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## ALONG THE KONA COAST

*"You just relax young man, and have the best cup of ice coffee you've ever had in your life"*

- Lady in a straw hat at Kona Airport greeting arriving passenger

(Along the Kohala Coast on the Big Island of Hawaii)

Stepping off the Aloha Airlines flight from Maui I was already a convert to the Hawaii cult. The Big Island was to be the actual point of my personal baptism.

It had all started a while back during my first visit to the islands. But there have been many destinations in between and now, on this most recent trip, it has all come full circle because I have come to realize that not only was Paradise not lost, it has really hardly changed.

The airport is new, looking something like some spruced up cabins at a well run national park. As we walked off the plane into, what else, nearly perfect 85 degree sunshine, I envied the locals lined up behind the "first-class" stanchions waiting to board the plane I had just left. I envied their casual work attire, not a tie to be seen, and I envied their proud heritage. I envied their street address, Pocoluakaloona lane, or something similar. But mostly I envied the fact that, as first class passengers, they would be receiving a package of genuine Maui "Kitchn-cooked" Potato Chips with their drinks.

As I walked through the outdoor terminal I came upon a lovely lady in a sundress and a straw hat serving complimentary iced coffee. It was, as she promised, the best I had ever had, a secret potion that, when mixed with Kona coffee produces a taste so memorable that it is reason enough to remain here forever. And we hadn't even reached baggage claim yet.

The rental car was waiting across the airport drive, another shiny red mustang, with the top already down and an oldies station properly tuned as I turned the key.

As we started to pull out of the airport driveway, I reminded myself that I would have to be extremely cautious on this particular island. Angela had determined that there was "affordable" real estate in these parts and she had a pencil and pad at the ready.

We pulled out of the airport and turned left, heading north of highway nineteen up the Kohala Coast. As we turned onto the deserted coastal road, I realized that the mystique that has always surrounded the big island, could be felt in the landscape. There were no signs of any kind. No fading signs for a truck stop, no red and black Pizza Hut warnings, nothing "broasted" ahead. There were no billboard promises in this paradise, no record of commerce littered the highway. You would have to know exactly where to find a bed for the night or a grilled cheese sandwich, or an insurance agent.

The road from the airport to our hotel seemed like some metaphysical cousin of California's Highway 101. Only this highway was located on one of the

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more scenic stretches of the moon. The ground leading up to the highway was covered with rippling hills of black lava rock, an undulating carpet of residue from the gods warning us of their power. This is the part of Hawaii where you will hear stories of the Night Marchers, those legendary ghosts of warriors, long dead, who arrive periodically to warn the inhabitants of the Big Island of pending volcanic eruptions and massive tidal waves.

The moonscape, the nothingness, and its beauty, combine to form an open panorama of genuine anticipation and excitement. Surely there can't be a resort in this kind of environment. To the right, past the fields of lava, are rich, velvet green valleys sloping upwards to embrace the Hawaiian islands youngest mountain chain. The young mountains with their jagged points seem to be protecting us as we slowly pass by in our now, insignificant, little automobile.

One of those peaks is Mauna Kea, a 14,000' incredibly dramatic surprise. This mountain, if properly measured from its base below the surface of the sea, is taller than Mt. Everest. Visitors to this island in prime season, between January and March, are sometimes shocked to see their fellow passengers getting off the Aloha flight with skis. But you can ski this mountain.

Further north and then east you head to Waimea, site of the second largest cattle ranch in the United States. Over ten million pounds of beef are produced somewhere on this lunar surface, somewhere cowboys on horseback work the 225,000 acre ranch, somewhere up ahead.

To our left, again past lava beds, are gentle fields sloping downward to the sea. Sometimes we pass a dirt road and off in the distance we think that, perhaps, we have seen a building nestled among palm trees at the waters edge. But is it an illusion?

I said there were no signboards - but there were signs. Local children have gone down to the sea and collected rocks. They arrange the rocks to spell out sentiments in carefully lettered phrases lying on the larger and flatter portions of lava that line the highway.

"Only he knows the way" says one. "Mary and Martin - forever in love" says another, and my favorite, "we were here many times", a subtle reminder to the visitor that he is just a visitor.

We pulled off the highway along a dirt road that seemed to lead to nowhere. We had an appointment.

Just over a small ridge we came to a construction shack where a hard-hat security worker looked us over and checked our credentials. We were ushered ahead, down a sloping, curving dirt road that was headed toward the sea. We could now see the outlines of greenery, the deep blue water tinged with pockets of pale green, and then we could see clearly, a massive construction camp and the outline of what will be one of Hawaii's premier resorts, the new Four Seasons.

There are now 250 workers on site, building a resort that will blend in with the priceless Kailua-Kona topography. I was grateful for the opportunity to

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preview this resort during the building process because the industry buzz has been that it is going to be an elegant, comfortable, low-rise experience built along a fabulous piece of real estate.

The road in has to be constructed. A swimming pool formed by rock boulders is already in place, and fabulous rooms are in the process of completion.

The rooms each have private outdoor entrances. The bedrooms, overlooking the water, have hardwood floor and beautiful inlaid wood furniture. The bathrooms have all of the gimmicks you would expect and one you wouldn't. There is an outdoor shower, a glass door that faces a walled in private patio lush with clinging vines and plants. There is a shower built into the patio wall for private, outdoor bathing.

You will be reading about this hotel when it opens later this year. For now, I would urge you to secure 1997 reservations before the rest of the world knows its here.

We stayed at one of my favorite hotels in all the world, the Mauna Lani. It is down a private drive and awaits visitors with its magnificent open air lobby and interior courtyard. The hotel seems like a Thai dream, there is lots of mahogany and an air of far eastern charm and elegance. My dinner at the hotel's famed Canoe House was memorable, as we sat on the balcony in our pavilion open to the stars, overlooking the torches and the spotlights in the high trees that illuminated the waves gently lapping at the shore.

This morning we took a tour of the Bungalows where so many of the Hollywood elite come to relax in privacy. Their private limousine and butler meets them. The bungalows have private pools overlooking the golf course, and can sleep four. The cost of \$3,000 to \$3,500 per night seems reasonable enough to create a long waiting list. Bob Newhart comes with his close friend Don Rickles. Dustin Hoffman brings his family here and Kevin Kostner brings whomever.

When Tom Arnold and Roseanne Arnold arrived they had one request of their butler. They wanted twin Harley Davidson motorcycles so they could "explore the territory".

Hey, Roseanne, get off of my island.

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