



Ramble the Moloka‘i Wilderness, on Two Feet or Four

On Moloka‘i, people don’t spend a lot of time indoors. You can tell this just by looking out the window of your commuter plane, flying low over this rather tough-looking volcanic mountain ridge. Moloka‘i simply doesn’t *have* very much “indoors.”

The least developed of Hawai‘i’s major islands, this one’s still rural and wild. Moloka‘i has an excellent road system, but it basically consists of just two lanes and run east to west. Farming, fishing and hunting are pillars of the economy. Residents feel a sense of aloha ‘āina, fierce devotion to the land itself, a personal relationship.

As one locally written anthem puts it: “My mother, sweet Moloka‘i...makes you more of who you are.”

This devotion suggests that the land has a distinct personality – which it does, full of grandeur and surprise. Moloka‘i includes a national park, a Nature Conservancy forest preserve, a natural landscape, and great places to hike and ride horses. Travelers whose idea of a vacation is Zion or the Grand Canyon will be inspired by a week on Moloka‘i.

Although this is a small place – less than 40 miles long and only 10 wide – a week will not exhaust its potential for outdoor exploring. It will, however, provide a solid, thorough introduction to the whole personality of the island, which is certainly one of planet Earth’s most exuberant creations.

In terms of natural wonders, Moloka‘i’s chief attraction is its north shore. This whole side of the island is sealed off by a series of gigantic cliffs that plunge – some more than 3,000 feet – straight into the shimmering sea. At intervals this imposing wall is sliced by blade-thin canyons or draped by some of the tallest waterfalls in Hawai‘i. It looks as though half the island simply ripped off and fell into the sea.

In fact, geologists believe something of that magnitude did occur in past eons, sending out a tidal wave that literally rocked the Pacific. Afterwards, a small volcanic outburst created a flat peninsula, Kalaupapa, which seems to float forlornly at the base of the tallest sea cliffs on Earth.

These vertical slopes and the flatlands above them support native forests, including some of the most endangered plant and animal species in the world.

Obviously, it isn’t easy to explore such a tilted landscape on foot, but it’s doable by means of several distinct one-day adventures.

For example, the trail to Kalaupapa Peninsula begins at the top of the cliff, right next to where you park, and it descends nearly 2,000 feet to sea level by means of 26 switchbacks. It's a wide, safe trail often shaded by forest, the air full of bird song and roaring surf, the views wonderfully shocking.

You can make the three-mile trek by foot or by mule. Both choices are about equally strenuous, but mule-back provides greater opportunity to enjoy the shock. Moloka'i Mule Ride has been offering this four-footed service since 1973. Why mules? Says head mule skinner Buzzy Sproat: "Mules are a heck of a lot smarter than horses. In fact, they're smarter than most people." Whereas horses can be skittish and easily startled, mules take a calm, methodical approach to the cliff-side trail. According to Sproat, whose family has been training and working these beasts in Hawai'i for a hundred years, the mules know the route so well that they place their hoofs in the exact same spot every time they make the trip.

Whether you make it on two feet or four, the trip always includes an educational component – a narrated drive around the peninsula in the old yellow school bus by Damien Tours. Access to Kalaupapa National Historical Park is restricted to its 25-or-so residents and their guests, so you must first become a guest by having a reservation with Moloka'i Mule Ride or another activity provider that offers access to the park. If you come in on your own, the rangers will politely but firmly turn you back. You must also be 16 years of age or older.

The tour itself is fascinating, especially after a visit to the church hand-built by Father Damien – quite inspiring. And, there's something perfect about the timing of that school bus. By the time you reach it, you're eager to sit down. By the time you've finished driving around those rocky roads, you're more than happy to get back on a mule.

Even if you don't plan a day for the trail, you can walk to an overlook and do some easy hiking in the woods at Pālā'au State Park.

