

THE COST OF THE COAST



RIDING ALONG THE LAYERED LANDSCAPES OF HAWAI'I'S KOHALA COAST.

BY ADAM MANDELMAN

For a first-time visitor flying into Kona International Airport on Hawai'i's Big Island, a view out the airplane window can trigger deep regret. Nowhere to be seen are the state's trademark emerald ridges and lush valleys. A barren desert of lava spreads to the horizons. Although this landscape, like most deserts, has its own otherworldly beauty, it's not what most people expect from their Hawaiian vacation. Driving north from the airport to the island's Kohala Coast resort region doesn't improve the view, as sunburnt moonscape unfolds for mile after mile.

That a tourist yearning for tropical paradise would find herself in the middle of a vast and arid volcanic plain seems like a cruel joke. But a turn off the

Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway to any of the region's resorts soon dispels those anxieties. The seemingly endless basalt yields to coconut palms and bougainvillea that, although sparse at first, anticipate the verdant golf courses and parklands ahead. The parched shrubs and wild goats that adorned the highway have been replaced with ropey banyan trees and groves of ginger, heliconia, and philodendron that shade sprawling water features alive with fish, turtles, and—at one resort hotel—even dolphins.

The extravagant oases that erupt from the lava promise tens of thousands of visitors each year a genuine Hawaiian vacation amid inhospitable desert. As striking a contrast as this phenomenon presents, even more arresting are the well-



preserved traces of ancient Hawai'i that persist throughout this landscape. Over more than 50 years, resort development along leeward Hawai'i Island—as the Big Island is formally known—has steadily woven together shopping malls and petroglyph fields, towering water slides and crumbling Hawaiian temples, dolphin adventure pools and centuries-old fishponds. Simultaneously kitsch and extraordinary, this layered landscape of ancient and contemporary development embodies some of the deepest contradictions of tourism in Hawai'i.

In 1819, the Frenchwoman Rose de Freycinet passed by the Kohala Coast while on a scientific world tour with her husband. “Nobody can ever have seen a more arid and dreadful aspect than this part of the island of Owighee,” she wrote in her journal. “There is not a tree, not the smallest part of a plant; one would say that fire had passed over it”

Despite the region's “arid and dreadful aspect,” Kohala's port village of Kawaihae had served in the 18th and 19th centuries as an important royal residence and trading post. But by the late 1950s, the coast was almost deserted. European diseases had decimated the Native Hawaiian population, and the coast's paltry average rainfall—less than 10 inches a year—had repelled the sugarcane, cattle herds, and countless other newcomers arriving on Hawaiian shores. In 1960, the Kohala Coast was home to maybe a few dozen households in Kawaihae and nearby Puakō, and accessible only by foot, boat, or bruising jeep ride. Modernity had passed it by.

But what the area lacked in water resources, infrastructure, and population, it made up in sunshine. A 1960 state planning report—coming mere months after Hawai'i had become a state—suggested Kohala's “dry, warm climate,

ABOVE
An oasis amid the lava at Waikoloa Beach Resort, 2007.

ABOVE
Driving through lava desert on the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway, 2010.

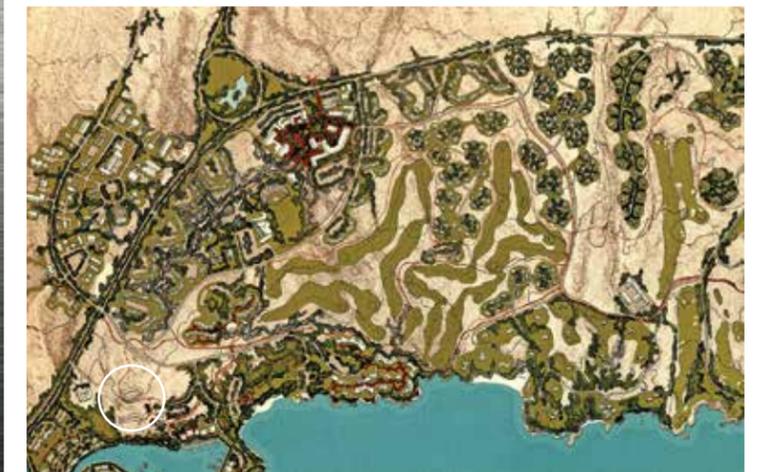
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ADAM MANDELMAN



LEFT
The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel at Kauna'oa Beach, c. 1965. Note Mauna Kea volcano in the background.

