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# Marvelous Molokai



Halawa Valley and Bay, Molokai

By Tor Johnson

Minutes after leaving The Ala Wai Yacht harbor in Honolulu, *Kāhēʻa*'s scuppers were awash, and I was shortening sail on our hard-pressed Beneteau 473. Although it's only 30 miles from Oahu to Molokai's western extremity, it was all to windward across the Kaiwi Channel, and apparently we'd have to earn each mile. The National Weather Service forecast "moderate" trade winds, but the channels in Hawaii are notorious for winds in excess of forecasted strength, and the seas are reliably nasty, steep and short. "Maybe this is why I rarely see another cruising boat around here," I thought, as we slammed into another steep sea.

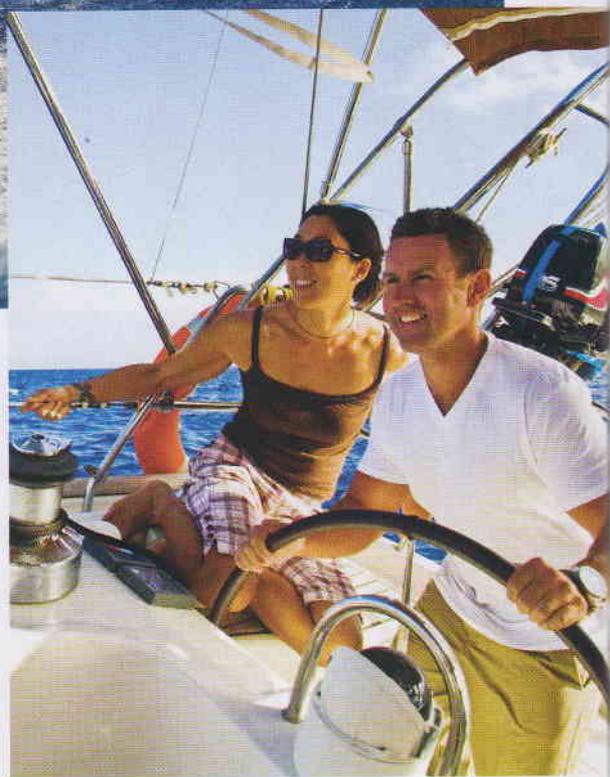
On any given day, Hawaii's channels boast some of the worst seas and winds in the Pacific. Anyone who's heard of the Venturi Effect will understand why the Alenuihaha Channel between The Big Island of Hawaii and Maui has some of the strongest winds, since strong trade winds are squeezed between mountains like Mauna Kea (a whopping 14,000 feet tall) and Maui's Haleakala (10,000 feet). Interestingly, the strongest winds are usually found slightly *downwind* of the narrowest part of the channel, a phenomenon that meteorologists ascribe to the fact that some of the air is forced up and over the constricted area. The news is not all bad though: the lees from Mauna Kea often reach out over a hundred miles downwind, and contain backwinds. Rather than beat against channel winds, local sailors often reach off into a lee, turning a beat into a spinnaker run.

There are rewards to sailing in these conditions, not the least of which is the chance to sail in para-

## Finding a gem in the Hawaiian Islands



Crew member Eli Knoke, above, thinking about reefing the jib in the Kaiwi Channel between Oahu and Molokai. Doug and Kyoko steering *Kahe'a* to Alawai Yacht Harbor, before crossing to Molokai



dise with few other cruising boats.

## THE MOST HAWAIIAN ISLAND

After taking delivery of *Kāhe'a* (“red streaks,” as in the dawn sky), our Beneteau 473, in Vancouver, British Columbia, my father and I had sailed her north through the Inside Passage to Alaska and out to Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands. In Kodiak we picked up an excellent young crewmember named Eli Knoke, who was apprenticed to his father, a master carpenter. Eli sailed across the Pacific with us, on a course straight south to our home, Hawaii. My faithful crew also included Wahiawa-based Tracy Dixon, a Navy senior chief in explosive ordnance disposal. Tracy is reliable and methodical, as one would expect from someone who handles bombs for a living (and is still living).

Since then we'd taken a few

trips across to Kauai. Kauai has an all-weather port at Nawiliwili, and Hanalei on its north shore is one of the most beautiful bays in the islands, with the spectacular Na Pali coast right nearby.

