



HAWAII'S FRESHWATER WONDERS

A PRECIOUS RESOURCE PROVIDES OUTDOOR
ADVENTURES IN THE ALOHA STATE BY ERIC LUCAS

THE MORNING AIR IS SOFT AND STILL, and only the tweets and rustles of tropical birds crease the quiet. The river's malachite-colored water glimmers like glass as shafts of sun thread through the forest canopy. When I stop and rest my paddle on my kayak's prow, there's not a hint of civilization, and I might be hundreds of miles into a South American jungle.

In fact, I'm a half-mile inland from the north shore of Kaua'i, Hawai'i's Garden Isle, enjoying the natural element that makes the island so verdant. Oldest and westernmost of Hawai'i's main islands, Kaua'i receives glorious sun but also prodigious precipitation, especially in its highlands. This rainfall flows down from the heights to create

the island's enchanting waterways—including the Kalihiwai, the river I'm paddling on this morning. This trip is as mellow and refreshing an experience as I've had in Hawai'i. Nothing dramatic takes place; instead, these few hours exemplify what Thoreau called "moments when all anxiety and stated toil are becalmed in the infinite leisure and repose of nature."

So, becalmed, I study a thousand shades of green in the fronds above me that reach out over the river.

Despite the tremendous 450 inches of annual rainfall on Mount Wai'ale'ale, whose peak is more than 5,000 feet above and 10 miles inland from the river's mouth, the current becomes





FROM LEFT: ZEV FISHER; HEATHER GOODMAN / HAWAII TOURISM AUTHORITY (2)

mild by the time the water reaches the lowlands, so my paddle upriver (to a point beyond which is private land) is easygoing, as is the float back down.

After I return to the little park that fronts the river's namesake beach, I pull the kayak ashore and indulge in another form of refreshment, taking advantage of a rope swing beside the freshwater lagoon near the coast. I'm living in this moment, not presuming the swing will even be here the next time I visit. My plunge into the river is instantly cooling.

Hawai'i is one of those places where water matters most. One interpretation of the state's name is that its middle part, *wai* (a Hawaiian word with multiple meanings, including "water") suggests the centrality of freshwater resources to life in the Islands.

Kayaking on a river is just one of the many ways to enjoy—and savor—this natural marvel in the Aloha State. Among the many freshwater activities to enjoy in Hawai'i, you can ...

- Relax on a boat tour up Kaua'i's broadest river, the Wailua, or head up this river on a paddleboard or kayak. Add in a side-trip hiking journey (about 2 miles roundtrip) to Secret Falls and plunge in the waterfall pool there.
- Rappel beside or within a waterfall, on guided trips on Hawai'i Island or Maui.
- Tube or kayak down an irrigation flume on Kaua'i or Hawai'i Island.
- Sink your toes into the muddy bottom of a taro patch that relies on ample freshwater—or just savor *poi*, the staple of the Islands made from taro.
- Peel and enjoy coconut shrimp cooked by one of the vendors on O'ahu's East Shore—the shrimp are grown in spring-

Hawai'i freshwater activities include (from far left) exploring an old irrigation flume on Hawai'i Island; rappelling on a guided tour at Kulaniapia Falls on Hawai'i Island; and harvesting taro on Kaua'i.



fed ponds nearby. So are the tilapia found on menus around the Islands.

- Venture upland—if you are an intrepid explorer with a valid fishing license—to catch rainbow trout in a public fishing area in Kōkeʻe State Park on Kauaʻi. These fish are not native, but the state stocks an upcountry reservoir for seasonal fishing (mid-June through September this year). Angler success is pretty good—last year more than 20,000 trout were caught, with the largest fish surpassing 3 pounds.

- Marvel at the dozens of waterfalls that you can view and—in some places—hike to for a memorable swim. One such opportunity occurs upriver from where I went kayaking, accessed via Princeville Ranch's property along the Kalihiwai River. The ranch offers guided day tours to visitors, with the chance to hike or ride horseback to Kalihiwai Falls, where guests plunge in



Kalihiwai Falls, on Kauaʻi, is accessed via Princeville Ranch's guided tours.

