



Moloka'i by Car

The island of Moloka'i is less than 40 miles long, and it's only 10 miles wide. That means, if you got everybody off the island and started at the west end, driving your car as fast as possible, you could burn up every paved road in about an hour.

If you're in the mood to do something like that, Moloka'i's probably not the island for you.

But if you're game for tooling around where people interpret the posted speed limit as a sign of maximum recklessness – in a place with practically no traffic – this island is the one.

Moloka'i is the one because it rewards the slow driver and the frequent stopper. If you drove like mad, the place would seem to be just a long hilltop of red dirt and short grass and an incredible coastline, with the beautiful islands of Maui and Lāna'i in the offing. But the curious traveler, even the one who explores no farther than the paved roadways, will discover many delightful surprises on Moloka'i.

In contrast to the other Hawaiian islands, this one has very little finesse for attraction-making and self-promotion. Its chief strength is its genuine and distinctive personality. It's an offbeat personality, certainly. For the right traveler, through, Moloka'i is extremely endearing.

The slow driver would start by noticing that the western coastline, the one facing O'ahu, forms a bowl-shaped arc that holds Hawai'i's biggest beaches, not to mention, some of its least populated. Naturally, this is the place for Moloka'i's one modest resort area, Kaluako'i, where you can home-base yourself in a comfortable low-rise condominium resort.

Here is the site of the island's annual Ka Hula Piko Festival. Once each May, Pāpōhaku Beach Park – a great place to hang out or camp any day – turns into a high-energy music, food and artisan party where the Molokaians celebrate their island roots.

This is also the coast that launches the greatest long-distance outrigger canoe races in the world. Each September and October, Hawai'i's canoe regatta season climaxes here in the ultimate challenge – hundreds of hardened athletes paddling from here to Waikīkī across the brutal Kaiwi Channel.

On a hilltop overlooking this coast sits Maunaloa, more of a hamlet than a town, where you can mail a postcard, pick up groceries and visit its landmark attraction, the Big Wind Kite Factory. Choose a designer kite and sail it in the park next door. If you don't

remember how they work, the kite-makers will be glad to show you. Next door, the Plantation Gallery is chock-full of great stuff, from aloha shirts and books to Southeast Asian tribal art and made-on-Moloka'i gifts.

The drive to central Moloka'i is all fields and rough pastureland, hill country. Gradually the long shore to the right reveals itself, swathed in an immense shallow reef that stands nearly a mile off shore – the largest reef system in the U.S. To the left, the island's ridgeline is often capped with thick clouds.

Midway between the airport and Kaunakakai – the island's major town – there's an intersection on the left. This is Highway 470, the only major side-route on the main east-west highway. (None of Moloka'i's roads, by the way, has any more lanes than the perfectly adequate two, one for each driver.)

Drivers who make this left turn find themselves heading uphill through the orchards of Coffees of Hawai'i. You can stop here and tour the farm by foot, learning everything about coffee production from seed to cup. Or, join the Mule Drawn Wagon Tours with steadfast plantation mules Marla, Barbara-Jean and Mele. There's also the Morning Espresso Walking Tour, or the free Afternoon Hiking Adventure that goes through the coffee fields to the top of Kualapu'u Hill and its 360-degree view of the island. Call first to let them know you are coming. Coffees of Hawai'i also has a plantation gift shop offering made-in-Hawai'i crafts and the Espresso Bar & Deli serving light breakfast and lunch. A must-try is the incredible Mocha Mama! The down-home Kualapu'u Cookhouse restaurant is a block away, serving local-style lunch and dinner.

Further upslope, in the cool mountain district called Kala'e, the prominent rough-wood building set in a pasture is the R.W. Meyer Sugar Mill, fully restored to operating condition. Built in 1878 by a German engineer and his sons, it demonstrates the ingenuity that went into sugar processing in those non-motorized days. The adjacent Moloka'i Museum and Cultural Center offers tours, exhibits and periodic classes.

The road ends at Pālā'au State Park, a pleasantly cool forest. Even if you're not a "frequent stopper," you must get out of your car here and walk two very short trails. One leads to the Kalaupapa Lookout – suddenly you're standing at the brink of the tallest sea cliffs on Earth. The trade winds are pushing you back from the edge, the wall of cliffs goes on for miles, and the tragic peninsula of Kalaupapa lies below, waves smashing its shores. The sight is mesmerizing any time of the day, but try it at sunset when cloud-brimmed sunlight streaks from the side and there's no one else around.