On this cruise, however, we decided to take the path less traveled to the “most Hawaiian” of the Hawaiian Islands: Molokai. Molokai has the greatest percentage of native Hawaiians—over half are said to be of Hawaiian ancestry. Molokai's north shore is famous for its impressive sea cliffs, and for the small spit of land at the base of the cliffs that once served as a prison and colony for leprosy patients. This is where Hawaii's famous saint-to-be, Belgian born Father Damien, gave his life to help the lepers.

Our plan, assuming we were in one piece after the beating in the channel, was to put in at an

abandoned barge harbor on the west extremity of the south shore called Haleolono or “House of Lono” (Lono is the Hawaiian god of peace, fertility and music). Next we would continue up the southern side of the island to the main port of Kaunakakai, meet up with my girlfriend Kyoko who is the brains and the beauty behind my photography business, then hopefully stop at Kamalō, a rarely used anchorage entered through a narrow and unmarked reef pass, then on around to

the real prize, the cliff-bound north side of the island. I was looking forward to exploring some remote anchorages that I'd never visited, and as a photographer I was really looking forward to capturing the drama of the highest sea cliffs in the world.

As we crossed the channel from Oahu, the seas moderated a bit, and as is often the case in channel crossings, the wind began to lift us toward our goal as we neared land. Things were looking better. Eli even stopped retching over the rail. Unfortunately, because Molokai is oriented east to west into the trade winds, they tend to adhere to the land, leaving very little lee during the day. The Kalohi Channel between Molokai and Lanai is another "pinch zone," where the wind accelerates, and we ran smack into even more wind from out of this channel, right on the nose. With steep breaking seas now coming from both sides, there was nothing to do but motor into it at a few knots, making a decidedly unpleasant and jarring finish to the crossing.

We normally catch more fish than we can eat in the channels between the islands, using simple hand lines with feather lures; on this crossing we caught nothing. I felt this was due to our slow speed against the seas. However Eli, our young Kodiak crew, insisted this was due to one thing: "Bananas." I refused to hear any such superstition, pointing out that it's also a superstition that women should never go to sea, and we all know *that's* wrong. Besides, I *love* bananas.

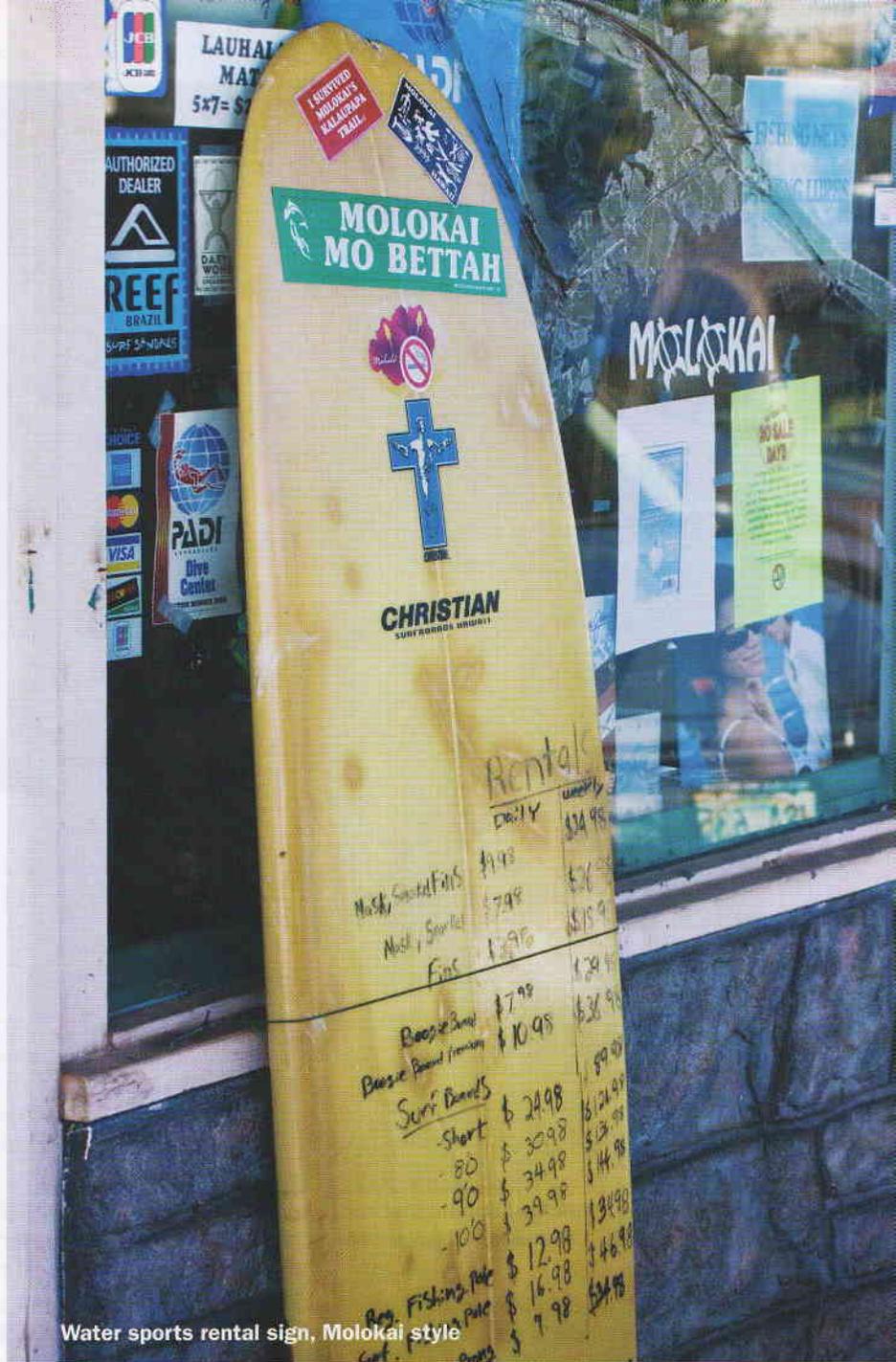
Having seen large waves from a westerly winter swell break across the entrance of Haleolono on a previous trip, I was concerned about shoaling, but the least depth in the channel was still an ample 18 feet at mid-tide (tidal ranges in Hawaii are rarely much over two feet). We found that quite a bit of chop from

