

Maui Travel Story – May, 2007

On a whim and a NWA ticket sale, Nancy and I spent this past weekend in Maui. Many of our friends talk about being there, but neither of us had been to Maui. I expected Maui to be just like O’ahu, but it feels quite different, in large part because of the absence of Waikiki’s very tall buildings. O’ahu has a population of about 900,000 whereas only about 130,000 live in Maui. (About a fifth are native Hawaiian.) And whereas Hawaii as a whole attracts about 7 million tourists a year, Maui only gets about 2 million. Maui has several town centers all over the island, whereas a single city, Honolulu, dominates the other island.

Maui’s terrain reminded me of Cabo with many colorful flowers set against dry desert grass and rock. A better comparison probably would be Palm Springs where elegant ranch houses sit in spacious residential lots. Actually Maui defies categorization because of its geographical diversity. We were told that Maui has six major microclimates or micro-environments, each with its own weather patterns. For instance, most of the hotels ring the western beaches which get less than 12 inches of rain per year but the western mountains only five miles away get 400 inches of rain annually. One side of the Haleakala Crater is a tropical rainforest and the other a desert.

Most people rent a car and take a day to drive to the rain forest on the eastern side of the Island, but being short on time we took a 40 minute helicopter tour instead. The first visual treats we encountered were the miles and miles of rich-green sugar cane (see photo on right) and pineapple fields. These are their two main industries after tourism and they absorb most of the lowlands in the center of the island.



Top of Haleakala Crater

From the sweet lowlands we climbed above the clouds over 10,000 feet to the top of the Haleakala Crater. The Crater has not erupted for 217 years and looks like a piece of the moon with lots of little craters inside the big one. To prove that it is big our pilot told us that the entire Manhattan Island would fit comfortably within in it.



After circling in the clouds our helicopter dropped down to the shoreline and traced it back to the airport passing by waterfalls, villages, and huge vacation estates. On the left is a series of waterfalls right after passing the town of Hana at the most easterly point of the Island.

We stayed in the Wailea Beach area at the southwestern corner of Maui, which you can see in the photo below taken during our sunset cruise.

The mountain in the distance of this photo is the Island of Kahoolawe, which has become uninhabitable due to its use during the past 50 years for military exercises. Four years ago it was turned over to the Hawaiian people for environmental preservation, but so far no one lives there.



A few miles further down the coast are many acres of lava flow from the 1790 eruption. Most of the area has been designated the



Ahihi-Kinohiwa Natural Area Reserve, but I don't see how the lava rock alone has kept everything from growing for 200 years. (They put a huge amount of rock along the edge of the highway by our house and in 5 years we had tall bushes growing from the dust and seeds blown in.) In any event, the lava formations under the water have made the rough coast a popular place for snorkeling and scuba diving.

Birds of Maui

While Maui has a lot of birds, it does not have a large variety of species. As you might expect, the 2,500 mile flight discourages most birds. Since there are very few large birds, the smaller bird and animal populations grow very fast. Noisy Myna birds are everywhere, but it is also easy to find other small birds.



Myna Bird



Red-Crested Cardinal



In general Maui's small birds allow people to get much closer than here on the mainland. I guess birds feel more relaxed when they don't have to worry about people, animals, and big birds wanting them for a meal. The medium size egret on the left was hunting for lizards and insects along Wailea Beach. We followed it a long way along the beach because it added to the composition of beach photos.

Animals of Maui

We saw very few mammals (including dogs and cats) in Maui. There must have been wild boar at one time, as they became a basic staple of every luau. Whales and giant sea turtles are quite common and we saw both swimming during our cruise, although most of the whales had already gone to Alaska for the summer.



The giant sea turtles (see above) get up to 7 feet long and weigh over a half ton. Rats used to be a major problem on the island, but some wise guy brought over mongooses from Australia. Now mongooses are rampant, but they don't have the stigma from which rats suffer. They are surprisingly tiny with bodies about 6 inches long. (See photo on left.)

Flowers of Maui

We were amazed by the large number and variety of flowering trees and bushes. On the right is one of my favorite pictures, a mixture of bougainvillea, glory bush, bromeliads, and red torch ginger.



Red Torch Ginger

We also saw lots of hibiscus, morning glories, anthurium, bromeliads, and birds of paradise. In addition, so many of their trees bloom. A very common tree is the plumeria (on the right) with either red or white flowers used for making many of the traditional Hawaiian leis.



Nancy took half of the photos in this travel letter. You can see by the picture of the bee here that she is getting professional about it.

Hibiscus seem to be everywhere in Maui. Some varieties are native to the Island. They used highly trimmed hibiscus bushes as hedges, and the flowers still grow.



Wailea Beach with West Maui in Background

In the past 50 years the population of Hawaii has doubled, but the population of Maui has nearly tripled. That kind of growth is not so surprising given Maui's natural beauty, but present day traffic congestion may inhibit the continuation of such high growth. Maui is a wonderful place but I would prefer to live on the mainland where you don't have to sit all night in a plane to get away from the Islands.