

PARADISE ISLANDS

Sand, sun, water slides, and more sand—
what more could a family ask from a vacation?

by Melanie Haiken When my husband and I were younger, what we considered travel was rough-and-ready adventure. We shared second-class train berths with entire extended families in India and dangerously overstayed our visas exploring the temples of Burma. Hawaii had never much interested us—it was too much of a “vacation destination,” too prepackaged, too much seemingly empty luxury without the ballast of cultural exploration. But travel priorities change drastically the minute there are kids in tow—suddenly safety and cleanliness are paramount, not to mention comfort. Still, we thought, it must be possible to have the best of both worlds.

Thus, when we finally decided to visit Hawaii, we elected to explore Molokai, the least developed of the islands, to balance out the more predictable enticements of our main destination, Maui. The five-year-old Molokai Ranch, epitomizing the latest wave in family travel, offers a tidy solution to the adventure-versus-kids dilemma. The isolated, outdoorsy camps, surrounded by acres and acres of open space (still a working

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exhilarating experiences you paste into the scrapbook of your mind. Humpbacks visit Hawaii en route to Alaska, where they spend the summer months gorging themselves in the plankton-rich northern waters. In February, the time of our visit, they are making their way northward, the females nursing newly born babies, the males vainly trying to capture the attention of the distracted new mothers. These macho antics make for spectacular

cattle ranch), create the illusion of adventure without the discomforts or hard work. They're definitely on to something at Molokai Ranch; that much was immediately apparent when we discovered three families from our "hometown" (central Marin) sitting at nearby tables our first night in the dining room.

Guests sleep in cleverly monikered "tentalows"—one-room, wood-framed canvas tents connected by a spacious deck and each featuring a covered dining area and private bathroom. Extremely clean and well kept up, the tentalows are an odd combination of fancy and rustic. They come with fresh towels and even spa-style robes, yet you have to pull on a rope in the shower to keep the water on. It's like a hyperefficient summer camp, with staff members talking constantly to their counterparts via walkie-talkie and ever-more-lavish meals spread out at regular intervals throughout each day.

Our first morning, having heard from fellow guests about the amazing whale-watching expedition the day before, we expressed an interest in going. The staff informed us that the small boat and rocky seas made the expedition inappropriate for small children, then before we could voice our disappointment began making arrangements for our daughters, Melia and Linnea, to join a "bug-hunt" hike the next morning so we could go without them. I must say, it was nerve-racking to wave good-bye to our suddenly very small-looking girls (ages six and three) as they smiled cheerily at us out of the windows of the departing bus. But when we went to retrieve them four hours later, they almost refused to acknowledge us, so deeply engaged were they with the hapless caterpillars and praying mantises they had collected in their glass jars. And despite my long-held reservations about vacation babysitting services, the photo we took of them with "Auntie Andrea," the former kindergarten teacher who leads the ranch's kids' program, now hangs on our refrigerator as if she were a beloved relative.

Meanwhile, my husband and I set out for the open sea with "Captain Dave" and a boatload of other novice whale watchers and had one of those