the channel enters the harbor, but once tucked well into the eastern side of the anchorage, it's quite calm, protected and completely deserted, except when big cross-channel Hawaiian canoe paddling events use it as a staging place in early October. Some boats tie to the shore, but with the open entrance and ever-present surge, it feels more comfortable at anchor.

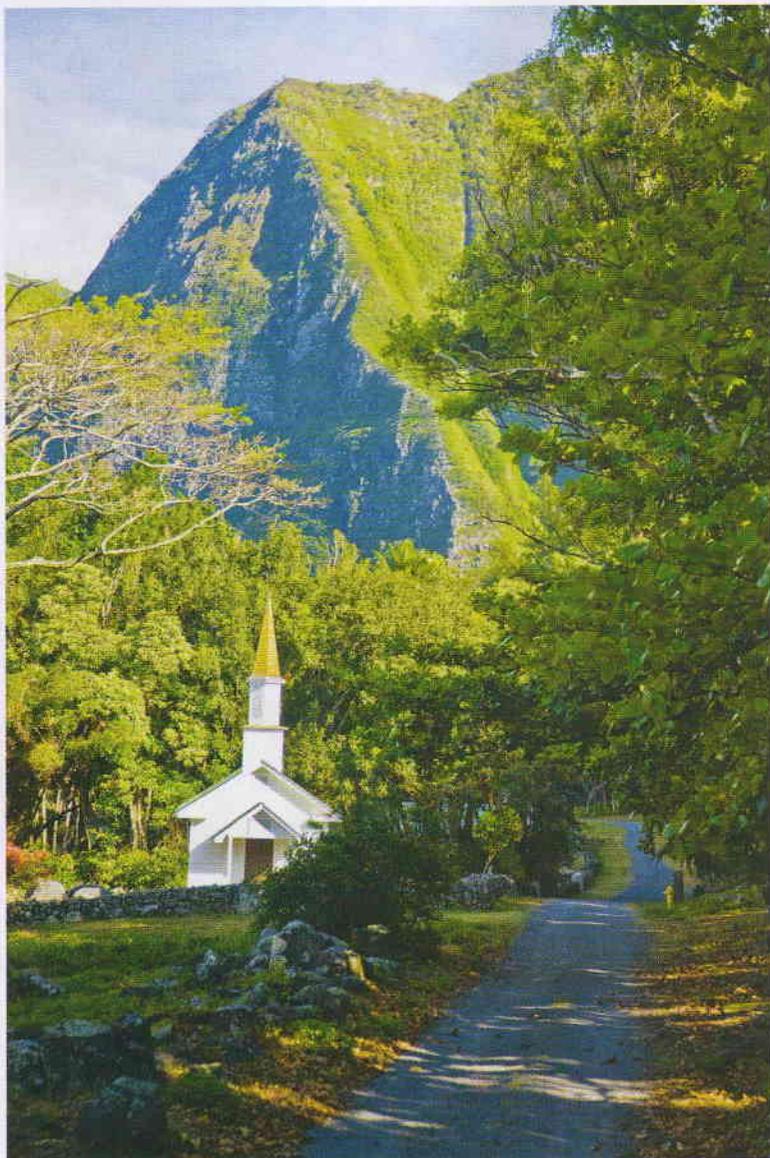
#### A WINDY PLACE

Our next leg was a short 12-mile

passage up the Kalohi Channel to the main port of Kaunakakai. Kaunakakai is the hub of Molokai life, the inter-island supply barge terminal, and the only place to buy supplies. Having experienced the seas in this pinch zone, we took the advice of a local fisherman and motored up the coast at first light. The lees here, especially when the northeast trades are veering a bit easterly, are short lived and limited to the late evening and early morning hours. By the time we arrived at



Water sports rental sign, Molokai style



**Old Protestant church at the original settlement of Kalawao, Molokai. *Kahe'a*, opposite, at anchor off Kalaupapa, Molokai**

Kaunakakai, the trades were already 15 to 20 knots, and a nasty chop was slowing us to a crawl.

Kaunakakai is a windy place, especially during easterly trades, and although protection from seas and the holding are excellent, trades routinely gust across the anchorage in the afternoon at 30 knots. Tracy Dixon, our very methodical and careful bomb disposal expert, started ashore in our small rigid hulled inflatable, when a strong gust suddenly lifted the bow skyward. He fell back bodily onto the outboard engine, but luckily the wind caught the dinghy at an angle rather than straight on, and threw the bow across the wind. He made a

wild unintentional 180-degree turn and found himself heading back to the boat, much to his surprise. Tracy was dry and unhurt, except for a slightly bruised ego. After this we made it a rule to put two people in the inflatable for ballast.

