



Moloka'i Through the Year

Arrive when the community is celebrating – this is an excellent strategy for travelers who truly want to dig into and discover the culture they visit. This strategy is especially valuable when that culture is strongly distinct, deeply rooted, geographically unique, and full of people who are proud to belong.

In other words, this is especially true on Moloka'i.

Moloka'i's annual festivals celebrate two main themes – the healthy physical challenge of the island landscape, and the rich spiritual importance of its ancient traditions. However, to avoid sounding too high-brow about all this, let's point out another theme – Moloka'i people do love to pā'ina – party! Community gatherings usually involve lots of good food and live music by the island's many talented musicians.

Visitors are always welcome. But don't expect to be coddled. Join in. These events are not tourist attractions but down-home expressions of, by, and for the community. Just one caution is necessary: when this island celebrates, visitors from the other islands will throng the place. (After all, Moloka'i is Hawai'i's heartland.) So you might have some trouble finding a rental car, and you might find that Moloka'i's limited accommodations are all booked. The wisest advice is to plan ahead by at least three months. A little long-range thinking can give you an authentic cultural experience that you will savor in memory for the rest of your life.

The following paragraphs describe most of the major annual events for the island. Others arise, and the details given here can change. The best way to keep track of Moloka'i through the year is to check the website and stay in touch with the folks at Molokai-hawaii.com.

Ka Moloka'i Makahiki Festival, more than 25 years running, takes place every January. From ancient times in Hawai'i, the makahiki season has always been the most festive period of the year, a post-harvest period of peace, games and sporting competitions between the different island regions. This contemporary version, a one-day festival, preserves that tradition in the style of Moloka'i. Lectures, land and ocean activities, arts and crafts workshops, sporting competitions, a song contest and traditional ceremonies take place at the Mitchell Pau'ole Community Center in Kaunakakai.

April sees the annual Ho'omau Concert, which benefits the Pūnana Leo O Moloka'i program. Pūnana Leo is a Hawai'i-wide program dedicated to keeping the native language – 'ōlelo Hawai'i – by teaching the children to be fluent speakers. Without a living language, no culture can expect to have a future. So this all-day festival with music, crafts, food and children's games helps finance a critical cultural program.

April is also the month for Earth Day around the world. What better place to recognize the preservationist spirit of Earth Day than on one of the earthiest islands on the globe? The Moloka‘i Earth Day event is sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and is held in Kaunakakai, encompassing food, entertainment and educational displays.

Near the end of the month is the 22-mile Maui Challenge race, during which hundreds of paddlers, both men and women, come from around the state and beyond to compete in a downwind surfing run into and across the Pailolo Channel.

May sees two formidable open-sea paddling races across the Kaiwi Channel, a 39-mile crossing between Moloka‘i and O‘ahu and one of the most grueling and challenging passages on earth. The Kaiwi Challenge Relay draws people from all over to make the crossing in one-person canoes, starting at west Moloka‘i’s Kaluako‘i and ending at the Outrigger Canoe Club in Waikīkī. Later in the month, the Kanaka Ikaika (strong man) Kayak Race is the world championship kayak competition for both men and women who race solo across the Kaiwi Channel from Moloka‘i to the east end of O‘ahu.

May is also the month for a uniquely Molokaian celebration of hula. According to one ancient tradition, the essential dance form of Hawai‘i first emerged on Moloka‘i. The Ka Hula Piko Festival, a “celebration of the birth of the hula,” features free outdoor entertainment by musicians and dancers from all over the state, plus food and crafts, in an event that lasts all day at Pāpōhaku Beach Park in west Moloka‘i. Hālau Hula (hula schools) come here from throughout the state; so do electrified Hawaiian bands and comedians. Food-sellers and artisans are all from Moloka‘i. This is a great party!

In July, the Moloka‘i to O‘ahu Paddleboard Race establishes the world champion of long-distance paddleboard racing. The race kicks off at Kaluako‘i, and ends at Maunaloa Bay on the island of O‘ahu.

September is the month for the annual Nā Wahine O Ke Kai outrigger canoe race, the final event of the women’s outrigger racing season. The title means “women of the sea,” and the display of power from these highly trained all-female canoe teams will astound you. Visitors can catch sunrise and the race launch at remote Hale O Lono Harbor, Moloka‘i. Competitors work their way across the Kaiwi Channel, ending at the Hilton Hawaiian Village on O‘ahu.

Late September and early October is the season for the Festivals of Aloha, a major celebration of Hawaiian culture throughout the state. This is a great time to be on Moloka‘i, to enjoy Hawai‘i’s music, dance and history through a series of festive and fun special events.

In October, the month after the women show their stamina in the outrigger team channel crossing, the men dig in with their season-ending race. The Moloka‘i Hoe Outrigger Canoe Race is the top world event in the men’s division of this grueling team sport. The

race takes off at dawn from Hale O Lono Harbor and ends at Duke Kahanamoku Beach in Waikīkī.

Moloka‘i’s annual Food & Business Expo takes place in the fall. Top chefs from Maui, Moloka‘i and Lāna‘i dish up their best original recipes using Moloka‘i products, so get ready to taste their wares and check out what other Moloka‘i merchants have to offer. The event takes place at the Lanikeha Community Center and is sponsored by the Moloka‘i Chamber of Commerce.

The much-celebrated “aloha spirit” of Hawai‘i is not an abstract concept. It permeates the lives and customs of people who grow up close to the land, the kūpuna (elders), and the old ways. Nowhere in the islands can you get closer to this spirit than by joining the independent-minded community of Moloka‘i.