

*mysteries of hawaii*

# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS ON MOLOKAI

Of all the mystique around the Hawaiian islands, nowhere is it thicker than it is on the edges of Molokai. Little has been written about the island from the outside. There have been stories about kayaking up to the shadows of Molokai's sea cliffs, and riding mules to the threshold of its infamous colony (page 50). But an aura of guardedness has kept most of us from going any further than that. This is one man's attempt at a breakthrough on Hawaii's "Friendly Island."

STORY BY TONY PERROTTET PHOTOS BY JON WHITTLE



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SOCIAL CALLS ON MOLOKAI CAN'T BE RUSHED. This occurs to me as I drive the winding gravel road of the island's lonely east coast, where the cliffs rise high out of the sea. Somewhere at the end of the line, I've been told, lies a succulent green valley, where the Solotario family is living much as they have for centuries. When I pull up at dreamy Halawa Bay, I see driftwood and pandanus lining the shore, but no family, no houses — nothing. But then I hear a resounding “Aloha,” and Kawaimaka Solotario, heavily tattooed and in his 30s, emerges from the rainforest.

Lest I think I've truly arrived on Molokai, Kawaimaka stops me. “We have to obey protocol.”

First, we wrap breadfruit in coconut leaves.

“An offering,” he says.

Then, as we walk through taro fields, we pause at regular intervals to blow a conch shell — basically, asking permission for me to enter the ancestral lands. This is a promising start into a tough place to crack. Molokai's people successfully protested against a cruise ship from entering its port in 2003 (it never did come). This is why I've arranged an introduction with Kawaimaka's family, on their terms.

After a few hundred yards, I spot some humble wooden dwellings and am greeted by the 70-year-old patriarch, Pilipo Solotario, Kawaimaka's genial father, who is cutting up papaya for lunch.

As I present my breadfruit gift, Pilipo gives me the traditional Hawaiian greeting, touching our foreheads together and mingling our breath.

“You're no longer a stranger in Halawa,” Pilipo says.

This is life in the valley, not a tourist show. Molokai is the most culturally intact of all the tourist Hawaiian islands (over 60 percent native Hawaiian compared to the 20 percent state average). Here in Halawa things have changed only gently since Polynesian outriggers first hit the sands. We sit under palm trees with sleeping dogs as sentries



**Kawaimaka's extended family makes up the only remaining population in the valley of Halawa, a word that means “sufficient life” and refers to the area's bounty.**

while Pilipo chats in the clicking Hawaiian tongue to his daughters, then reminisces about the tsunami of 1946, which took place on April Fool's Day. “It wiped out the village,” he says with sudden gravity, although the village's inhabitants, observing the tide rushing out, all got to safety on higher ground.

“Let's go to our swimming pool,” booms the son, Kawaimaka, instantly lightening the mood. So we follow a rushing stream, hopping boulders and plucking wild guavas, mangos and avocados from trees overhanging the trail.

“There were 5,000 people living in our valley before

Europeans arrived,” he says. “In the 1950s there were 300. Now there’s just our family, 20 of us.”

Kawaimaka himself has just returned from several years working in Honolulu, where he used his more prosaic Americanized name, Greg. “Oahu was OK,” he says, “but there’s nowhere like Molokai.”

The trees finally part to reveal a stunning sight: Mo’oula, a 100-foot waterfall, pouring its crystalline water into a perfectly circular water hole.

“That’s our swimming pool. Jump in!”

The water, pure and cool, makes me feel like I have really arrived on Molokai. But I haven’t — not exactly.

WHEN MY 20-SEAT PROP PLANE FIRST FLEW over Molokai, the island (pop. 8,000) appeared deserted. From the air I spotted one paved road and no moving vehicles. After collecting my rental car from the only person sitting at any airport counter, I drove out past a hand-painted sign that ordered “Slow Down! This is Molokai!” and made my way — slowly — into the only town, Kaunakakai. There were no stoplights, and one little grocery store was open. On the door I studied a sign: “Aloha Spirit required. If you can’t share it today, please visit us some other time. Mahalo.”

