



Kauai

The forbidden dance

Once forced underground, Hawaiian culture is now celebrated on every corner of Kauai, writes Lynn Gail

It takes just two traditional hula dancers to captivate the crowd. Barefoot, the performers connect to their ancestors – pillars of strength lighting up the National Tropical Botanical Garden on Kauai, Hawaii’s fourth-largest island. A soulful rhythmic chant merges with the hollow beat tapped on a gourd as they present a traditional kahiko, an ancient hula. It’s a language I can’t understand, coming from deep within, honouring those who paved the way, who danced long ago.

“For a long time here in Hawaii, hula was forbidden, our language was forbidden. But hula is back, our language is back, strong now and here to stay,” kumu hula (master hula teacher) Leina’ala Pavao Jardin tells an attentive audience.

Thought to be a pagan ritual, hula was banned by missionaries in 1830, but regulations didn’t stop the Hawaiian people. They went underground, performing the hula in hiding for some 40 years until restrictions were eased, and fines were reduced. The chant we heard was in honour of Hawaii’s last king, King David Kalākaua. Famous for the quote “Hula is the language of the heart, therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people”, he was admired for his tireless work in preserving Hawaiian arts. It’s a humbling window into a culture I knew little about.

Hula is now so revered, the 60th Merrie Monarch – the week-long “Olympics” of the art – attracted more than 4000 people when it took place in Hilo in April.





Photography: Lynn Gall (dancers, fire dancer, shrine) & Ben Ono (Na Pali Coast)



Clockwise from left: Kauai from above; Jayna Parongao and Breeze Pavao perform an ancient kahiko; a fire dancer performs; the Nāpali Coast; and a shrine at the Lawai International Centre (far left).

Inspired by the hula history, my companion and I head to neighbouring Old Koloa Town to learn more about Kauai. Established in 1835, the heritage town is home to the island's first sugar mill, and where a mesh of migrants set down roots, working in the plantations. Today there's a strip of pastel-painted shops punctuated by historical statues and plaques. Behind designed-to-look-dated signage, fine art galleries, clothing outlets, and boutiques sell wares to passing patrons.

Keen to see the Na Pali Coast State Wilderness Park, we join a catamaran cruise from nearby Port Allen, setting sail with the compass pointing north. We skirt low-lying land which morphs into mountains rising 1000m from the ocean floor. I imagine the island's elders clambering up sheer peaks, chanting to their ancestors, asking permission to enter the land – Hawaiians believe if you do wrong, the ancestors will soon send a sign.

On the map, Kauai's "Garden Island" landscape shows most of its 1430sq km draped in rainforest. Carpeted crevices fall to the ocean floor like pleats on a 1950s skirt. White lacey beaches hem the famed coast, a natural Hollywood studio. It's where the likes of *Jurassic Park*, *King Kong* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (among others) were filmed. It might be Hawaii's fourth-largest island – where buildings by law can't be higher than palm trees – but only five per cent is developed. The 73,000-strong population resides in coastal areas, leaving the volcanic interior intact.

Back on terra firma, it's a 10-minute drive to the Friday night markets in Hanapepe, Kauai's quirky heritage town. On an island measuring 53km long by 40km wide, nothing is far away. It's a step back to simpler times. Musicians are setting up by buildings with vintage façades. A group of senior straw-hatted ukulele players jams together, high on life. On the corner, hippy "Woodstock" wannabe guitarists strum 1960s rock'n'roll favourites. It seems the whole village is soaking up the balmy, relaxed vibe while enjoying a fusion of Japanese, Chinese and American street fare.

The following morning, we visit the Lawai International Centre, a tucked-away healing sanctuary built by Japanese immigrants in 1904, 55 years before Hawaii became America's 50th state. The external world soon slips away as we step onto sacred land where 88 Buddhist shrines snake up a steep hillside, forming a mini-pilgrimage route. Born from the 1200km walk in Shikoku, it's the only one of its kind outside Japan. Handing me a hiking stick, Lynn Muramoto, president of the non-profit centre, tells me, "This is a global healing centre. Our valley is more than the shrines; it's about the heart of the people, open to all who gather here."

I begin the meditative zigzag climb, taking time to pause and peer inside each of the 88 miniature shrines. Each contains offerings left by worshippers before me – gemstones, spiritual quotes, and jewellery placed next to deity statues. Sheltered by 13ha of surrounding forest, I feel the powerful pull of the land as my mind slows. The background din fades, even the birdsong is muted. Before outsiders came, Hawaiians would bring their wounded and sick to heal. Today, through the tireless work of dedicated volunteers, the centre now attracts visitors from all over who come to soak up the sacred land.