In Kaunakakai we rented a car and looked around the island, scouting both the anchorage at Kalaupapa from the stunning lookout on the cliffs above, and the narrow reef pass at Kamalō. We also took a ride on a spectacular road out to the Halawa Valley at the eastern end of the island. We learned that the Molokai Ranch, one of the island's main economic dynamics, had just closed its doors due to opposition

to its plans to develop a remote corner of the island for high-end homes. This was quickly followed by the closure of one of the main air carriers to the island, Aloha Airlines. A chatty local, who said he wanted to study environmental law "to protect what we have," offered to guide us on a hike into Halawa Valley to a nearby waterfall for \$50 each, an offer we declined. We later saw the same local out surfing. Apparently no one else had taken him up on his offer.

Having decided to take a chance on the reef pass at Kamalō, we made an early start again, motoring upwind in light morning winds. We still failed to beat the trades, and at the entrance it was blowing the usual 20 knots. There is only one buoy at the entrance to Kamalō, so we were on our own for the rest of the narrow channel, crabbing sideways in strong beam winds. Fortunately the sun was at a favorable angle, and I could see the reef on either side, while at the same time monitoring two different chart plotter systems. The anchorage was well protected, but even windier than Kaunakakai. A simple dinghy ride ashore was a wild and wet affair.

## TRULY WONDROUS

The next leg of our trip was around the exposed north side of the island. Like any Hawaiian north shore, a large north or west swell will turn the coast into a far better surfing arena rather than a cruising ground. Although forecasts are available on the VHF, the best place to check for upcoming swells is the Hawaiian Surf Forecast for Oahu, a collaborative effort of the National Weather Service and a gifted surf forecaster from the University of Hawaii named Pat Caldwell (<http://www.prh.noaa.gov/hnl/pages/SRF.php>).

After checking and re-checking

the weather to make fairly sure that we wouldn't be caught on this unforgiving shore by a north or west swell, we beat up through the Pailolo Channel around Cape Halawa, the eastern extremity of Molokai.

