



## Moloka'i by Sea

It's just after dawn on the beach at the Hotel Moloka'i, and the light is brilliant. The wind and the sea are perfectly matched – both are barely moving and slightly cool.

You pull your bright yellow kayak slushing across the beach, sleekly into the water, and jump in. Right away you know what to do – start paddling. It's instinctive. It's what people have been doing here for thousands of years.

If you're a novice paddler, it takes a few minutes to get the trip and rhythm. Meanwhile, during the first awkwardness, you also happen to be shooting straight out into the open sea. So you're grateful that there are no waves breaking over your hull or pushing you sideways. In fact, there are no waves at all. The ocean is amazingly calm.

The sea floor is just a few feet below you, and no matter how far you travel away from shore, it stays right there. "If you fall out," says your guide, "just stand up."

Suddenly you begin to grasp the amazing nature of Moloka'i's south coast. Now you can see that, in fact, there are waves – dead ahead. But they're about a mile away! Out there, taking the blows of the sea, is the front edge of the reef, a natural wall that wraps more than 30 miles of coastline. You're paddling the shallow, lake-like surface of the most extensive fringing reef in the United States.

Needless to say, this is a great place to kayak. In the morning, before the tradewinds pick up velocity, you can paddle this area with relative ease, investigating the ancient fishponds that line the coast. These fishponds – sea enclosures built of artfully stacked stone – give silent testimony to the skill and ingenuity of the bygone residents of this island.

Two companies provide these guided kayak excursions: Moloka'i Outdoors departs from mile marker 16 on the east end. Moloka'i Fish and Dive, a sporting goods store on Kaunakakai's main strip, departs from the small-craft slip at Kaunakakai Wharf.

The latter kayak trip goes west along the coast to explore Pālā'au Fishpond, the largest of them all and the only one containing brackish water – a mix of sea water and fresh stream water that rolls off the land into the stone enclosure. This circumstance gives the Pālā'au trip an extra kick: paddling through a dense jungle. The shoreline at Pālā'au is choked with an impenetrable forest of mangroves. (The mangrove is the only tree capable of growing in seawater. Once established, it forms a 40-foot-high thicket full of darkness, stillness, and the creaking of branches.) The guides of Moloka'i Fish and Dive have discovered that the fresh water streaming out of Pālā'au Fishpond creates a narrow channel through this jungle, a kind of kayak "trail." They take their guests on this eerie

path, which in places gets so close you have to drop your paddle and pull yourself along by grabbing roots and branches. Typically, guests will exclaim: “this is just like Disneyland!” And it is, with one important difference – this is no amusement park. It’s the real McCoy.

A kayak excursion is just one way to experience Moloka‘i by sea. The people of the island have always lived and thrived on contact with the ocean, and they like sharing this tradition with their guests.

Sportfishing boats – the 31-foot twin-diesel *Alyce C.*, for example, or the 27-foot ‘*Ahi* of Fun Hogs Sportfishing – offer the excitement of hooking up a big marlin, a mahi mahi, or an ono. ‘*Ahi* Captain Mike Holmes is one of the only fishing boat skippers in Hawai‘i who believes his guests should keep whatever they catch.

Fun Hogs will also take you to secluded areas of the reef to find the best places to snorkel and view a huge variety of Moloka‘i’s abundant reef fish. Rays and turtles are among the many graceful sea creatures that can be seen here. Or, the captain may cross over to Mānele Bay on Lāna`i, sometimes providing one-way passage for independent-minded travelers exploring Hawai‘i’s small, undeveloped islands.

Blue water sailing on a catamaran, whale-watching excursions, light tackle fishing – all are readily available on Moloka‘i, with expert guides at the helm.

Scuba diving on Moloka‘i? You bet. Moloka‘i Fish and Dive offers many kinds of land and water activities, but scuba is a particular specialty. For dive trips (and snorkeling and whale excursions), they use Captain Jim and the 31-foot Powercat *Ama Lua*. The guides are young men who are not only PADI certified but also born-and-raised island boys who know the waters as well as anyone alive. They know all the “blue holes,” the underwater caves, and places for swimming with hammerhead sharks.

All of these sea-going excursions begin and end at the Kaunakakai Wharf, on the reef-protected south shore. Along the north shore, though, where wave and wind strike against the tallest sea cliffs in the world, boating is a different experience altogether. For that you need Walter Naki of Moloka‘i Action Adventures and his 21-foot Boston whaler called *Puakea O Wailau*. Walter has unique qualifications for taking people “backside.” First of all, he’s an exceptionally competent outdoorsman – hunter, fisher, diver. Moreover, his family roots are here along this intense coastline, in now-uninhabited Wailau Valley. Walter’s grandfather was one of the last Hawaiians to leave the valley and adopt a more civilized lifestyle.

During the summer months, the trip leaves from Hālawā Valley, at the extreme road’s-end of east Moloka‘i. (During the winter, Walter departs the shore near mile marker 20.) Walter’s little boat bounces and dances over the swells as he races past the cliffs, a big grin on his face. He’s home. He points out the sights – Hawai‘i’s longest waterfall, rare seabirds with fantastically long tails, strange rock formations associated with old legends. He shoots his boat through a natural tunnel in the sea cliffs. He lets his passengers wade

ashore at Wailau Valley, where they wander around in a waking dream of lost Polynesia. It's a wild ride – “for hardy people,” says Walter. But he not-so-modestly declares his trip to be one of the two best activities on Moloka‘i (the other being the trek to Kalaupapa Peninsula). By the standard of pure exhilaration, there's no doubt he's right.

Moloka‘i Action Adventures (that is, Walter Naki) also offers customized experiences of deep-sea fishing, hunting, spear fishing, reef trolling, and even fly-fishing. Just say what you want, and we will provide – that's the Moloka‘i spirit. In the world of “package” travel, this island is always personal.

The largest seagoing vessel that you are likely to see docked at Moloka‘i is the ferry. It crosses the Pailolo Channel every day between Kaunakakai and Lāhaina, West Maui. Molokaian use the ferry to commute to jobs or to do their bulk buying on the much larger neighbor island.

Conversely, visitors to West Maui will use the ferry so that they can include Moloka‘i in their travel experiences. The channel crossing, which takes about 90 minutes, is a reasonably priced alternative to an airline ticket.

Actually, there are three vessels in the ferry fleet. The *Maui Princess* is 118 feet long, a high-speed touring yacht that carries about 150 people. The *Moloka‘i Princess* is a similar craft and almost as large. Both have been fitted with gyroscopic stabilizers that help take some of the chop out of rough channel crossings. The *Lāhaina Princess* is a 65-foot fiberglass yacht whose air-conditioned main cabin and open-air deck can seat nearly 150 passengers.

Activity providers such as Moloka‘i Outdoors offers programs that greet guests at the ferry landing and get them back in time for the return trip. This means that Maui visitors can make a day trip to Moloka‘i. But most people would agree that a few hours on Moloka‘i isn't nearly enough time. A two- or three-night stay between channel crossings makes a lot more sense.

Aside from the seagoing activities mentioned here, you'll see little else in the way of traffic on Moloka‘i's pristine and brilliant blue seas. There's no yacht harbor choked with masts, no giant glass-bottom dinner-dance cruise boats, no submarine rides, no parasails. Moloka‘i is not for everybody – and that's precisely the reason to go.