A luxury real-estate development — the first ever planned on Molokai — provoked intense local protests that eventually led to its cancellation in 2008. During that bitter, divisive fight, another hand-painted sign was erected outside the airport, this

**The Friday jam session and Saturday farmers market are the busiest action in Kaunakakai (right). Halawa Bay (below) is literally at “the end of the road.”**

one reading: “Welcome to Molokai. Be Sure You Go Home.” In other words, “Enjoy our island, just forget about picking up a condo.”

As I step into the supermarket with trepidation, I have to wonder: Will the residents welcome me?

“We sometimes get pushy people,” says the Hawaiian checkout girl when I ask about the sign. “They come here and demand, demand, demand. No manners. That’s not the Molokai way.”

Laden with food supplies, I set off along the eastern coastline, following the solitary “highway.” The terrain grows taller and greener. My abode for the week is a wooden cottage painted olive green and white, so close to the ocean I can almost cast a fishing line out the window. The porch is framed by plumeria trees, with sweeping views over to Maui. Down on my private beach, I plant a plastic chair so the waves can lap over my feet. The only visitors are the occasional green sea turtles cruising by. I’m feeling as if another layer of Molokai has been peeled back.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAKE UP AND SPOT something bobbing in the surf. Alone, I walk down to the little beach and discover a ship’s lifesaver that has washed ashore encrusted in periwinkles and marked with faded Japanese script. There’s no telling how long it’s been floating at sea or how many times it’s made landfall with no one here to welcome it.

If there is a welcome center anywhere on Molokai, it’s hiding from my view. In town I wander into the Kalele Bookstore and Divine Expressions and meet Auntie Teri, presiding over coral necklaces and woven palm baseball caps. She loudly greets a parade of locals who shuffle in to sit and chat, making it feel like the *Cheers* version of a Hawaiian bookstore. One elderly resident is setting up a display of seeds.

“I want to replant Molokai’s native flora,” she explains. “I give out the seeds for free, and people plant them all over the island.” I’ve read how some nonnative plants have led to erosion of the coastline, while Hawaiian plants hold it firm. As I stand there in my shorts with untanned legs, the folks eye me with caution, as if I’m some introduced plant myself.

Finally, I step forward. “Can I ask a silly question?” Auntie Teri, to my relief, breaks into a huge grin. She’s like the town crier, so I quiz her on a key issue. “Where should I go on a Friday night?”

“Go to the jam session at the Molokai Hotel.”

“That’s the best thing to do?” I ask.

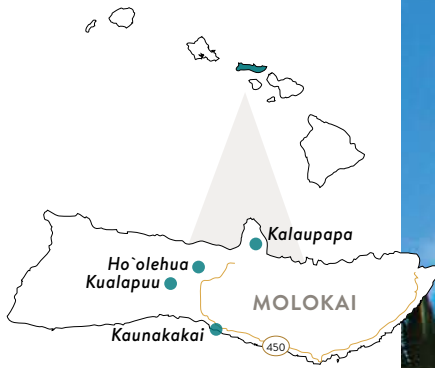
“It’s the only thing to do.”

So a few hours later I saunter over to the hotel — not hard to find, since it’s the only one on the island. A



AS I STAND THERE IN MY SHORTS AND UNTANNED LEGS, THE FOLKS EYE ME AS IF I’M NOT A NATIVE PLANT.





### POINT OF INTRIGUE

From the one hotel on Molokai (Hotel Molokai, of course, in Kaunakakai) it's a 20-minute drive and a slippery mule ride down to the island's most mysterious place — the colony in Kalaupapa where those with leprosy were once outcast. Gravestones are lined up on the original site, which can be toured. A

### 12 FORMER PATIENTS STILL LIVE HERE

A new colony was built for patients who decided to stay after the incarceration ended in 1969, but it's off limits to visitors.

"After the patients were allowed to come and go, their prison became their paradise," says park superintendent Erika Stein. A truck driven by a former patient passes in the distance, avoiding us. This door is theirs to open, or to close, as they please. — TP



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I NOTICE  
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The bread store and the church become connections to the people and to the prettiest beaches (far left), which are buffered by long trails and vague directions.



