



The Adventure of Kalaupapa National Historical Park

Like a Gettysburg battlefield or an Anasazi cliff dwelling, the national park at Moloka'i's Kalaupapa Peninsula tells a rich and important story about being human. But its human drama tends to overshadow another fact – one that's equally compelling. Kalaupapa is one of the most thrilling landscapes on Earth. Taken as a one-day adventure, the trek repays your moderate exertion with maximum inspiration.

In fact, you scarcely have to exert yourself at all – just walk a short distance from your car at Pālā'au State Park, and you'll get an airplane-level view of the terrain. Suddenly, you're standing at the top of the highest sea cliffs in the world. The sheer green walls, sliced with waterfalls, go on beyond seeing. So does the ocean, blue as a dark gem. White waves crash against the rocks thousands of feet below.

That's where Kalaupapa is. Down there, all alone. It's a wedge-shaped piece of runaway land that seems to have slipped out of the base of the cliff and gotten stuck. You see a few confetti-sized rooftops and a one-lane airstrip that looks as though someone rubbed an eraser on the grassy lava.

Kalaupapa gives the word "remote" new meaning.

Scarcely more than two dozen people live there, all of them white-haired. The cargo barge arrives once a year – an annual Kalaupapa holiday, when everyone gets to look at each other's new stuff and make jokes about it.

Once a day except on Sundays, right through town comes the Damien Tours bus, yellow as a dusty banana, a vintage all-metal school bus with green plastic seats and stainless-steel hang-on poles. When the bus comes through, the residents make sure they're busy somewhere else. They prefer not to be put on display.

You'd probably hide out, too, no matter where you lived. But Kalaupapa is a special place. The residents are all survivors of a well known tragedy, now very much a thing of the past, and they've been given the privilege of living out their days in peace and privacy.

Starting in 1866, Hawai'i citizens who contracted Hansen's Disease – the dreaded "separating sickness" or "leprosy" that figures so prominently in Bible stories – were sent here, virtually cast away. This was the final mission of Father Damien, now a candidate for sainthood, and other "Martyrs of Moloka'i" whose sacrifices inspired a global effort to cure the disease.

In keeping with its hard-won spirit of privacy, Kalaupapa offers no lodging, no shopping, and no lunch counter. Visits are restricted to a single day.

Actually, there's an exception to this rule. The national park has a volunteer work program with three-day minimum stays. In fact, for people who like to be outdoors and doing something purposeful, the park's volunteer program offers a startlingly original way to visit Hawai'i—preserving rare native habitat for endangered plants and animals, and working around one of the most valuable archeological preserves in the state. To get information on the volunteer application process, contact the National Park Service's Moloka'i office.

No matter how you visit, you have to be at least 16 years old and you have to be guest of one of the residents, which means you need to have a reservation for a seat on the bus and with one of the activity providers that offers access to Kalaupapa, such as Moloka'i Mule Ride, Pacific Wings, or Moloka'i Fish and Dive.

But when you're standing at the top, at the lookout, staring down the long cliff, it's natural to ask yourself – how? How do you physically get down there?

Obviously, the airstrip offers one option. Midget planes operated by charter air services will fly in a few passengers for the school bus, then hours later whisk them back to Honolulu of Maui or even to the little Moloka'i airport “topside.”

Or you can walk.

There's one trail – three miles long and 2,000 feet down. The trailhead starts not far from the lookout. Contact an activity operator to make the arrangements. Bring lunch and lots of water. And take your time. Stop to savor the impressions – the native forest that cloaks the cliff, the birds trilling, the phenomenal sea crashing below you. The trail is wide and perfectly safe. It's built to accommodate the maneuvering of mules.

Yes, you can ride a mule down the trail to Kalaupapa. Each mule trek is timed to meet with the old bus. The mules are big and brown, sure-footed and safe, as safe as your living room sofa. It's important to keep remembering that “sofa” image on your way down the cliff – when you're mounted tall in the saddle and your steed is casually clopping its hoofs around the outside edge of the trail's 26 dizzying switchbacks.

The ascent, of course, is no piece of cake, not even on mule-back. It's not easy, nudging and kicking your mulish way all the way back up the switchbacks. By the time you get topside – elated in body and mind – you know that you've had an experience. Something completely *involving*.

And when you get topside, whether by hoof or foot or even by plane, you are surrounded by something just as rare – the remarkable island of Moloka'i. The glow of amazing remoteness that you feel on the peninsula does not fade up above. The entire island is a place snatched out of time.