Feeling Lawai Valley's aloha (love and fellowship) we head for the hills, going inland to Waimea Canyon, the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific". It's the end of the rainy season. Sunshine turns to solemn skies as wet winding roads test our driving skills. Curving corners disappear as the weather gods deliver a deluge.

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Nāpali Coast

Clockwise from above: The Nāpali Coast, Kauai; Nāpali Coast helicopter tour; Doug Wolkon of Kauai Farmacy; Tunnels Beach, Heana, Kauai. Tiele Doudt teaches the art of pandanus weaving.



“**Y**ou’ll see nothing,” says the woman watching videos in a wooden hut-come-checkpoint as we enter an empty carpark. A blanket of heavy clouds hovers like a stubborn child. So we wait patiently until Mother Nature gives in. At last sunrays bring an otherworldly landscape into view. The voluptuous vista is hard to take in. Ravines up to 1100m deep are

mottled with low-lying mist. Distant waterfalls hang in valleys like long sheer curtains as ochre peaks glow in golden light. But the show is quickly over. Clouds roll in like credits rolling up on a blockbuster film.

The Garden Isle is a land of contrasts – hotter and dry in the south, cooler in the north. It’s a welcome change when we head north to drop into 1 Hotel Hanalei Bay for a lauhala (pandanus leaf) weaving lesson with kumu Tiele Doudt, the hotel’s cultural adviser. An offshore breeze flows through as Hawaiian melodies play in the background. More than a weaving experience, it’s an insight into a people who have fought to keep their footing. Tiele’s the third generation to work here – her mother worked in sales and her grandmother worked in the hotel’s laundry.

“When missionaries came, weaving was discouraged because we sacrificed so much time for our arts and people needed to work, so I really enjoy my position here, practising weaving while teaching,” she smiles, proud to share her culture. I see why it takes so long; my fingers fail to work like hers. Thankfully Tiele is an excellent teacher, and I leave wearing a traditionally woven bracelet.

We learn the hala plant (pandanus) we fashioned into wrist wear that morning is one of many important island plants when later spending time with herbalist Doug Wolkon. Doug swapped business suits for farm boots to create Kauai Farmacy, a family-run medicinal herb farm in Kilauea on the North Shore.

“We are so out of alignment, we are missing connection to our world through not working with plants,” Doug says as we stroll around 1.6ha of lush garden, an Eden that heals and nurtures.

“The information comes through us as we align with nature – alignment brings wisdom,” he says as we sniff, taste and touch.

We try blue verbena, a small flower with a mushroom flavour used for anxiety, digestive problems and depression. Black pepper tingles our tongues as Doug lists some uses: improves digestion, a cancer preventive, and keeps infections at bay. These plants and many more were used by Hawaiians in ancient times. The land was their outdoor pharmacy, a living encyclopaedia of natural medicine. Nioi, a Hawaiian chilli pepper, was used for cleaning irritated eyes. ‘Olena (turmeric), believed to contain mana – a spiritual power – was used in ceremonies to purify space, people, and objects, alongside treating a range of medical issues including inflammation and skin irritations.

“If you blend ancient knowledge and wisdom with modern technology, the possibilities to heal consciously are endless.” Doug’s words linger like meaningful chants when we leave the heal-yourself sanctuary. As we pass surrounding mountains, I study the deep crevices, imagining shrouded secrets enveloped between each pleat. Ancient customs perhaps protected by ancestors, like the hula, to be passed down with aloha to each generation in honour of the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people.

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Lynn Gail is a Perth-based travel writer, photographer and educator with a keen focus on culturally diverse subjects, ancient belief systems, and off-the-grid destinations.

Photography: Lynn Gail (Tiele and Doug) & Ben Ono (helicopter tour)

ESCAPE ROUTE

GETTING THERE

Hawaiian Airlines, Jetstar, Qantas and Virgin Australia all fly directly to Honolulu from Sydney. Hawaiian and Southwest Airlines have connecting flights from Honolulu to Kauai Island.

STAY THERE

1 Hotel Hanalei Bay
1hotels.com
 Sheraton Kauai Coconut Beach Resort
marriott.com

ENTRY

For entry and visa requirements into the US:

smartraveller.gov.au