BELOW
A detail from the 1967 *Kohala Coast Resort Region* plan by Belt, Collins & Associates—Pu'ukoholā Heiau (circled) is in the bottom-left corner.



outstanding beaches, and calm waters” might one day nurture a tourism boom. In July of that year, Laurance Rockefeller, the third son of the oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, toured Hawai'i at the invitation of Governor William Quinn. Rockefeller had earned a reputation for developing hotel properties in remote destinations such as the Grand Tetons and Virgin Islands. Quinn and his advisers hoped Rockefeller might do the same for the new state's less-visited corners. The final stop of Rockefeller's tour included a swim at Kohala's Kauna'oa Beach, a crescent of golden sand framed by black lava and a view of the 13,000-foot summit of Mauna Kea volcano.

Rockefeller told Governor Quinn seven months later that he would build a resort hotel at sunny, desolate Kauna'oa Beach. Roger Harris, a planner with decades of experience on the Kohala Coast, remembers that Rockefeller's announcement was

greeted with disbelief: “Everybody in Honolulu said, ‘Let 'em have it. I can't believe they're gonna make it out there in the lava.’”

Rockefeller chose Belt, Collins & Associates to develop the project. The firm, which combined planning, engineering, and landscape architecture under one roof, executed Rockefeller's vision for a luxury hotel and golf course at Kauna'oa Bay. Bulldozers broke ground in 1962 and carved new roads from the lava, including a segment of the Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway that would one day connect the Kohala Coast with a new international airport outside Kailua-Kona, 30 miles to the south. Engineers built a sewage treatment plant, drilled water wells, and created a 650,000-gallon reservoir. Heavy machinery cleared scrub and broke up brittle lava rock, which, when blended with imported topsoil, became a fertile medium for turf, trees, and tropical flowering plants. Robert Trent

Jones laid out the golf course, while Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed the hotel.

After pumping immense quantities of water through the landscape—up to 700,000 gallons daily—the resort flourished into an oasis of tropical abundance surrounded by harsh desert. The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel opened in July 1965, and an article in *Holiday* magazine the following March gushed (in a casually racist turn of phrase), “It is a Godforsaken landscape running from the foot of Mauna Kea to the sea, and on this wasteland the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel has been placed, like a diamond tiara in the hair of a pygmy.”

Soon after, Rockefeller commissioned Belt, Collins & Associates to prepare a plan for more development of Kohala's arid coast. A lavish, 110-page land development plan published in 1967,

the *Kohala Coast Resort Region*, called for creating “a series of oases” amid the lava. The plan laid out a comprehensive vision for infrastructure, landscape, and architectural design, all modeled on the firm's experience with the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. The document also proposed historical parks devoted to the coast's archaeological heritage, much of which remained visible in the landscape. In fact, Rockefeller had been instrumental in restoring the remains of King Kamehameha's Pu'ukoholā Heiau, an 18th-century temple platform next to the hotel that became a National Historic Landmark in 1962.

