

Kalihiwai Region of Kauai

Our “Second Home” overlooking the Ocean

Jean and I have spent many months living in Kauai over the past few years, and we have learned a lot about this most distant outpost of America. Kauai is the most distant of the Hawaiian Islands, and we live on the northernmost part of the northernmost island. It is a great place, far from the “madding crowd” and about as isolated as you can get in America. There are no stop lights within 20 miles in either direction.



We live in the Kalihiwai (Cal – Lee – hee – wye) area of the island – on Kalihiwai Road, which leads, where else, to Kalihiwai Beach. (Actually, there are two Kalihiwai Roads, but more about that in due course, because on Kauai nothing is quite as it seems.) We live in an “A Frame,” set on 10 acres, on a ridge overlooking the ocean. The home sits within 100 yards of a large private waterfall and pool on the property, and the waterfall can be easily heard in the bedrooms. In fact, it can’t be ignored – particularly during winter months when the rains in the mountains bring the usual roar to a crashing roar.



If you think of Kauai as a circle, with a high mountain in the center and radials of ridges and valleys coming from the middle, you have Kauai. The volcano created the island, and the position of the island at the far north and west end of the island chain places it right in the trade winds. Those trade winds hit the land mass and climb the valleys up to the volcano –

Our Private Waterfall -- Taken from Second Bedroom

Kalihiwai Beach from Stanton's Home
(Note Kalihiwai River on Far Side)



and that creates the wettest place on earth.

Our “second home” would look like a modest mountain cabin in a ski area, and not all that impressive, but on this property it is worth about \$2.5 million. Or more. This home survived the 1982 hurricane without damage (and we lived in it just a month later), but the 1992 hurricane damage was substantial. Its furnishings

can be lost to the next hurricane without diminishing the booty of the eventual heirs. The home overlooks some newer, and grand homes – one recently built by the Getty family. Wise families either build a disposable home, or something that is invincible – and nothing in between.

But this treatise is about the area, and its history, because the Kalahawai area is an interesting place. Technically it is a part of the community of Kilauea, a nice little town. Kalihiwai was a community of its own before two tsunamis in a short period literally wiped it off the face of the earth.

That does not happen where we live, of course, high on the hill and well back from the beach. Down at the beach – which in earlier days supported first a taro-based community and then a rice-based community, life has changed. The plantation life was diminishing in the early part of the 1900s, and the Chinese, then the Japanese, and finally the Philippine indentured workers found that life on Kauai was better than returning home. Many settled in the Kalihiwai valley, alongside the river that led to the beach. Kauai is the only Hawaiian island with navigable rivers, fed by the nearby “wettest place on earth.” The soil and the river made the planting of taro and later rice, easier than almost anywhere. Rice was particularly good because the river could flood the fields of a crop that was high in nutrition and needed no refrigeration.

The beach had once three stores and a school but now has only a few scattered houses awaiting the next tsunami, which will certainly destroy them eventually. Construction of homes alongside the beach are “disposable” – which is to say the

owners know that either a hurricane or a tsunami will destroy it eventually, so neither the construction or the furnishings are designed for posterity. (There are homes invincible to hurricanes, but NOTHING can withstand a tsunami! There have been 180+ tsunamis since 1813, but some have been so minor as to be unnoticed.)

That next major tsunami is long overdue, but tsunamis do not obey human calendars. Tsunamis are not “tidal waves” because distant undersea earthquakes and not tides initiate them. Tsunamis move across the ocean at 400-500 MPH, unnoticed, except in very recent years by sea buoys, and in a series of ebbs and flows, raise the ocean in a roiling burst of sand, rocks, and water. When you are on a beach in Hawaii and see the ocean recede rapidly, leaving behind flopping fish inside the coral reefs – run, do not walk up the hill without trying to get to your car! The incoming wave will destroy everything in sight!