**DID YOU KNOW?**

You'd be forgiven if you thought coconut palms were native to Hawaii. Anthropologists think the palms are a "canoe plant" Polynesians brought over from the Marquesas 1,800 years ago. Ever since, Hawaiians have embraced the plant as one of their own, though today you won't see coconuts hanging from palms along Waikiki and in other popular locales. The government removes the nuts so they won't fall on anyone. It's a fair concern. The state's tallest coconut palm, in Oahu's Keawaawa wetland, measures 112 feet high. — Dennis Hollier



dozen musicians are gathered at the open-air bar, and about 50 locals are nursing drinks. Every few minutes, as the slack-key guitars and ukuleles get into their honey-smooth rhythms, a different member of the crowd gets up to hula — grandmothers, teens, 8-year-olds. The master of ceremonies, a grizzled guitarist with a goatee and a cowboy hat, spots me at the bar and waves: "Just remember, every dollar you spend in Molokai stays in Molokai!"

I turn to my neighbor at the next stool and ask if everyone goes home after the session ends at 8 p.m.

"No!" she says. "We're all going on a hot bread run!"

And so I find myself slinking down an alley lit by Christmas lights to Kanemitsu Bakery, and joining a queue with 30 people who love the bread enough to stay up until the ungodly hour of 8:30 p.m. A window opens and a man begins passing out steaming hot rolls with jam toppings. Mine drips butter and strawberry, like a pizza dreamed up by Willy Wonka.

AUNTIE TERI TOLD ME SUNDAYS ARE "BIG, BIG social days. Everybody dresses up to go to church."

After a Saturday of snacking on papaya and the best macadamia shortbread ever on my chair in the surf, I figure it's only right to drag myself out of bed at dawn on Sunday and drive to St. Joseph's Church, a tiny 19th-century chapel in a clearing by the beach. At 7 a.m. a row of pickup trucks is lined up on the lawn, and the service is already in full swing when I creep into the last varnished pew beneath slowly revolving ceiling fans. The small congregation looks at me as I take a seat. Led by a white-bearded priest wearing a lei, the lavishly tattooed crowd joins in hymns, while the flower-scented morning air wafts through open

windows, along with several hummingbirds.

After the service the priest grabs my elbow and shows me a box piled high with bunches of green bananas — a post-Mass gift. "A member of the faithful has a farm, and he likes the congregation to partake."

Soon he's giving me driving directions too. "Go west. The coastline is the most beautiful in Hawaii."

And so, suitably replete with fruit, I drive along a lonely road past more hand-painted signs — "Don't Change Molokai, Let Molokai Change You" — into an austere landscape. The priest had also tipped me off that the road ends at a hiking trail, which threads its way from one perfect cove to the next.

As I stumble, a little sun-struck, to the last beach, I'm surprised to find a dozen SUVs, tents, and locals fishing and barbecuing their catch. I pause, worried that I've stumbled onto a refuge for Molokai's locals, far from the prying eyes of outsiders. But I'm found.

"You came on foot?" one woman says, cutting up a fresh mahi mahi. "How did you find the trail?"

Oh, I say, I have contacts "in the church."

I notice a series of abandoned cabins in the sandy expanse behind their camp — the sight, and its story, are surreal.

"That's our ghost resort," someone says, laughing.

The ruin, they explain, is a spooky memorial to a conflict that still haunts Molokai. In 2008, the major landowner on the island, Molokai Properties, announced plans to build 200 luxury estates on the nearby beach of La'au. Many locals bitterly opposed the move. The beach was sacred, they argued, and the idea of large-scale development, was anathema to the island's spirit. Tempers escalated until a shocking decision was made: not only did the company cancel the development, it closed down two other hotels on Molokai, throwing 120 people out of work.

"This was our eco-lodge," a man named Alaina says, waving his hand at the sand-filled relics. "They just boarded it up and cut the tops off all the palm trees."

"A lot of us are still unemployed," his brother adds.

They don't say they regret their principled stand, despite the heavy price it took to preserve the island's charm. As we chat next to the perfect beach, I find it strange that it is here, a short distance from the doors of a resort that never opened, where I feel inside Molokai. Maybe the island was never closed to me at all. It could very well have been the other way around.

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