It's just past Halawa that the coast turns mountainous, and the cliffs are truly wondrous. We shortened sail to genoa alone to get a better look, since the squally trades would have blown us downwind past this coast in minutes. Between rainsqualls I jumped into the inflatable with my camera gear and a handheld VHF, and told Tracy and Eli to "just sail the boat down the coast." Tracy took one look at the unforgiving cliffs and looming squalls and said, "I'm not comfortable with this." Eli looked worried too, but I had more confidence in them. Aside from a few wild gibes that I won't dwell on, they kept the boat well under control.

We weren't expecting a perfectly calm and flat anchorage along such an exposed rugged coast, and after scouting two anchorages recommended by locals (at Pelekunu and Pahu Point) and finding rocky bottoms with dubious holding, I was ready to give up on anchoring in the area for the night and head for the lee of Kalaupapa, which has good holding and good protection from the trades due to the protruding peninsula.

As a last resort I decided to take



a look at a rarely used anchorage near Father Damien's church on the windward side of the peninsula, tucked in behind Okala Island. This was actually the site of the original colony, Kalawao, where those with the suspicious blemishes of leprosy were forcibly exiled beginning in 1866. Looking at the rugged, treacherous coast, we considered what it would have been like for the early exiles. During north swells when boat landings were difficult, patients were sometimes pushed over the rail and told to swim.

Many never made it ashore through the surf, and the ones who did were faced with a painful and dangerous climb across round, slippery, wave-thrashed rocks. Because leprosy attacks the nerves, many patients would have lost feeling in their feet. One could only imagine what they went

through. Once ashore, the exiles would have to fend for themselves by growing their own food and find shelter in an overcrowded, makeshift camp. Some were forced to huddle in caves under the cliffs. Leprosy is now curable with modern drugs, and we now know it's not only extremely difficult to transmit, but only five percent of the population is even susceptible to the disease. In hindsight, the forced exile seems a cruelly mistaken policy, but in the contemporary context of massive epidemics that had recently wiped out most of the

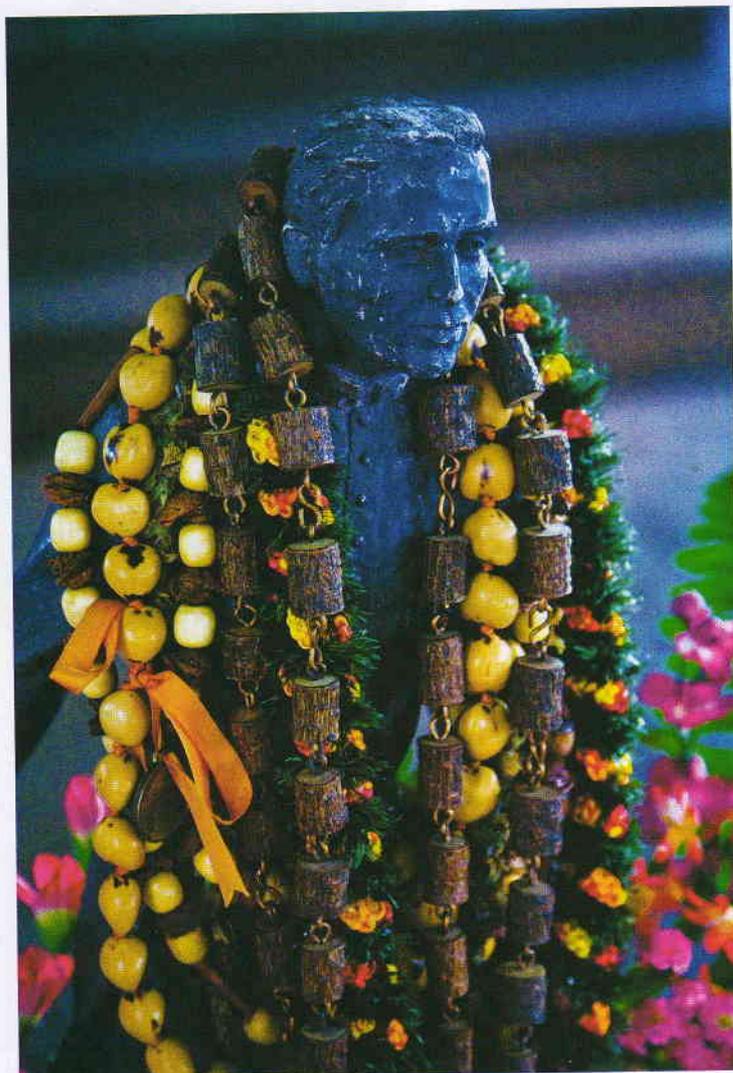


Hawaiian population, fear of such an unknown, horribly disfiguring new disease must have been pervasive.

