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Quiet Kauai's wild west

By Jeanne Cooper | February 11, 2016 | Updated: February 11, 2016 2:03pm



Photo: Waimea Plantation Cottages



IMAGE 3 OF 10

One of the dwellings at Waimea Plantation Cottages in Kauai.

Despite its name, Wrangler's Steakhouse in Waimea also offers local fish, lamb from Niihau and the plantation-era lunch box known as a kau kau tin.

Chatting with the server in Hawaiian, our guide from a morning trip to Kauai's remote Polihale Beach separated his kau kau tin's small, stacked cans of beef teriyaki, shrimp tempura and rice — a legacy of Japanese sugar cane workers who arrived in the late 1800s. My friend happily tucked into the lamb burger, produced on the nearby island of Niihau, where isolation imposed by generations of a family originally from Scotland has helped preserve the language we were overhearing.

Meanwhile, I tucked into grilled butterfish, a local favorite, while gazing across Wrangler's cowhide-draped porch at a statue of British explorer Capt. James Cook, who introduced the West to Hawaii here in 1778.

We had unwittingly ordered a Garden Island cultural sampler. With a side of history.

Along with the rather grand canyon that shares Waimea's name, those same cultures have also contributed to the flavor of Old West on Kauai's west side: real-life wranglers, towns that time has passed by and the enduring presence of indigenous people here long before white pioneers.

The region renowned for its red dirt may not boast any luxury resorts to track it into, but it has a small-town, big-outdoors appeal that's refreshingly familiar and foreign all at once.

Cook's landing

We gained a literal perspective on Waimea and its surroundings by pulling off Kaumualii Highway — the main road, named for Kauai's last independent king — just before crossing the Waimea River into town.

We turned into Russian Fort Elizabeth State Historical Park, a long (and variously spelled) name for a site with not much to explore, beyond the grass-tufted rock walls of the star-shaped fortification. Built in 1817 by an enterprising German doctor on behalf of an Alaska-based Russian trading company, the fort was quickly abandoned on Russia's orders and dismantled by 1864.

Still, from its riverside heights, you can view a panorama similar to what greeted Cook's sailors aboard the HMS Resolution and Discovery. The island of Niihau lies 18 miles to the west, a shadowy low wall on the horizon, while scrubby green *pali* (cliffs) rise to the east and north, pointing the way to Waimea Canyon and Polihale.

The flatlands below would have held as many or more thatched-roof huts of Hawaiians than the modest homes and buildings we see today. The murky river, whose name means "reddish-brown water," keeps adding more sediment to the gentle shoreline where Cook sent a lieutenant in search of an anchorage and fresh water.



Photo: Robert Coello, Hawaii Tourism Authority



An aerial view of Polihale Beach in Kauai.

Fifteen years after that fateful landing (and 14 after Cook's slaying in a skirmish at Kealahou Bay on the Big Island), Cook's former midshipman, Capt. George Vancouver, introduced cattle to Hawaii as a gift to King Kamehameha I.

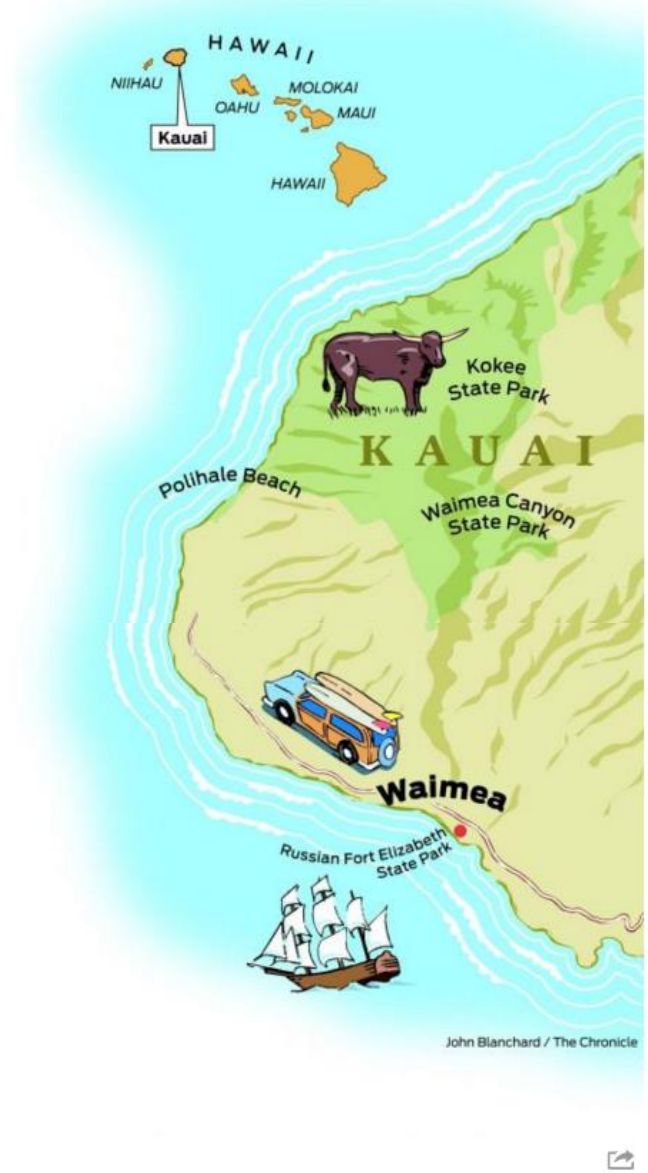
The royal chief put the long-horned beasts under a protective ban (*kapu*) but by 1830, their destructive proliferation on the Big Island prompted Kamehameha III to invite *vaqueros* from Spanish California to rein them in. Dubbing these cowboys *paniolo* for the language they spoke, *español*, Hawaiians quickly adopted their practices, and adapted some to local ways.