Another way to approach "backside Moloka'i" is through two protected preserves. Kamakou Preserve is a patch of rare undisturbed mountain forest containing more than 250 kinds of native plants – over 200 of them live nowhere else but in Hawai'i. The Nature Conservancy has built a boardwalk that runs through three miles of the preserve, including a bog inhabited by closely crowded, dwarf versions of endemic plants. The boardwalk keeps hiking shoes from sinking into the bog or treading on the plants. This and other trails run between two overlooks – topside views of two valleys that slice steeply down to the sea. These viewpoints are exhilarating. Cool, sweet-scented wind rushes up from below, and rainbows hang on long waterfalls.

The Nature Conservancy offers guided hikes once a month. Each hike event can accommodate up to eight hikers, and usually, they're booked months in advance. Sometimes the Conservancy's work parties will give hikers a lift.

The Conservancy also leads monthly hikes to Mo‘omomi Preserve, a remote beach and dune area. This is a vigorous trek, a full day of silence and solitude. You start at sea level on the south shore and cross the width of the island, rising the whole way until you stand at the top of the north shore. Hikers travel at their own risk in the spirit of wild independence.

The trails at the preserves are free and open to the public year-round; no hiking permit is required. Hikers can stop by The Nature Conservancy’s Moloka‘i office Monday through Friday to obtain a map and information. It’s recommended that all hiking gear and footwear be thoroughly cleaned before you arrive on island, to avoid bringing in unwanted weeds and pests alien to Moloka‘i.

On Moloka‘i’s east end, the road stops at beautiful Hālawā Valley, the first of the north shore’s small, steep-walled canyons. The hike up the valley is a Hawaiian classic – through lush forest and past ancient settlement sites to 250-foot Mo‘oula Falls, where you can swim in the pools. Valley residents don’t want people just traipsing through for the sake of numerous historic sites that are unmarked, and therefore, at risk of damage from unknowing hikers. But, they don’t mind if you’re led by a guide. To book the hike, call one of the island’s activity providers, such as Moloka‘i Fish and Dive.

On this end of the island, you can breathe in such panoramic natural vistas as secluded waterfalls, rainbows and the endless Pacific by riding on the wonderful horses of Pu‘u O Hōkū Ranch. This 14,000-acre ranch and organic farm acts as a benevolent steward of the rugged east end. The ranch offers guided horseback adventures ranging from a one-hour ride through lush pasturelands to a half-day ride to a secluded beach, where you might splash through gently lapping waves or stop to swim, snorkel or simply lay about.

Campers with more modest ambitions and tighter budgets can pitch tents at a couple of county-run campgrounds. The choicest of these is west-end Pāpōhaku Beach Park, a grassy campsite with showers, restrooms, drinking water, picnic tables, barbecue areas and – best of all – the near presence of the one of the largest beaches in Hawai‘i. One Ali‘i Park near Kaunakakai offers similar facilities along the quiet, reef-protected south shore. Also, the State of Hawai‘i permits free camping at Pālā‘au State Park near the Kalaupapa trailhead.

You can also explore the island on two wheels, whether for street cycling along oft-empty roads or on a mountain bike over wilder terrain beyond the pavement.

Moloka‘i Bicycle in Kaunakakai provides road and mountain bikes, car racks, jogging strollers, trailers and child carriers. For a small fee, they’ll drop off or pick up the bikes at the airport, hotel, harbor or condo, and they’re happy to provide information on camping, hiking, ocean and other outdoor activities. All bike rentals include helmet, lock, map and water bottle.

Cycling author John Alford called his experience on Moloka‘i’s east end: “Epic – a must for every adventure traveler.”

It's simply true. The island of Moloka'i is one of the finest cycling destinations in the world. And here's what makes it better – not many people have discovered yet just how good it is. No matter where you are on the island, you have all the elbow room and freedom of choice that you want.

As the Hawaiian islands go, Moloka'i has definitely followed its own drummer. It has resisted the lure of commerce, happy to miss out on what Mark Twain called “all the modern inconveniences.” As a result, it's a treasure for those independent travelers who prefer the solace of outdoor beauty over the clamor of indoor attractions. For people who love the Earth, unadorned, Moloka'i's distinct personality stamps itself indelibly in the heart.