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the brisk waters that cascade from the cloud-wreathed slopes above. Similar waterfall experiences are available on O'ahu, Maui, Moloka'i and Hawai'i Island.

For all the understandable focus on beaches and the Pacific Ocean that bounds the land on all sides, Hawai'i's freshwater resources have been and remain just as crucial to life in the Islands. More than 2,000 miles lie between this archipelago and the U.S. mainland. By the time easterly trade winds embrace Hawai'i's mountains, these winds have come a long way over ocean, picking up moisture en route.

There are clear geographical distinctions in Hawai'i between inland environments that are dominated by freshwater and coastal environments defined by proximity to saltwater, but the two are connected. Raindrops that fall on Mount

Wai'ale'ale, as well as raindrops and occasional snowflakes on Haleakalā and Mauna Kea, are born from Earth's biggest ocean. Prevailing trade winds blow from the east-northeast into the Islands, and, as the air climbs volcanic heights, water is wrung out in colossal cloudbursts via a phenomenon called orographic lift.

Mount Wai'ale'ale is among the wettest places in the world; so are the West Maui Mountains and the windward slopes of Hawai'i Island. Each gets, on average, up to 400 inches of rain a year, and more than 600 inches in some years. In fact, one amazing year, 1982, brought 705 inches of precipitation to the highest ridge in the West Maui Mountains, Pu'u Kukui. That is almost 59 feet of water—more rain than a five-story building is tall.

As it happens, West Maui ridgetops are at about the elevation where warm, moist

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'Akaka Falls State Park offers hiking with views of picturesque waterfalls.

FALLING WATERS

Towering mountains, abundant rain, numerous watersheds—Hawai'i has all the ingredients for waterfalls. Here are some popular waterfall experiences.

Hawai'i Island: Waiānuenue Falls, at the edge of the city of Hilo, is aptly nicknamed Rainbow Falls; a viewpoint nearby offers nearly constant photo-ready vistas. Near Hilo, adventurers

can rappel down the privately accessed Kulaniapia Falls, led by experienced guides. Farther north along the Hāmākua Coast, a short trail in 'Akaka Falls State Park offers views of two waterfalls, including the namesake 442-foot 'Akaka Falls.

Kaua'i: Princeville Ranch offers guided excursions to Kalihiwai Falls, either on foot or on horseback. These trips (about 4 miles, over varied terrain) include a

lunch and the chance to swim beneath the waterfalls. To reach 300-foot Hanakāpī'ai Falls, near the Nāpali Coast, visitors must now take a shuttle from Hanalei to the trailhead at Kē'ē Beach and then day-hike along and up to the falls (8 miles roundtrip). Hikers need permits and reservations in advance, and should heed all cautions about hazards on this popular route.

Maui: Twin Falls is one of the dozen or so cascades along the Hāna Highway; the property owners also run a farmstand. Past Hāna, the Pīpiwai Trail leads to two falls, Waimoku and Makahiki. Check ahead for rental-car rules and road conditions; tours are also available. Rappel Maui

has excursions to a private waterfall where guests rappel down cliffs and through waterfalls. No Ka Oi Adventures has a Hidden Waterfalls Adventure that explores secluded falls, with opportunities to swim.

Moloka'i: Hālawā Valley is a cultural preserve at the island's east end where guests learn about taro and take a guided hike to Mo'oula Falls in the upper valley.

O'ahu: Waimea Valley is a preserve on the North Shore; the valley's namesake 45-foot falls are accessed via an easy ¾-mile stroll through botanical gardens, and swimming is allowed, depending on the weather. —E.L.

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incoming trade winds meet colder, drier air, condensing into the familiar cloud “halo” at 5,000 feet or so that is present on virtually every mountain in the Islands, almost every afternoon. For the most part, if you want to see Hawai‘i’s big mountains, your best chance is in the early morning when trade winds are light and clouds have yet to form.

