They brought with them the agricultural products, like Taro, that have been a mainstay – and they brought their animals. There were none here. Their pigs that got loose have become the wild pigs of today. Rats, goats, chickens – everything had to be “imported.” Even houseflies. (Of which there are not many – I attended a polo match for 7 hours, complete with 100 horses and a hotdog/hamburger picnic, AND NEVER SAW A FLY!)

The history of the Hawaii afterwards is not greatly different from the history of Kauai, except that Kauai was the only island never defeated by King Kamehameha. Being close to Honolulu (which in Hawaiian means “the meeting place”), but so distant

because the channel is so rough, it has remained culturally as well as geographically remote from many of the changes brought by modernization.

It was the beginning that was different: The unique situation of the early beginning, the unique shape that creates a fantastic rain forest, the first landings of humans in the island chain... All islands in the chain have a similar “wet” side and a “dry” side, but nothing on the scale of Kauai. The islands are all volcanic formed, so they all lend themselves to the unique Hawaiian means of describing directions – everything is either “makai” (toward the ocean) or “mauka”(toward the mountains.)

Kauai is known as the “Garden Island” – Kauai.. Populated with 50,000 people, it is, according to National Geographic, “One of the most beautiful places on earth.” Certainly that is agreed to by the filmmakers who filmed South Pacific, The Thornbirds, Fantasy Island, Jurassic Park, and many other movies and TV series that need real beauty for a setting.

Those of us who have found the North Shore, are very, very happy that few others are here. We tell everyone how close we are to the “wettest place on earth”. The American tourists, here for a week of romance, stay on the south side of the island so a passing shower will not inconvenience them. The Japanese tourists, here for a week of photographs, apparently live in buses on the South Shore because you never see them more than a few feet from a bus, They are seldom seen on the North Shore.

Although we have seen great changes in the 18 years we have been coming here, there are still no stop lights on the northern half of the island. No Macdonalds, no Burger King, no KFC , no Safeway, no Wal-Mart, no Borders – they are all on the South Shore.

(Good place for them.)

The location of Kauai – the northernmost, and the westernmost – is both a blessing and a curse. The curse is weather, in the form of hurricanes and tsunamis. All the Hawaiian Islands are susceptible to those, but recently Kauai has been hit hardest by hurricanes. In 1982, we came just weeks after Hurricane Iwa swept the island with 95 MPH winds.

We thought the island was nearly destroyed, but that was nothing compared to the huge Hurricane Iniki that crashed into Kauai with 165 MPH winds. It really did destroy the island. Actually, it is mostly rebuilt by now but the memories are fresh in the minds of the residents, and to some extent in the minds of travel agents – so the tourist travel has not been what it could have been.

As bad as hurricanes are, tsunamis have killed more people on the Islands, by far. The big tsunamis in 1946 and 1957 did most of their damage on the Big Island at the Hilo Harbor (159 dead), but it did not spare the north face of any island including Kauai. I had the opportunity to talk with one of the survivors of the 1957 tsunami here on Kauai. As a visitor you have nothing to worry about with tsunamis now because there is a good warning system – but you need to understand the populations' background concern. It is etched in their memories.

Tsunamis are not “giant waves”. The entire ocean rises, recedes, rises again, and recedes. This can happen eight or more times. The 1957 tsunami rose past the crossbar on the telephone poles on the road behind the local Kalihiwai beach. It obviously destroyed all the homes on the beach, killed many people, but the houses are back, and even more homes have been built. (Tsunami insurance costs \$1,200 a month!). The Islands are long overdue for another big tsunami, but there is a well-monitored siren warning system for the next one.

(On one of the recent false warnings, some surfers went to sea to “ride” the big wave. What they did not realize is that it is not a wave, but a monster sea rise, tumultuously churning, filled with rocks from the sea – surfers would have all been killed, thereby cleansing the gene pool.)

Because of the beauty, the weather, the laid-back attitude, this island will – eventually — be discovered. The vanguard has arrived to discover high gas prices, high milk prices, high home prices – but low property taxes, low water costs, no clothing costs, and no need for heat and air conditioning. Yes there are hurricanes, and tsunamis, and great warmth and great beauty.

It may be a mixed bag, but on balance, it is hugely positive.