

June 6, 2000

The Oregonian

Kauai after Iniki: *The Rebirth of Paradise*

By Deston S. Nokes

Finding your 40-foot boat 100 yards inland, smashed against the trees, is a tough way to lose your job. But after Hurricane Iniki ripped through Kauai in 1992, catamaran captain Bernard Matsumoto had little choice but to be philosophical.

"It wasn't as though tourists were going to be flocking to the island anytime soon, so I took a couple of years off while Kauai recovered," he said.

Sailing his new 55-foot catamaran around Kauai's south shore, the 44-year-old skipper of Captain Andy's Charters pointed out where new, luxury homes have replaced the wreckage wrought by the hurricane. His boat was full of tourists who paid top-dollar to charter his craft. Sea turtles bobbed their heads and cameras clicked at the sight of a humpback whale spouting nearby.

Life in Kauai today is good and profitable. Eight years after Hurricane Iniki, the jobs, the tourists, the facilities and incomparable beauty of the island are back.

"It was like a bomb exploded"

On September 11, 1992, Iniki, a category-five hurricane, ripped into the south end of Kauai and blasted its way through and out the north shore. Reports listed sustained winds of 160 miles per hour and wind gusts of 200 miles per hour. Thirty-foot waves smashed into resorts and homes. When Kauai awoke, it found Iniki had inflicted \$1.6 billion worth of damage, ranking it the third most costly hurricane in the history of the United States.

"It was like a bomb exploded," said Marjorie Lewis, 17-year resident and owner of Island Rentals and Real Estate. "But I learned that even if your neighbor didn't have much, they'd share it with you. People weren't trying to profit from one another's misery. One household might still have gas to cook. Another might have running water. We shared with each other to get through."

Six months after Iniki hit, the damage was evident. Many dwellings along Poipu Beach were razed to the foundation. Popular restaurants were gutted and the opulent Westin Kauai Resort



wouldn't open again until it was sold to the Marriott Corp. and renovated years later. Shopping centers had more vacancies than stores and jobs in the service industry were scarce.

For about six years, the only economic boom occurred in the construction sector as insurance money funneled in and homes were rebuilt. Many of the devastated hotels took longer to reopen.

Today most of the destruction's evidence has disappeared and Kauai is now harvesting its reputation as one of the most beautiful vacation destinations in the world.

The Garden Island

Kauai, a short, 95-mile flight from Honolulu, is geologically the oldest and northernmost major Hawaiian Island. It is 33-miles wide and 22-miles long, with more beaches per mile of coastline than any other island in Hawaii. The island is well regarded for its ability to retain its natural tropical splendor



while expanding its population and industry. For example, limiting building construction to less than the height of a coconut tree speaks to a desire to regulate growth.

"Kauai has retained the spirit of small town living," observed Lewis, a 17-year Kauai resident. "This is the kind of place where people call you by name in the post office. There just seems to be less competition here than on the other islands. Famous people love it here because locals just don't pay attention to them."

Every local interviewed first mentioned the kind, laid-back people as the island's greatest resource. But to tourists, the amazing scenic diversity makes a more immediate impression.

From the airport in Lihue, almost every portion of the island is accessible within an hour-and-a-half drive. The north coast offers a lush, steamy tropical wonderland where visitors can kayak, golf and hike along 4,000-foot-high cliffs rising along the Kalalau Trail on the Na Pali Coast.

The island interior is less inhabited with the cloud-shrouded Mount Waialeale rising in the center. Averaging 444 inches of rainfall, it is the wettest spot on Earth. Thankfully, the precipitation in other portions of the island is more moderate with an average of 44 inches per year. While the northern portion of the island can at times experience sporadic wetter weather, a quick drive south to Poipu Beach promises more consistent sunshine.

Continuing around the southern portion of Kauai, visitors can view the rugged 12-mile long Waimea Canyon. It is surprising in its magnificence: a yawning, vast, green version of the Grand Canyon. Farthest west is the sparsely populated Polahale Beach. Long, hot and undeveloped, smart visitors will bring plenty of water and be cautious of the fierce undertow.

The NaPali Coastline along the northwestern corner is best seen by helicopter or chartered boat. But for those who turn green at the thought of ocean swells or floating helicopters, a drive to Kalelau Lookout (accessible via the drive to Waimea Canyon) provides a very rewarding view.

For the more adventurous, helicopters will provide the most complete view of the picturesque island. During a recent trip, this writer was able to see most of the island during a flight that lasted about an hour and a half. Classical music trumpeted in our headphones as the helicopter rushed across an amazing jungle landscape and plunged down into Waimea Canyon. Angling to the NaPali Coast, small goats dispersed as the helicopter rushed up a wild, untouched mountainside. Bright hues of blue ocean washing against intense lush green cliffs provide an unforgettable visual experience.

Taking a catamaran or boat along the coast allows stops at pristine, inaccessible beaches. Our trip featured gorgeous snorkeling spots with exotic shimmering fish, as well as dolphins playfully jumping along side the boat.

Many of the island's vistas are recognizable as the setting for dozens of motion pictures, including "Jurassic Park" (which was being filmed when Hurricane Iniki hit), "The Lost World," "Mighty Joe Young," "South Pacific" and the recently released "Dinosaurs."

Building on Diversity

According to Gary Baldwin, chairman of the County of Kauai Planning Commission, the visitor industry has bounced back, though not quite to pre-Iniki levels. But the concern of planners is less about tourism than it is about promoting economic diversification.

"At six percent, our unemployment is the lowest it has been since 1994," he said. "We have seen a lot of growth in science and technology with the expansion of the Pacific Missile Range Facility and the opening of the Western Kauai Technology Center. Four new high-tech companies have opened and another five are scheduled to locate in Kauai."



Baldwin said that the industries are in sensor, optical and coding technologies, database and software, coastal zone management.

“Best of all, with very few exceptions, these companies pay well and hire local people,” he said.

“They are the types of business that can bring back locals who had to move to find jobs.”

Baldwin points to the struggling sugar industry as another

area where diversification is being encouraged. One sugar company has closed and another is struggling, but federal funding has allowed the island to grow asparagus, coffee, seed corn, and the county is looking into developing forestry.

Driving in and around Lihue and Kapaa on the eastern portion of the island brings up one of Kauai’s most glaring challenges: traffic-glutted roads. However veterans of Portland or California daily commutes may scarcely notice.

“Our infrastructure in terms of roadways and parks has not progressed as it should,” Baldwin agreed. “We have already zoned and permitted the additional construction of rooms for hotels, and our infrastructure improvements should go accordingly.”

Marjorie Lewis believes that only another slap by Mother Nature can deter the success Kauai has reaped in the last few years. “My only concern is the impact of another hurricane, because I only see this island getting better,” she said. “Right now we have people on the mainland selling their homes there and paying cash for retirement properties here. Along the southern coast near Poipu Beach there are now very few properties available for development.”

Bernard Matsumoto also sees only success in Kauai’s future. “I moved here from Oahu, before there were stoplights or a McDonalds. Long ago the boating business was mostly just a summertime phenomenon — taking out tourists with cast-iron stomachs on small inflatable rafts. Now business is good, we’ve got much larger boats and it’s smooth sailing year-round.”