Along with shaping the land, abundant rainfall has influenced the course of human history in the Islands—making life not only possible but also reasonably prosperous for Hawai‘i’s first inhabitants. Centuries ago, when Polynesians arrived in Hawai‘i from distant South Pacific isles, they brought with them agricultural staples they would need for their new homeland. Among them was taro—*kalo* in Hawaiian—most forms of which are grown in water-holding paddies. The islands were divided into triangle-shaped districts peaking at a mountaintop and widening toward shore. These sections, called *ahupua‘a*, usually aligned with the watershed of a stream that supplied drinking water and irrigation for the area’s taro patches. In drier locales, Hawaiians dug ditches to bring water across the slopes to their fields. And in flatland locations near shore, they built freshwater fishponds in which they practiced aquaculture.

“Our cultural heritage is inextricably tied to our natural resources,” a Hawaiian elder once told me, explaining the continuing reverence for old *ahupua‘a* land divisions, whose triangles still align with slopes on every island. Their historical names persist in place names, such as Kapa-lua and Lahaina on Maui; some subdivision and lot lines on Hawai‘i Island follow *ahupua‘a* boundaries.

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HAWAII TOURISM AUTHORITY

Centuries after Polynesian settlement, when American colonists set out to establish industrial agriculture in the Islands, sugar cane became the most prominent crop; like taro, sugar cane needs water, so in the late 19th century, plantations expanded traditional Hawaiian irrigation systems and built long canals on the middle mountainsides of the four main islands. These channels were larger, longer and more heavily engineered than the older ditches, with embellishments such as trestles to carry irrigation flumes over gullies, and tunnels to allow passage through tall bluffs. The ditches provided the means to turn Hawai'i into an agricultural powerhouse.

Twin Falls, on Maui, is one in a series of cascades found along the famed Hāna Highway.

Sugar production eventually moved on to other parts of the world. But ditches remain, and on Kaua'i and Hawai'i Island they have become venues for a unique freshwater attraction—flumin', as it's called. In Hawai'i Island's Kohala District, for example, visitors board sit-on kayaks for a float down the Kohala Ditch, re-inventing an old local children's pastime.

"Back in the plantation days, the kids were the masterminds of this recreation," says Bernelle Camara, general manager of Flumin' Kohala in Hawi, on Hawai'i Island's far northern shore. "They'd grab anything that floated, hop in the ditch, cool off on hot summer days."

Today, Flumin' Kohala operates with a lease from the Kohala Ditch Company, which still provides water to local agricultural operations, such as Kuleana Rum Works, a company that has revived sugar



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cane agriculture to make its spirits. The ride covers 2.5 miles, and the Flumin' Kohala guides provide their guests with a grounding in the history of agricultural irrigation, as well as the broader history of Kohala, the homeland from which Kamehameha I conquered the Islands to create the Hawaiian kingdom.

Like many other Kohala residents, Camara is proud of the area's royal heritage. She points out that Kamehameha I was a ditch builder, too, creating canals that supplied water to his favorite taro patches.

Another iconic figure, adventure writer Jack London, marveled at the Kohala Ditch when he toured its headwaters with his wife, Charmian, in 1916. As Charmian wrote in her book *Jack London and Hawaii*, Jack was taken with how engineers had diverted runoff from high up "in the clouds" and put to use this incredible liquid resource: "Do you get the splendid romance of it?" he reportedly said at the time.

Once, long ago, I made my way to the foot of a Hawaiian waterfall. Walking through quiet bamboo forests, watching for songbirds, listening to the babble of the stream, I was primed for magic in advance. Swimming to the spot where the waterfall entered the pool remains one of my most memorable experiences in more than 30 years of visiting Hawai'i.

Do I get the romance of it? Anybody can, in these rain-blessed Pacific islands where water is life. ✘

Eric Lucas lives on Washington state's San Juan Island, which has no significant waterways.

Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com) offers daily service to Hawai'i Island (Kona), Kaua'i, Maui and O'ahu.