This week's Waimea Town Celebration, for example, includes classic rodeo events and inductions into the Kauai and Niihau Cowboy Hall of Fame, and the West Kauai Visitor Center in Waimea hosts an exhibit on Kauai and Niihau *paniolo* every February through June.

It's a point of pride here that Hawaiian cowboys first rode the range while the Old West was a youngster.

Looking southeast from Russian Fort Elizabeth, you can see the grasslands of Makaweli Ranch, where cattle graze on more than 25,000 acres. Scottish widow and sheep rancher Eliza Sinclair bought the land in 1865, a year after purchasing virtually all of the 72-square-mile island of Niihau from King Kamehameha IV.

The Robinsons, her fifth-generation descendants, now produce grass-fed beef from short-horn Red Angus cattle on their Kauai pastures, and free-range lamb and eland (a type of antelope) from livestock on the "Forbidden Island," nicknamed for its decades of little or no access to visitors.



Talking the talk

While visitors can see some of Niihau on a pricey helicopter tour that lands on a remote beach, you'll meet Niihauans, and see more of their culture, everywhere on Kauai's west side, where many families moved to work for the now-defunct Gay & Robinson Sugar Plantation in Makaweli.



Photo: Waimea Plantation Cottages



A rainbow arcs over Waimea Plantation Cottages in Kauai.

Just north of Wrangler's is the Waimea Hawaiian Church, where Niihauans gather at 9 a.m. Sundays to worship and sing in their native language (everyone is welcome). Eavesdropping on our server's conversation with our guide at Wrangler's, Hawaiian cultural scholar Lopaka Bukoski, I hear the distinctive "t" sound that often replaces "k" in the Niihau dialect: They both have roots on the island.

Bukoski, who like many Hawaiians has a profound awareness of his genealogy, turns out to be related to Ilei Beniamina, a Niihau native who advocated for Hawaiian-language education that now flourishes on the west side. Before her death in 2010, Beniamina also perpetuated the island's tradition of making jewelry from delicate shells (*pupu*) that can take months to collect, and just as many to craft into lei and necklaces that can sell for thousands of dollars. A few less pricey but still exquisite examples of *pupu o Niihau* are for sale at Wrangler's, which has a small gift shop as well as Waimea's only full-service restaurant.

Niihauans have a reputation for strict church attendance and refraining from alcohol, so plan ahead if you're going out for dinner on Sundays, when most restaurants are closed, or if you're looking to down a beer with a meal.

Even the diner called Da Booze Shack has a sign saying it serves "God, not alcohol."

A helping of history

Wrangler's is owned by Colleen and Mike Faye, whose Norwegian ancestor helped create another large west side West Side sugar plantation, eventually called Kekaha Sugar Co.

H.P. Faye had come to Kauai at the behest of his uncle, Valdemar Knudsen, who had married into the Sinclair-Robinson family and began planting cane in 1878. With the success of efforts to drain swamp lands and bringing more water down from the mountains, the plantation, like others across the islands, desperately needed more laborers.

That demand brought a supply of workers from Japan, who for decades lived in modest cottages in plantation-owned camps, sharing lunch in kau kau tins along with Filipinos and other ethnic groups.