The anchorage at Okala had a sand bottom and good holding. With the aid of a stern anchor to keep us into the chop, we were surprisingly comfortable, and although wind eddies from the immense surrounding cliffs prompted us to lay a second bow anchor, we slept more soundly than one would expect amid such a rugged scene.

## THE COLONY

Our next stop was a well-protected anchorage off the lee side of the peninsula at Kalaupapa, the current home of the colony. Although the last patients were sent to Kalaupapa in 1969, twenty-three original patients still live there in a town that seems forgotten by time. The area is now a National Historical Park, and access is strictly limited out of respect for the remaining patients, and their desire for peace and tranquility. The only way to visit the community is to take a tour by mule, or to come at the invitation of a resident. As sailors, we were not permitted to land. After dropping anchor, I'd just begun a new chapter in the fascinating history *The Colony*, by John Tayman, when I heard a woman's shout from shore. It seemed that a group of students from the University of Hawaii was visiting the settlement, and one of them had disappeared, saying he planned to swim out to our boat.



**Figure of Father Damien bedecked in leis. Eli hands Tracy Dixon gear between waves at a secluded anchorage on Molokai, opposite**

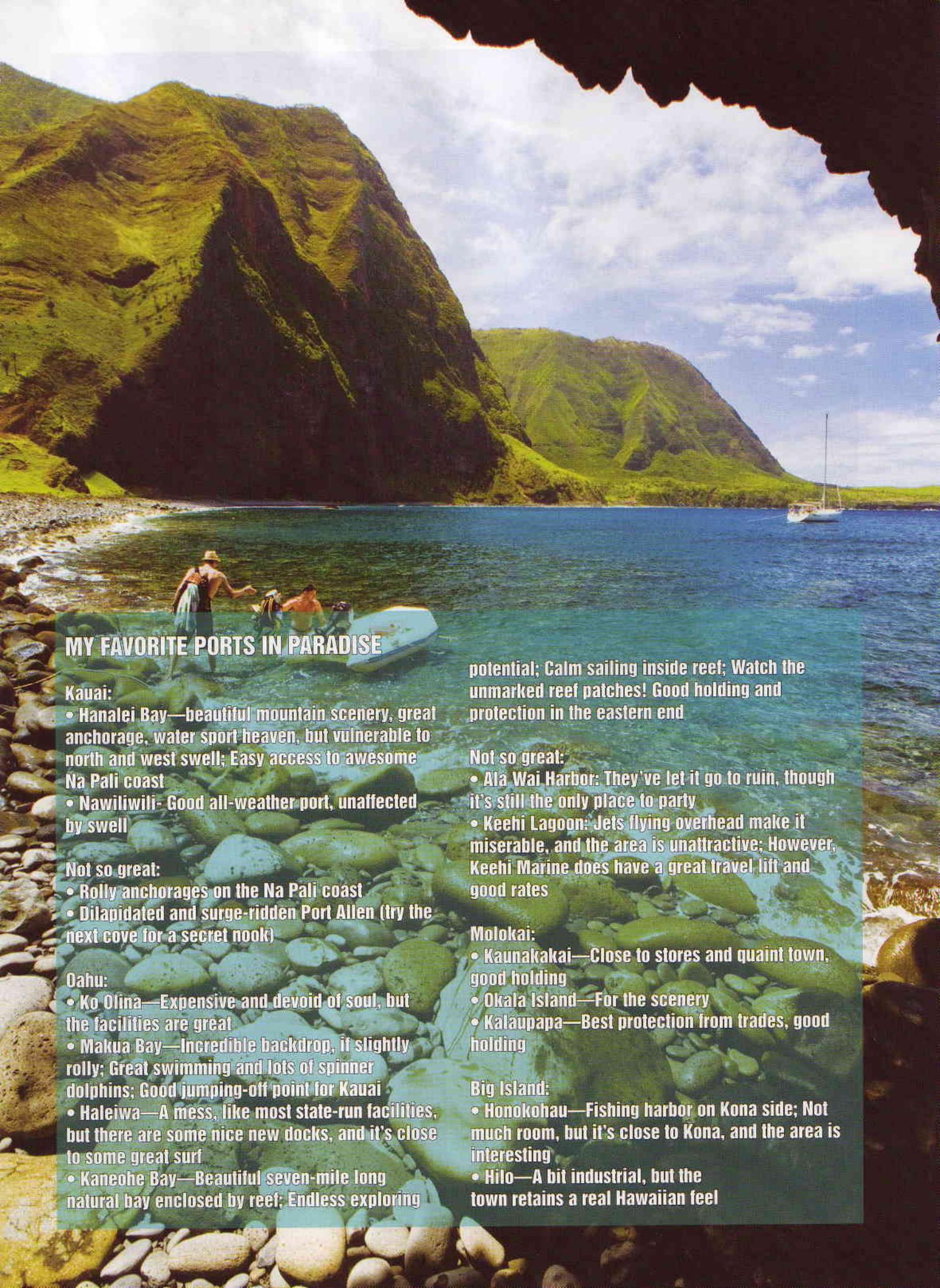
I quickly loaded one of his friends into the inflatable, and we eventually found the missing swimmer making great speed with a powerful, relaxed freestyle form. The group had alerted the staff at the colony, and Randall Watanuki, the maintenance mechanic, had come down to the dock with them to search for the missing swimmer.

