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Earth, Wind and Fire: Lāna`i's Natural and Cultural Highlights

Lāna`i's Cathedrals lie underwater or in the purity of a windblown landscape. At the dive site called Cathedrals, an underwater grotto glows with light and the human hand is absent. At Keahiakawelo in northwestern Lāna`i, wind and time have carved a temple in a canyon of eroded land. In the mountains and at the shoreline, in the vast open spaces of a tiny, secluded island, time has moved slowly and the whispers of the past can be heard.

Lāna`i's natural and cultural attractions are spread out over 141 square miles, down roads more bumpy than paved, through rainforest and pineapple lands and arid, windswept plains. There are only 30 miles of paved road. Four-wheel-drive vehicles are the norm. In Lāna`i's rhythm and scale, it may take an hour to go 12 miles, but the landscape is part of the journey. From its summit at Lāna`ihale to its 47 miles of coastline, Lāna`i is a museum without walls. About 5 miles from Lāna`i City, Kānepu`u Preserve is the largest remnant of the dryland forest that scientists believe once covered the medium elevations of all the islands of Hawai`i. The 590-acre preserve is one of Hawai`i's most significant; a critical, carefully tended habitat for precious Lama (native ebony), Olopua (native olive), Lāna`i sandalwood, nā`ū (native gardenia) and 46 other species of native Hawaiian plants. Kānepu`u is the last dryland forest of its kind in the world, a nature lover's jewel 1,700 feet above sea level in the quiet central uplands of Lāna`i. The area is gated to prevent wild deer and mouflon sheep from disturbing the endangered plants, but visits are allowed.

Keahiakawelo

A mile and a half northwest of the Kānepu`u Preserve, the bumpy road leads to Keahiakawelo, the haunting geological wonder also known as Garden of the Gods. From an eerie lunar landscape emerge spires, buttes and rock formations in all shades of purple and red, the handiwork of the wind gods. Centuries of wind erosion have created these natural formations. Brown, ocher, sienna, umber, lavender – these words come to mind as the shifting light makes a painter's palette of the earth. The story is told of two chiefs from Lāna`i and Moloka`i who each burned a fire on opposite sides of the channel to see whose flame would last longer. The fire of Kawelo burned in this desolate region after the last flicker of Moloka`i's flame.

Kaunolū

It is said that somewhere in this pre-contact Hawaiian village is a shrine to Kamehameha's fish god, hidden there by order of the Hawaiian king in the 18th century. A registered National

Historic Landmark, Kaunolū is a cultural treasure of old Hawaiian ruins, remnants of what was once a thriving fishing village. The heiau (pre-western temple), house sites, petroglyphs, terraces, and a network of archaeological remains still bear a striking majesty. The setting: a bluff 1,000 feet above the ocean on the southwestern shore, atop Lāna`i's highest sea cliffs. Below, lava arches and a spectacular shoreline cradle a black pebble beach.

Kaiolohia

An 8-mile drive from Kō`ele – with views of Maui and Moloka`i nearly all the way – leads to Kaiolohia, a long, windswept beach also known as Shipwreck Beach. The rusted hulk of a wrecked World War II cargo ship lies abandoned in the channel, one of the major thoroughfares for the wintering humpback whales. The sandy road winds among ghostly kiawe trees. Flotsam, jetsam and driftwood line the beach, where precious glass fishing balls occasionally wash ashore. Inland there are Hawaiian petroglyphs, and eight miles north along the shore, Polihua Beach, dangerous for swimming, but the favored nesting grounds of turtles.

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