

TICKET FOR ONE TO THE ISLAND OF KAUAI

Article by Susan Fornoff

Photography (unless otherwise noted) courtesy of Kauai Visitors Bureau



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The last time I visited Kauai, I swore I would return with a sweetie who would sit enthralled beside me during the Poipu sunsets, keep me warm at the scenic lookout atop the lush Waimea Canyon, and frolic with me among the warm waves off Hanalei Bay.

Then a hurricane ripped into my beloved Hawaiian island. And then I married a nontraveler. So it took eighteen years after I made that promise before I found myself with a ticket to Lihue—a ticket for one, to join seven men for a resort-and-golf tour of my romantic destination.

I packed books.

But, here’s the funny thing about Kauai. With only four percent of the island developed, and with

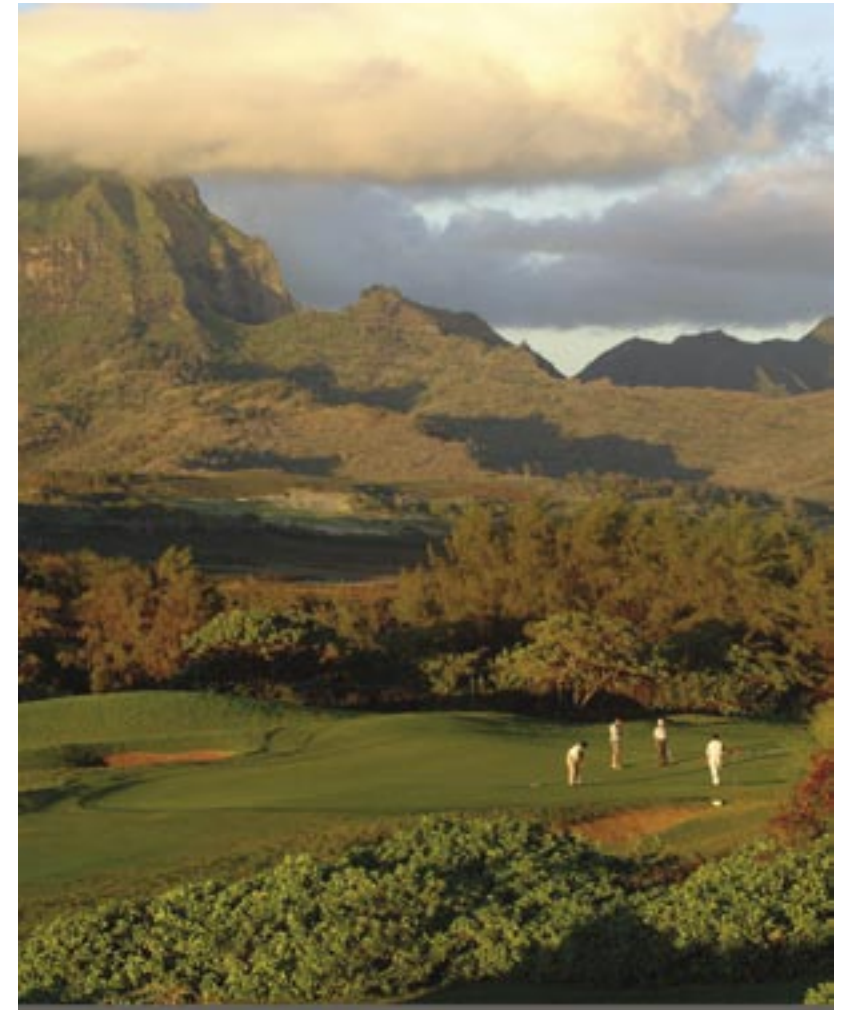
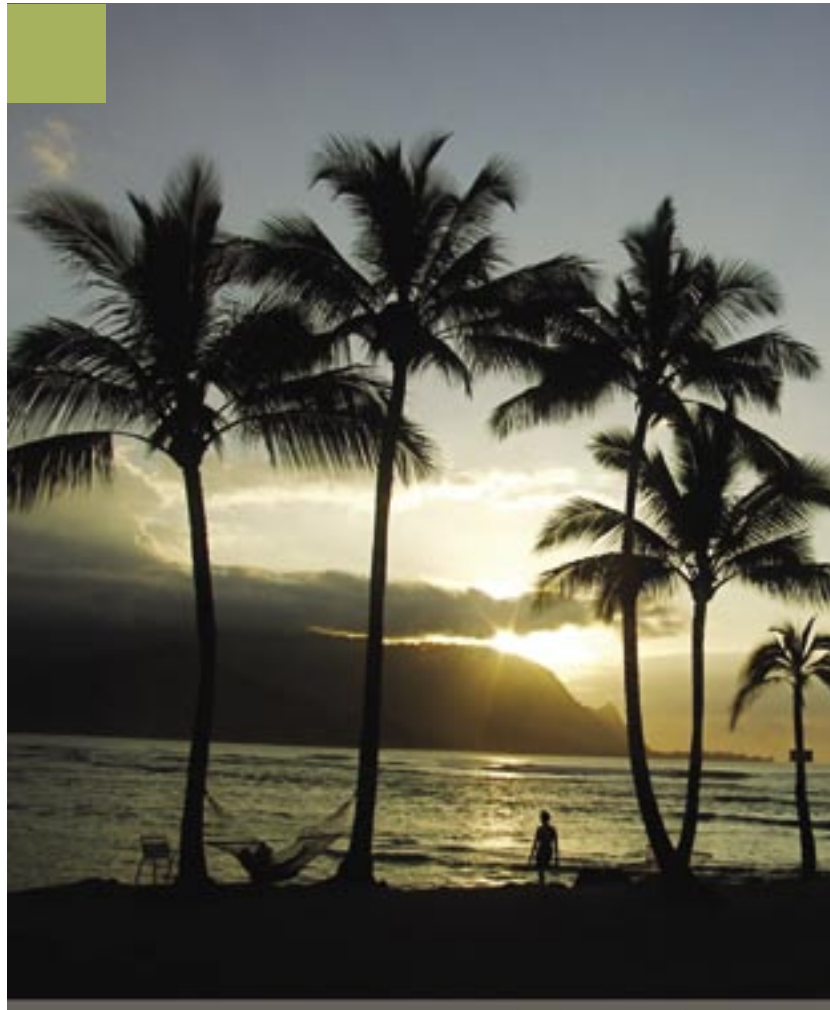
more miles of beach (fifty) than any of the state’s other islands, beauty reigns abundantly. From actress Julia Roberts’ compound up north to tourist-filled beaches south and from sunrise east to sunset west, the island casts such a wondrous spell of romance and tranquility, I didn’t need a sweetie to enjoy it.

