

Kauai Travel Story (Feb 15, 2008)

Ironically our trip to warm Hawaii began with spectacular views of the Rocky Mountains from 30 thousand feet. In the distance Big Sky Mountain poked toward the sky like a huge, white pyramid. In the foreground we passed over two other ski mountains. The Rockies remained rugged for another half hour. As we approached Portland we flew near the top of Mount Hood. (See photo to the right.)



I had not realized how steep the huge mountain stands. No wonder many people have been caught in storms near the top and never returned alive. The mountain's majesty is amazing. A few minutes later we glided over the giant Columbia River where dozens of freighters unloaded and loaded or waited in line.



Landing in Kauai also was spectacular. Most of the sun had descended below the horizon casting a light blue tone to the land and sea. Only 25 miles wide and shaped like a birch leaf, Kauai can be captured in a single glance from the air.

Kauai is more primitive than most tourist destinations, as we discovered at 5am when a rooster crowed loudly behind our condo. For me it has been decades since waking up to rooster tunes. Two hours later at daylight, we saw at least 10 roosters who continued their

song throughout the day. Later we discovered roosters everywhere on the Island, roaming the streets like monkeys and cows in India.

The story is that the 1992 hurricane wiped out the coops of a big chicken farm and now thousands of wild chickens roam free because there are no hawks, foxes or other animals to catch them. I wonder why some poor surfers have not figured out a way to ship them to the mainland to be sold as expensive "free range chickens. Certainly no one need go hungry on Kauai, unless they're vegetarian.



Racing Roosters at Dawn

On the other side of the condo the ocean breakers loudly crashed one after another leaving a continuous but gentle roar. A "double reef" along that eastern shoreline guarantees that at any one time at least 3 or 4 ocean breakers remain in play. The beach is part of Lydgate State Park, a popular place for the locals to picnic.

Our condo, the oldest on the Island, was a bit run down but a joy because we could walk right out the patio door and in two dozen steps, walk on the sandy beach along the surf. It has been a long time since we could stay in a place that has neither heating nor air conditioning but still remains comfortable.

Just a half mile up the road is Wailua River where one can catch a boat to see the famous Fern Grotto, which is a small basin at the base of steep cliffs where all kinds of lush ferns and plants grow in great density.



Sunrise on Kauai Eastern Coast



Moss and plants of all kinds cling to the watery cliffs (see left). Some plants look like house plants but their giant leaves spread one to two feet wide. On the right is a banana flower.



Kauai has a population of 60,000 people split three ways between Asians, Whites, and native Hawaiians. The island is Hawaii's northern-most island, which accounts for its cooler weather. Another factor is the 5,000 foot mountain in the Island's center that attracts rain clouds. The peak is thought to be the wettest spot in the world with nearly 500 inches per year. We only saw the peak once, which is considered lucky during the winter.

Kauai claims about a million visitors per year, which means at least 1 or 2 tourists for every resident during the winter. Guess what its major industry is? And guess how crowded the roads are? Traffic crawls very slowly on roads that are more crowded than the California's Pacific Coast Highway. Fortunately most people don't seem to be in a hurry.

Kauai is known as the "Garden Island," which is also the name of the local newspaper. The Island deserves to be called a garden because of the colorful array of flowering bushes and trees throughout. The nick name "Garden Island" probably stems back to the days when Hawaiian Queen Emma lived along the southern coast. Anyone was welcome to visit her if they brought her a flowering plant. Now the royal grounds constitute the National Tropical Botanical Garden, which we visited to take some of the pictures of flowers below.



The hurricanes of 1982 and 1992 pretty much destroyed the houses along the southern shore. Now homeowners cannot get insurance, but that doesn't stop people from building multi-million dollar McMansions on the sea cliffs. The picture below shows a huge area where hundreds of insurance-less homes will be built in the near future.

One of the main activities for visitors to the Island is boat trips on big catamarans. Most of them leave Port Allen in the south and head up around the west coast. Some of these tours go for snorkeling, some to view the majestic mountain cliffs and waterfalls, and some to watch for whales. Our interests were whales and cliffs, but due to a storm arising along the coast, the boat went east instead of west. Instead of tall cliffs we saw short cliffs and lots of houses. But most importantly we saw a lot of hump backed whales.



The whales were hanging around in families. Apparently this time of year the mother whales are exercising their little ones getting them ready for the long trip north for the summer. Little, of course, is relative. Baby whales are measured in tons not ounces. Full grown these humpback whales weight 45 tons. Exercising includes a single upward kick of the tail sending the whale's body partly above the water's surface. If all you see is tail, that means the whale is headed deep below the surface.



Did you ever worry about the whale crashing the whale watching boat? Not a silly question. The secret is to keep the boat motor running; then the whales don't bump the boat. Fortunately the motor sound doesn't scarce them away totally. The US has a law against getting closer than 300 feet. Whale watching can be better in Mexican waters where they don't



have such a regulation. Just like tourists, whales like winter vacations in Hawaii. About 10,000 humpback tourists arrive in Hawaiian waters each winter. Just in case I wasn't clear, the tourists referred to are whales.

Our time in Kauai was limited to three and a half days, a long weekend, which was not enough time of course. Next time, if there is a next time, we will stay longer, a lot longer. Next time we'll go to the most scenic northern coast first.

As we landed in Minneapolis at 6am after flying all night, the pilot announced that the temperature outside was -8 and 90 degrees below what it was in Hawaii. Everyone moaned and then shivered as we walked into the cold. But it turned out to be a beautiful blue sky day with clean crisp air. As the day wore on I didn't notice the below zero cold any more than I felt the hot, sticky weather the day before. It reminded me that home is where you're supposed to be and you can be content if not comfortable anywhere.