The plan focused on just three miles of coastline, but it became a model for development all along leeward Hawai'i Island and served as the basis for state and county land-use plans in the region. “We had a lot of influence on what happened,” says Jim

ADAM MANDELMAN/ DATA COURTESY STATE OF HAWAII AND U.S. CENSUS BUREAU. LEFT: COURTESY THE MAUNA KEA BEACH HOTEL ARCHIVE COLLECTION. RIGHT:

COURTESY BELT COLLINS HAWAII, LLC. RIGHT



Bell, FASLA, a planner with Belt, Collins & Associates since the early 1960s and a former director of the firm. “All the resorts—from Keauhou in the south, all the way up to Mauna Kea and Mauna Lani at the north end of the coast—we had all those people as clients for 20, 25, 30 years.” In the decades since its publication, the *Kohala Coast Resort Region’s* strategy for coaxing lush paradise from three miles of arid, rocky coast has come to define an entire district.

But the astonishing transformation of West Hawai‘i’s deserts into tropical resorts also materialized another set of contradictions for Hawaiian tourism development, one that has increasingly aroused cultural tensions. DeSoto Brown, a historian at Honolulu’s Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, observes that “anywhere it’s easy to dig in the ground, you will find people buried there.”

That includes the tubes and caverns formed in Kohala’s lava rock. Despite its harsh ecology, the coast here has a long history of human settlement. Kohala’s Native Hawaiian villages, though modest in size, left significant cultural remains in the landscape, often concentrated at the very sites chosen for resort development.

Long before the Queen Ka‘ahumanu Highway, long before Rose de Freycinet’s 1819 tour, travelers on the Kohala Coast took to centuries-old foot trails, segments of which still persist today. Buffed smooth by the bare feet of pre-contact Hawaiians or marked by water-worn stepping-stones in particularly jagged areas, these coastal paths were part of the *ala loa*, or “long trail,” a network that once connected settlements, sacred sites, and important natural resources all around Hawai‘i Island, including the Kohala Coast.

ABOVE
A segment of the Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail skirts a golf course at the Mauna Lani Resort.

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—JIM BELL, FASLA

In 2000, Congress recognized the significance of both the *ala loa* and its cultural sites by establishing the Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail. The Ala Kahakai, or “trail by the sea,” is dedicated to “the preservation, protection, and interpretation of traditional Native Hawaiian culture and natural resources,” and will eventually mark a 175-mile corridor from the island’s northern tip to its southeastern shore. For now, however, an early segment of the trail implemented as a high priority begins at Pu‘ukoholā Heiau, just next door to the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel.

Beginning at Pu‘ukoholā’s looming temple platform, the trail guides hikers through a landscape of contrasts. Thorny scrub gives way to a public beach, followed by a dusty path through aged lava. The path becomes a maintenance road,

and then a brick walkway threading through the engineered oasis of the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. Picking back up along the shore, the Ala Kahakai continues for another 15 miles, across lava fields and golf courses, through tropical gardens and petroglyph fields, past burial caves and infinity pools.

One of the most dramatic juxtapositions lies just a few miles down the Ala Kahakai from the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. At a place called Kalāhuipua‘a, fresh and brackish anchialine ponds have attracted settlement for around 800 years. Although in disrepair by the early 20th century, Native Hawaiians had converted these lava-formed ponds over centuries into a carefully managed aquaculture system producing Hawaiian mullet, milkfish, eels, and other delicacies.

Today, those fishponds are the centerpiece of Mauna Lani Resort, another Belt Collins project. Developing the Mauna Lani involved transforming the landscape much as Rockefeller’s Mauna Kea had, including the addition of thousands of coconut palms and a new network of waterways that, connected to the ancient fishponds, extend right into the hotel lobby. In more than a dozen interviews conducted by Mauna Lani staff in 2001, engineers, advertising consultants, and other former employees at the resort frequently remarked on the phenomenal work of transforming near-barren lava into a world-renowned oasis.



RIGHT
A banner draws attention to Hawai‘i’s unresolved colonial past at Spencer Beach Park on the Kohala Coast, 2007.

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TO MANY PEOPLE WITH NATIVE ANCESTRY, TOURISM IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED WITH HAWAI'I'S COLONIAL PAST.