Kekaha Sugar closed in 2000, and today some of its employees' former homes are among the 60 cottages and houses of Waimea Plantation Cottages, a sprawling, quiet sanctuary along the dark-sand, driftwood-strewn Waimea Beach. My friend and I enjoyed the view from the large lanai of No. 51, named for Charlie Kaneyama, a photographer for the Kekaha Sugar plantation newspaper who was a big band leader into his 80s.



Photo: Waimea Plantation Cottages



One of the dwellings at Waimea Plantation Cottages in Kauai.

Also owned by the Fayers, Waimea Plantation Cottages is now managed by a Canadian company, Coast Hotels, which is pouring money into upgraded furnishings, including flat-screen TVs and high-speed Internet, but with no plans to change the low-key ambience.

“You can feel your blood pressure drop as soon as you drive into town,” says Gregg Enright, the hotel’s general manager since January 2015, “and then you arrive here, and it drops again.”

Bukoski, who grew up with “Uncle Mike and Auntie Colleen,” as he calls the Fayers, now works for Enright as the front desk manager at Waimea Plantation Cottages. He remembers when Kekaha was a bustling town with shops and restaurants.

“It can be sad for me to come back home and see it like this,” he says as we drive through what has become a bedroom community for the controversial seed companies tilling fields en route to Polihale. Surfers also rent homes here, as do workers at the Pacific Missile Range Facility at Barking Sands, 5 miles northwest.

Called Nohili in Hawaiian, the dunes at Barking Sands have restricted access now, but combined with those of Polihale State Park, they form a broad, 17-mile-long stretch of light golden sand. Bukoski's energy picks up as we approach the entrance to Polihale, known to Hawaiians as a jumping-off point for spirits headed to the afterworld.

"This is my *piko* (navel), my source, where my family would put up a tent and live all summer. We'd play in the sun while my parents would drive into work," he explained.

Community volunteers rebuilt the notoriously bumpy access road here in 2009, so our 20-minute drive is only mildly rattling, with a brief pause to admire a deer darting into the brush. At the end of the unpaved road, dark pockmarked cliffs rise steeply from the warm sand and rocks being pummeled by winter waves.

We won't go in the water today, but we've had a dip into the Old, Old West all the same.

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If you go

Getting there

United Airlines flies nonstop daily to Kauai's Lihue airport from San Francisco, while Alaska Airlines flies nonstop several times a week from Oakland and San Jose. Hawaiian Airlines will offer seasonal nonstop flights to Kauai from Oakland from May 27 through Sept. 5. From Lihue, it's 25 miles, or about a 40-minute drive, to Waimea.

All addresses below are in Waimea.

Where to stay

Waimea Plantation Cottages: 9400 Kaumualii Hwy., (800) 992-4632, www.facebook.com/waimeaplantationcottages. The sprawling, low-key beachfront resort has one-, two- and three-bedroom cottages (plus a few larger homes) in garden-view, ocean-view and oceanfront categories, so rates range widely as well as seasonally; in March, they're \$169 to \$749. All units include full kitchens.

Inn Waimea: 4469 Halepule Road, (808) 652-6852, www.westkauailodging.com. The former parsonage has one room and one suite downstairs with king bed and two suites upstairs with queen bed and sofa sleeper; \$135-\$150. The inn also manages rentals of newly renovated cabins at Kokee State Park (\$59-\$119), and four beach and mountain vacation rentals in Waimea and Kekaha (\$179-\$395).

Where to eat

Wrangler's Steakhouse: 9852 Kaumualii Hwy., (808) 338-1218. Western-themed full-service restaurant with island beef, lamb and seafood, plus a porch for people-watching.

Gina's: 9691 Kaumualii Hwy., (808) 338-1731. Hole in the wall with hearty pastries and local-style breakfast and lunch plates.

Ishihara Market: 9894 Kaumualii Hwy., (808) 338-1751. Grocery store and deli with array of poke and plate lunch specialties. It's open daily, and till 7 p.m. Sunday (when nearly all else is closed).

What to do

West Kauai Visitor Center, 9565 Kaumualii Hwy. (808) 338-1332, www.westkauaivisitorcenter.org. Compact cultural history museum with free 3-hour walking tours on Mondays (reserve by Friday afternoon). March-October, lei-making at 10 a.m. Fridays (reserve a day ahead) by donation.

Polihale, Kokee and Waimea Canyon state parks are within a 30-minute drive of Waimea; Russian Fort Elizabeth State Historical Park is just across the river from town. See <http://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/kauai> for more information.



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