Even after they realized that their friend was fine, the group was very grateful for my attempt to help, and Randall, who had witnessed several drownings there, even offered to show our crew around the colony. Although he calls himself "...an

old fut in a young man's job" Randall is agile and strong, and has been running the colony's boat, diving, and maintaining the colony for 26 years. He took us through the well-kept, sleepy town and across the peninsula to Kala-wao to see Father Damien's grave. At this point the grave contains only Father Damien's right hand, since his native Belgium exhumed the body, took it home, then returned just the hand. Nearby was the grave of Father Joseph Dutton, a civil war hero who led a wild life, until an epiphany led him to spend his last 44 years tirelessly carrying on Damien's exhausting work. Randall has an immense

respect for Father Dutton. With modesty typical of local Hawaiians, Randall said, "I actually calculated his days here... My goal is to work here one day less than Father Dutton." We all heartily wished him success, and headed back to Kāhe'a for the next leg home downwind to Oahu.

Mere seconds after hoisting sail for Oahu *Kāhe'a* sank Molokai on the horizon astern, and once even surfed at over 13 knots. We caught several mahi-mahi, and even one small ahi tuna. All of this despite a small hand of bananas in the galley. ~



## MY FAVORITE PORTS IN PARADISE

### Kauai:

- Hanalei Bay—beautiful mountain scenery, great anchorage, water sport heaven, but vulnerable to north and west swell; Easy access to awesome Na Pali coast
- Nawiliwili—Good all-weather port, unaffected by swell

### Not so great:

- Rolly anchorages on the Na Pali coast
- Dilapidated and surge-ridden Port Allen (try the next cove for a secret nook)

### Oahu:

- Ko Olina—Expensive and devoid of soul, but the facilities are great
- Makua Bay—Incredible backdrop, if slightly roly; Great swimming and lots of spinner dolphins; Good jumping-off point for Kauai
- Haleiwa—A mess, like most state-run facilities, but there are some nice new docks, and it's close to some great surf
- Kaneohe Bay—Beautiful seven-mile long natural bay enclosed by reef; Endless exploring

potential; Calm sailing inside reef; Watch the unmarked reef patches! Good holding and protection in the eastern end

### Not so great:

- Ala Wai Harbor: They've let it go to ruin, though it's still the only place to party
- Keehi Lagoon: Jets flying overhead make it miserable, and the area is unattractive; However, Keehi Marine does have a great travel lift and good rates

### Molokai:

- Kaunakakai—Close to stores and quaint town, good holding
- Okala Island—For the scenery
- Kalaupapa—Best protection from trades, good holding

### Big Island:

- Honokohau—Fishing harbor on Kona side; Not much room, but it's close to Kona, and the area is interesting
- Hilo—A bit industrial, but the town retains a real Hawaiian feel