Before the first, and lesser, tsunami in 1946 caused huge damage, the valley behind the beach and along the river was a thriving agricultural community, with Japanese, Chinese, and Hawaiian families living off fishing and farming. During the 30’s and 40’s there was steel bridge across the river, and just behind the beach, and it was on that road and across that bridge that traffic – what there was of it – went on to Hanalei over that bridge.

And over that bridge, on the other side of the river, the Kalihiwai Road looped back to the new main road from Kapa’a to Hanalei. Therefore, as you drive from Kapa’a to Hanalei, leaving the town of Kilauea you see Kalihiwai Road. That is where we live. If you continue on the main road for several miles, across the new bridge and on the right is Kalihiwai Road! Again!

And no, they are not connected, because what was a “U shaped” road, connected by a steel bridge, is no longer connected. Two Kalihiwai roads makes life a bit complicated. (To get the full flavor, understand the second Kalihiwai Road leads to Anini Beach – which was Wanini Beach, but the “W” fell off and it was easier to call it Anini



Slight Surf on Kalihiwai Beach

than to replace the “W”. That is a true story and gives a good view of life here!)

In the village of Kalihiwai, along the beach and along the river, life was slow and bucolic. Almost no one owned a car, so children fished, surfed, went to school, worked the taro or rice. When the two tsunamis struck, the second one destroyed everything including the steel bridge. It killed 66 people on the beach



and along the river, and the village could no longer rationally be rebuilt. The town of Hilo over on the Big Island received most of the worldwide publicity in 1957 because hundreds died when the same tsunami struck that larger and more populace area.

Stanton Pa, whom Jean and I have grown to know over the years, remembers living in a home on the river when the first “wave” of the 1957 tsunami moved up the river as the children were preparing to leave for school. The family realized what was happening, and knowing that the next waves over the next few hours would be much worse, ran for their lives up the hills. He remembers the homes floating first up the river, and then down as the huge waves ebbed and flowed, until the homes disintegrated. The high water mark was at the top crossbar of the electric poles along the river behind the beach.

Stanton and his wife Inger now live in a home, really a nice shack in the disposable tradition, on the ridge overlooking the beach and the river. (When he lived on the river, this ridge was a sugar field.) The land (3 acres) on which his “shack” now stands is easily worth \$2 million, but Stanton asks “Where can I go and have this view” so he would not sell. His new view land was given to his family by the State of Hawaii with the hope that it could lure Kalihiwai residents off their fatal beach – but the families were not required to sell their beach homes to the State so many have BOTH a \$\$\$\$ home on the beach and another \$\$\$\$ home on the ridge overlooking the bay! Thus the Hawaiian families on the ridge are worth millions each, but have no money! Stanton, an aging but 6’4” stately Hawaiian who throws his net for fish doesn’t know what he would do with a million dollars, but his love of the land and its view is

palpable. Stanton is a retired Honolulu fireman, the current Kauai Police Commissioner, and has played King Kamahamaha in Hawaii pageants for decades because he just looks like the huge and great King.

Other members of Stanton's family still live on the beach at Kalihiwai, along with perhaps six other families remaining from pre-tsunami days. Because the traffic from Kapa'a to Hanalai uses the main road and goes by the first Kalihiwai Road, not knowing that this beach even exists. It is a quiet beach, seldom visited by the new cars that make a tourist so easy to spot.

The Kilihiwai region is just one of perhaps seven recognizable areas of the Garden Island of Kauai. Being on the North Coast, it is not often seen by the tourists. They drive right by as they go to Princeville, and Hanalai, but there is no reason for them to ever see us -- and we are grateful, because this is just a residential area with very few homes. But to the island residents, it is well known because of its beauty, its history, and its expensive homes.

We are so fortunate to have been able to live here for over a year in the past four years -- and we hope to continue. The Island is changing, about which more in due course. We are insulated here in the Kalihiwai region.

Aloha.



Kalihiwai River, through the plain in which the stores, homes, and taro/rice plantings were before the Tsunami damage of 1946 and 1957. I have kayaked this river all the way to the head -- a hidden waterfall.