And I certainly didn’t need a book. One sat unopened on the window seat in the glorious guestroom at the new St. Regis Princeville Resort, where guests are wrapped in a luxurious, pampering cocoon as soon as they bend to receive their leis at check-in beneath a painting of Lohi’au, the island’s mythical king. A great chandelier of 4,225 cascading Murano crystals greets them in a dramatic lobby trimmed in indigenous

Koa wood and walled in glass for unabashed views of “South Pacific” star Bali Hai, officially Mt. Makana. The connection to the lush surroundings feels most intimate on the deck here, or from the Makana Terrace below; the beautiful new pool-and-dining complex at the bottom of the elevator abuts Pu’upoa Beach.

Then there are the serenely camel-colored rooms with blue ceilings, accompanied by the famed St. Regis butler service rendering ice makers and vending machines superfluous. I meant to open the book. But that first night, I opened the sliding windows, and the waves lulled me into an early sleep. And at first light, the view from that cushy window seat commanded my full attention. Over two days, I watched surfers,





followed rainbows, gauged rain showers, and read no books. I tore myself away long enough to endure a nourishing facial at the opulent Halele'a spa, which had its own memorable view—of golden waterfall walls enclosing a plush lounge that otherwise might have been perfect for reading except that it was so ideal for, well, lounging.

Naturally, the Robert Trent Jones, Jr. golf courses at Princeville feature panoramic views of Hanalei Bay, of the Queen's

Bath swimming hole, of whales in season. We could even spot the supposed wettest place on earth, Mt. Waialeale, averaging more than 450 inches of rain every year. Not so expected was the contrast between the Prince Golf Course and the renovated Makai Golf Club. The beastly Prince is a rare jungle track that provides a fearsome test to the most accomplished player and an exhausting, ball-depleting chore for the unaccomplished; the Makai represents resort golf, with the challenge laid out plainly before

the visitor and with two unforgettable par-threes, one of them about a three-story shot down to a green neighboring the St. Regis, and the other a wicked, wind-influenced carry of 150 yards or so over the cliffs on the most scenic point of the course, referred to by the architect as “the end of the earth.”

Also unexpected was learning that my seven companions also had fallen under the spell of Kauai. One happily had brought his wife; others vowed to bring

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one (or someone near and dear) someday soon. Hmm, I thought, where have I heard that before, and then vowed myself to return again soon with a sweetie worthy of the St. Regis Princeville Resort.

In the meantime, it had become clear from listening to my new friends that we would all be carrying unread books on to our next stop, the Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa. Here, we would enjoy the scenic and gracious challenge of golfing at Poipu

Bay Golf Course—where Phil Mickelson shot fifty-nine on a day more windless even than the gentle one that graced our round—and at Puakea Golf Course, the Cinderella story of our golf course tour for the way its memorable back nine wanders in and out of ravines and presents views of Mt. Ha'ipu, part of the scenery in the film *Jurassic Park*.