The other trail leads to Moloka'i's curious Phallic Stones, towering rocks shaped just like...well, let's just say that women have traditionally slept up here to stimulate their fertility.

Back down the hill and left on the main road, past Kamehameha V's seaside coconut grove – a forest of shaggy-headed columns – quickly you're in Kaunakakai. Downtown. It's a block long, and everybody knows everybody except you, the visitor.

It's a primitive-looking town where you can acquire the primary essentials – for example, an inexpensive Cabernet (rated 95 by *Wine Spectator*) at Moloka'i Wines 'N Spirits. Or a loaf of the revered Moloka'i Bread – a fresh-baked must-try – from Kanemitsu Bakery. Or a cast-iron camping griddle from Moloka'i Fish and Dive. If you're extremely lucky, a Hawaiian family will be selling homemade lunches, foil-wrapped and pounds-heavy, off the tailgate of an old pickup. In other words, Kaunakakai has what you need – and that includes bike rentals, a pizza café, a natural food store, a pharmacy and grocers. All you have to do is park the car on Ala Mālama Avenue and walk through some of those primitive-looking doors. But not when the town is closed – every day after dark, and Sunday. Kaunakakai is where Molokaians stage their athletic events (in a lighted county ballpark) and where they celebrate their heritage during Aloha Week and the winter Makahiki Festival. They're the last people on earth who would ever make you feel excluded from their own events – after all, you're a visitor.

Past Kaunakakai now, you cross into the rainier east end of the island. The line is nowhere drawn, but with each mile the sense of being “east end” increases. The road starts winding, its bends full of trees. This is where Molokaians concentrated their population in the old days. Along this lake-like shoreline, they built huge stone fishponds, ancient feats of aquaculture engineering. Present-day Molokaians are restoring them. You can visit two churches hand-built by Father Damien. He deliberately placed them near the sites of old Hawaiian temples such as 'Ili'ili'ōpae Heiau. The east end is ancestral and wild.

After miles of winding past isolated beach-coves, the road rises through the green pastures of Pu'u O Hōkū Ranch. Here you can ride horses in the open countryside, down by the sea where humpback whales gather and raise their families, or up in the mountains where there are waterfalls and pools.

The road ends by dropping dramatically into Hālawā Valley, with its sinuous sandy bay and deep green canyon walls. From this point, Moloka'i's nearly vertical north-shore cliffs forbid any further passage by automobile.

Two wild areas retain some unspoiled remnants of Hawai'i's threatened native ecosystems. One is Kamakou Preserve. This dirt-road excursion requires a four-wheel drive vehicle and leads to the highest part of the island, where you can look down from above at one of the most precipitous valleys in the island chain. The sight of Waikolu Valley will have you stepping back, gasping. Trails here run through pristine areas, especially the Pēpē'ōpae Boardwalk that goes through a fragile bog habitat and ends at a dizzying overlook of deep Pelekunu Valley.

Another such excursion leads to a shoreline nature preserve at Mo'omomi. Here the coastal dunes provide habitat for many rare native plants and animals. In the old days, the Hawaiians came here to gather sea salt, to fish, and to quarry materials for their stone tools.

Both of these preserves are managed by The Nature Conservancy of Hawai‘i, and any four-wheel voyage into these at-risk natural areas should begin with a visit to the Nature Conservancy’s headquarters near Kaunakakai. At the headquarters you can let them know your plans, pick up maps and get guidance on how to behave for the cause of wilderness conservation.

Another good drive journey is the one-hour trip down from Maunaloa to Hale O Lono Harbor. In an earlier day, agricultural products were shipped from here to O‘ahu. Now it’s a quiet spot for exploring, fishing or just ending the day with a beautiful sunset.

This is the limit of Moloka‘i by car. All you can do now is turn around and drive slower.

First-time drivers here need to be warned. On Moloka‘i, people wave. When they see that you’ve got a rental car, they’re likely to slow down and make sure you get through the intersection okay. Experiences like these are liable to change the way you feel about civilized driving.

If you’re the type that would prefer to be chauffeured – so you can pay full attention to the scenery and attractions – you can take a guided land tour in the comfort of an air-conditioned van driven by a knowledgeable guide. Covering one end of the island to the other and all of Moloka‘i’s main highlights including an ancient fishpond and scenic lookouts, the tour may take a leisurely 5 to 7 hours and includes a pleasant sit-down lunch – yet another way to enjoy the Moloka‘i experience on four wheels.