Within a decade of its opening in 1983, the Mauna Lani was ranked by *Condé Nast Traveler* as one of the top four tropical resorts in the world. Meanwhile, more than a dozen archaeological investigations conducted at Kalāhuipua'a since the 1950s have revealed numerous traces besides the fishponds of the area's deep human history, including cave and surface dwellings, burials, and petroglyphs.

This proximity suggests the harmonious coexistence of contemporary and ancient Hawai'i. The resort, on its website, in staff interviews, and throughout its print publications, announces its "enlightened stewardship" of the landscape. The Mauna Lani was one of the few—if not the only—developments that, before the passage of a state historic preservation law in 1976, voluntarily conducted an archaeological survey and preservation plan. In 1984, the resort received the Historic Hawai'i Foundation's historic preservation award for management of the fishponds. The Mauna Lani's relationship to Kalāhuipua'a is part of a tradition that began with both Rockefeller's restoration of Pu'ukoholā Heiau and the Kohala Coast Resort Region's plans for developing historical parks. Leilani Hino, a former director of community affairs at Mauna Lani Resort, described this in an e-mail as having emerged from a "commonality of good, practical resource management among powerful international friends and businessmen."

But those commitments to heritage management notwithstanding, the mingling of past and present in Hawai'i's tourism landscapes is not always as comfortable as it appears. To many people with native ancestry, tourism is inextricably linked with Hawai'i's colonial past. In 1892, American business interests overthrew Queen Lili'uokalani, the Hawaiian Kingdom's last monarch. That coup, which led to annexation and ultimately statehood, terminated Hawaiian sovereignty and left a deep scar on Hawai'i's indigenous community. Even when a resort has the best intentions of stewardship, the incorporation of Native Hawaiian archaeology into landscapes that serve almost exclusively nonnative tourists can be alarming, to say nothing of developers much less mindful of indigenous heritage.

Peter Mills is an anthropologist at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, where he chairs a master's program in heritage management. The curriculum serves predominantly Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students, in the hope of correcting the underrepresentation of indigenous communities in cultural resources management throughout the Pacific. Mills has described the program as "decolonizing heritage management." He says that in developed places such as Kohala's resort landscapes, an ideal approach to managing cultural resources would involve consulting with descendant communities on matters of stewardship, access, and interpretation.



ABOVE
The preserved fishponds at the Mauna Lani Resort at Kalāhuipua'a, 2016.

COURTESY OF THE MAUNA LANI BAY HOTEL & BUNGALOWS & MAUNA LANI RESORT

Kamu Plunkett is one of Mills's Native Hawaiian graduate students. A former construction worker, Plunkett is developing a community-based GIS inventory of cultural resources that he hopes will help negotiate better heritage management plans from developers before the first bulldozers arrive. Plunkett believes that Kohala's resort landscapes are among the many reasons heritage management in Hawai'i needs to involve grassroots indigenous communities more directly.

For Native Hawaiian communities, the juxtapositions revealed by a walk down the Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail represent more than mere irony. The kinds of development that have transformed the Kohala Coast from lava desert into tropical oases are not unique to Hawai'i Island, but are rather a feature of everyday life all across the archipelago. More often than not, and even despite the best intentions of well-meaning devel-

opers, planners, and state officials, Hawaiian tourism has been accompanied by the enclosure and even erasure of indigenous cultural resources. But for as much as Hawai'i's layered landscapes embody some of the state's most painful contradictions, they have also inspired a new generation of heritage managers. Describing Kohala's layered landscape of resorts and Native Hawaiian archaeology, Plunkett says, "I see the old and the new right up against each other. I also see it as cultural heritage and development right up against each other. It's a reminder of the times that I live in, and the choices that I make." •

ADAM MANDELMAN IS A GEOGRAPHER AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORIAN. HE IS COMPLETING A BOOK ON THE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN PEOPLE, TECHNOLOGY, AND ENVIRONMENT IN THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER DELTA.