The scenery at the Hyatt included some nicely padded lounge

chairs around the winding array of pools and lagoons—a unique option here is the kid-free pool up on the crown, quiet enough for reading except that there's the tiki bar conveniently nearby just begging for some “Cheers” style camaraderie. I confess that I and some of our group did open some of the books at Stevenson's Library, one of the most delightful bars on or off the islands. But none of their writers could entice us from Stevenson's live music, the pool table, comfortable

The sprawling, low-rise Hyatt keeps its guests busy—experts staff concierge desks in the lobby and arrange snorkeling, Ziplining, kayaking, and other adventures, and there's a daily resort schedule that generally includes a show of Hawaiiiana at sunset on the Seaview Terrace just off the grand atrium.

conversation areas, and the terrace views. (Others might be more entranced by the bar's selection of single-malt Scotch and vintage Port.)

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Even the wonderful beds in the guest rooms aren't likely to keep visitors indoors here. The Anara Spa keeps an open-air feel throughout, and has treatment rooms opening onto artfully planted lanais. I opened a book at the co-ed pool but didn't finish a page before it was time for a most transporting Lomi Lomi massage from a longtime practitioner. I could have gone back to it, but, well, there was the steam room.

Surely there would be time at the last stop on our tour, the Kauai Marriott Resort & Beach Club, to catch up on reading. It was an airport hotel, after all, right? Oh, not so—this particular Marriott is a full-blown resort with ten-story towers arranged around a grand swimming pool complete with arches and columns inspired by the one at the Hearst Castle. It's situated on lovely and lively Kalapaki Beach, in full view of whatever cruise ship might be docking at Lihue for a few days—in our case, the



NCL Pride of America, which looked bigger even than the 345-room Marriott.

A \$50 million renovation in progress in 2009 produced hip new guest rooms (furnished with robes and slippers), suites, and restaurants; a unique “restaurant row” on the bay offers guests choices that include lively Duke's, the romantic Portofino, and an upscaled Kukui's for island cuisine and pupus. Wish we could have stayed for the

reopening of Toro-Tei Sushi Bar in its new waterside digs. As it was, our books stayed in our suitcases as we explored the food and beverage scene at this happening vacation destination, so surprising for those of us used to those other kinds of airport hotels evaluated on the basis of, the more window panes and the darker the curtains, the better.

The Marriott's Kauai Lagoons Golf Course, undergoing renovations, had just eighteen of its

original thirty-six Jack Nicklaus-designed holes in play. One reason for the changes in Kauai Lagoons' routing is a new real estate venture on the property, the Ritz Carlton Residences. Ground was broken and construction started in 2008, but the machinery halted when the economy stumbled and conditions became unfavorable for marketing the fourteen private residences.

Sue Kanoho, executive director of the Kauai Visitors Bureau,

noted the challenge of balancing the needs of tourists (resorts, golf courses, restaurants) with the natural beauty and cultural traditions of Kauai—which of course are so much a part of its appeal to those tourists. As she spoke, she sampled the roasted beet salad at Merriman's, where the cuisine is heavily island-centric, an homage to the region's farms and fisheries; a chain restaurant might find the reception chilly, although CostCo and Wal-Mart have come to Kauai.

Is much more development on the way? Not likely on an island so carefully adhering to Ahupua'a, the philosophy of living in balance with nature, one that the St. Regis employed in its design principles and one that implores the visitor to put down the book.

There is, by the way, a Borders Books on Kauai. So you can leave your own at home and take your chances. I finally finished the one I had started before my

trip. I finished it on the plane home. [AL]

Susan Fornoff has written for magazines and newspapers. Most recently, she was Travel Editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

www.kauaidiscovery.com

St. Regis Princeville Resort, Princeville:

A must-go destination for honeymoons or anything like them, and for anyone wanting to infuse gorgeous natural surroundings with luxury. It's on the wetter, and thus, more lush, part of the island. (800) 826-4400 www.princevillehotelhawaii.com

Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa, Poipu Beach:

A fun destination for active honeymoons or anything like them, for families, and for aficionados of single-malt Scotch. It's on the sunny side of the island. (808) 742-1234 www.kauai.hyatt.com

Kauai Marriott Resort & Beach Club, Lihue:

A lively destination for those seeking a literal taste of Kauai along with the figurative Hawaiian flavor, and a great spot for those who like to vacation without driving. Weather wise, it's on the border of the showers that keep Princeville fresher and the sunshine that keeps Poipu warmer. (800) 220-2925 www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/lihi-kauai-marriott-resort-and-beach-club