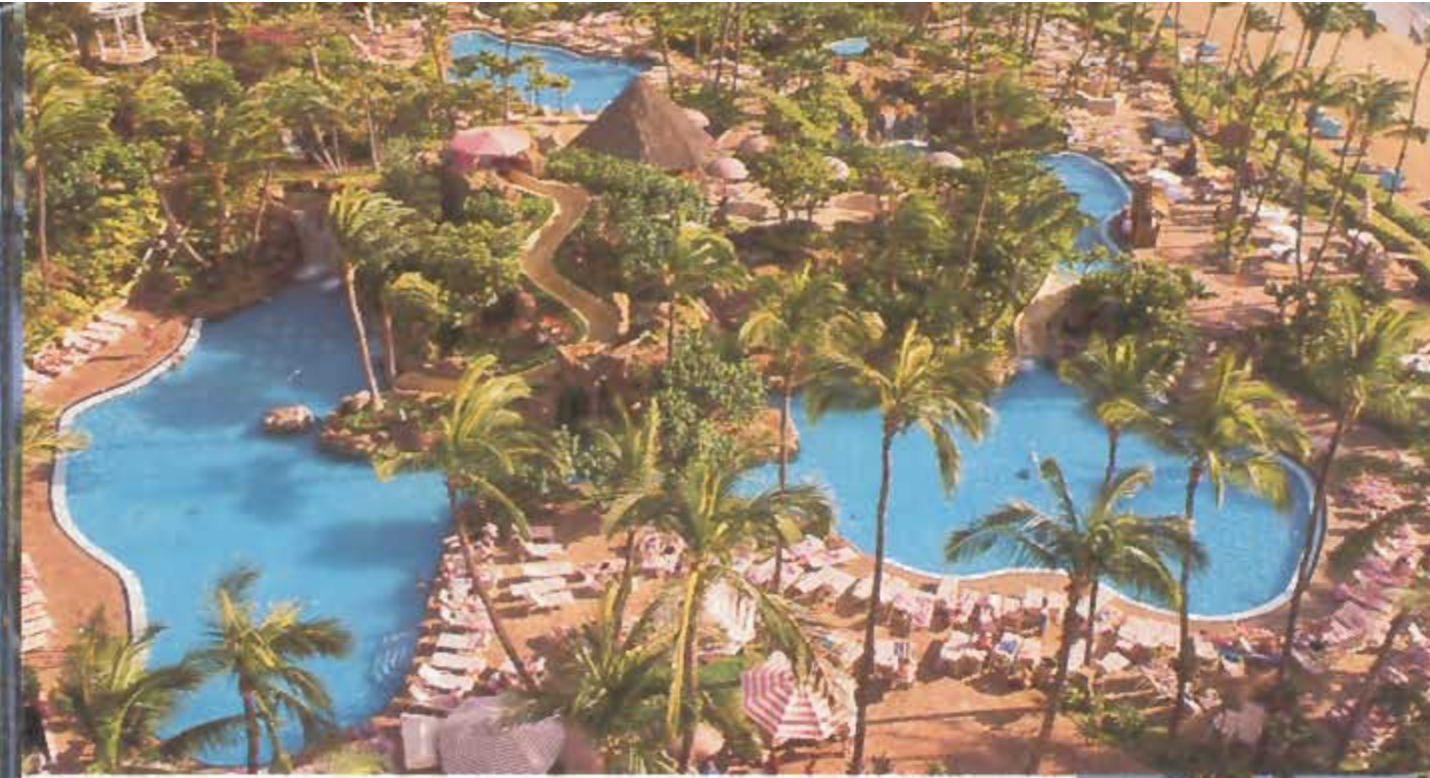


OPPOSITE PAGE: The dramatic black rocks that bespeckle glinting sand make Maui's beaches particularly picturesque. **ABOVE:** The girls quickly discovered that hammocks make great swings; Melia and Linnea playing *paniolo* (cowboy) on Molokai.

displays—arching backs, tail flips, and even full breaches, in which the whale shoots so high out of the water that his head and half his upper body are visible. Humpbacks are definitely the show-offs of the whale family and make gray whales, our annual visitors here in the Bay Area, look like desk-bound nerds by comparison. We found ourselves in pursuit of one particularly flamboyant male, who breached 19 times during a half-hour period. The whole experience was so thrilling that as we headed back toward shore, the tiny Zodiac inflatable jolting over suddenly rough seas, we were all giggling together like teenagers who'd pulled off some clandestine caper.

Just as my prejudices against organized activities were dissolved by the pleasures of Molokai Ranch, Maui undid some further illusions with equal dispatch. The first revolved around elegance and refinement, qualities I had decided were out of keeping (and too anxiety producing) with my not always etiquette-minded—and almost never quiet—kids. But I hadn't bargained on the pure, undiluted fun provided by being in a setting so rich in beauty and exotic accoutrements that for a wide-eyed preschooler and first-grader, it was like being invited to spend a few nights in their own private zoo.

It first hit me when I saw the fish. They were



giant carp, and they were swarming all over each other in the pond that occupies most of the gloriously landscaped central courtyard at the Maui Prince Hotel in Makena, Maui. Gold, white, yellow, black, and “calico,” as my daughters called them, they were as big as river trout back home, and their seemingly insatiable appetites ensured that they would flop up onto the stones edging the pond if you so much as dropped a few crumbs in the water. We soon discovered that the plastic baggies of fish food for sale outside the hotel’s breakfast buffet were an entertainment bargain at a mere 50 cents; the kids’ fascination with the carp feeding frenzy would, if we planned it just right, carry us through our first cup of coffee or tea and halfway through the morning paper before they galloped back into the restaurant to report on their adventure. Of course, we didn’t choose the Prince for the carp but for the justly famed beach, which looks like the vividly painted backdrop for a rousing rendition of “Bali Hai.” But the parklike grounds, which on one rainy morning provided us with a collection of enormous spiral-shelled snails and tiny translucent slugs, as well as a fragrant heap of wind-dropped plumeria blossoms, were a great fringe benefit.

The truth is, Maui confounded my expectations as surely as Molokai had done. Let’s take water slides. Before we left, a friend who regularly vacations in Hawaii advised us to “spend at least a night or two at one of the fancy places that have water slides—the kids just love them.” I nodded, hiding my disdain as I pictured the flimsy yellow plastic spirals familiar from cheesy hotel pools of my childhood. Why would I select a hotel so my kids could try out one of those? But in Hawaii, water slides have become merely one ingredient in lush, tropical fantasies that allow every swimmer—even one barely out of water wings—a chance to play in an underwater world as vivid as Esther Williams’s. At the Westin Maui in Kaanapali, where we spent several blessed days almost perpetually wet, the word *pool* seems an almost absurd understatement; think instead of waterfalls you can swim under, carved rock tunnels linking one pool with another, a dramatic rock-lined pond next to a pool lined with bent-legged flamingos, slippery chutes with so many twists and turns that every time Melia went down, we’d grow



Not your typical water slide: the wildly exotic pools of the Westin Maui let you swim in a tropical fantasy; Melia takes an unplanned swim in the pool at Molokai Ranch.

anxious about how long it was taking her to reappear at the bottom.

We broke up our beach days with all sorts of kid-pleasing activities, from watching the shark feeding at the Maui Ocean Center to hiking up to the Iao Needle—with a stop at the Hawaii Nature Center on the way—to riding the Sugar Cane Train, but the big surprise came with eating out. Food is a huge dilemma for parents on vacation—no one wants to worry about stains on white tablecloths three times a day. But the all-you-can-eat breakfasts served at both resorts were perfectly suited to kid-pickiness; they could

walk the length of the piled-high buffets, helping themselves to wedges of papaya and slices of coconut-dusted French toast, and the thrill of exercising their free will ensured that they actually sat down and ate.

And then again, there was “keiki kamp,” the name these places all seem to give to their own child-care program.

Having decided that a family vacation was meant to be spent together as a family, we weren’t planning to take advantage of this service—until we passed the large, colorfully decorated center one day when we got lost en route to our room. “That looks fun! We want to go there!” the girls clamored, and I soon found myself signing them up for an evening visit. Seizing the opportunity, I made a reservation at I’O, the latest venue for master chef James McDonald, voted “Best Chef on Maui” by the *Maui News*, the local daily. My husband and I had a sublimely romantic meal under the stars and returned to find the girls happily splattering coconuts with psychedelic colors, having already spent a couple of magical hours stringing shell-bedecked anklets out by the shimmering pool.

On our last night, we walked down the starlit beach to the simple thatch-roofed Barefoot Bar at the Hula Grill, in Whaler’s Village next door to our hotel. As we enjoyed for the last time all the basic Maui indulgences—icy, umbrella-festooned drinks for me, savory grilled swordfish for my husband—there suddenly appeared a languid hula dancer who drew my girls as if by an invisible thread until they were sitting, spellbound, almost directly in front of the tiny stage. When it was time for the nightly hula session, she invited them—along with many other guests of assorted shapes and sizes—up on stage with her. As my little girls swayed their skinny hips and stamped their sandy bare feet along with the plaintive notes of the guitar and I cursed the lack of a camera, left behind at the hotel, it suddenly hit me that we were probably reenacting a moment experienced almost identically by every visitor to Hawaii—and that it didn’t matter. A moment doesn’t have to be yours alone to be absolutely perfect. *SF*