



The views are stunning on the three-hour sailing: The catamaran passes Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach on its way to Honolulu. (Deston Nokes)

Interisland Superferry: By sea or by air?

We test ride the boat and compare the two

By DESTON NOKES SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Hawaii's new Superferry endured extremely stormy seas before it even got wet.

Today the huge, high-speed catamaran operates daily sails between Oahu and Maui. But for much of last year, the \$300 million project was battered by a blast of environmental protests, lawsuits and political squabbling. It delayed the ferry's projected launch from August until December.

Then, after operating a brief time, the vessel was damaged while being towed for mechanical servicing — it collided with the tug that was pulling it. And if that wasn't enough, the ferry sustained keel damage in dry dock. Then planned voyages between Oahu and Kauai were scuttled because of pressure from protesters.

All this combined to further delay the inaugural sailings until April this year.



The Superferry offers plenty of TVs and other amenities.
Deston Nokes

But now that it's operating daily between Oahu and Maui, it's time to take a look at the Superferry experience — the advantages, drawbacks and unique amenities. How does it compare to air travel? What's the ride like? What is there to do?

On a recent voyage from Maui to Honolulu, my kids and I were foot passengers.

On first impression, the vessel is a futuristic, shiny upgrade from the ferries that cross Puget Sound. In fact, the interior at the bow looked like a spawn of the Starship Enterprise. The ferry is ringed with plenty of windows to enjoy the scenery, and there are spacious walkways in between large areas of comfortable lounge seating.

The space and comfort are important benefits for many. "I think the Superferry benefits big people the most, as well as anyone who is afraid to be in an airplane," explained Donna Austin, who works aboard the ship, named the Alakai ("Ocean Path" in Hawaiian).

"The ship is great for kids with autism, who often are afraid to be closed in. It's excellent for transporting sports team and hula halaus (hula schools). We've even had them dancing in the aisles!"

More than anything, according to Austin, it's bringing a lot of Hawaiian families together. As I look around, I noted that about 20 percent of the passengers appeared to be mainlanders, while the rest were Hawaii residents.

Austin also pointed out that the Superferry is a



great option for folks in wheelchairs or walkers. “There are many segments of the population who just don’t fly because it’s so inconvenient,” she said. “On board, the kids can buzz around, families can congregate and just relax.”

There’s certainly plenty to do. There are plenty of TVs, some with larger screens showing a feature film. There’s a variety of food counters offering muffins, coffee, kalua pork nachos, pizzas and even adult beverages. There’s a large souvenir gift shop, a video game arcade and — for toddlers — a safe, contained area where they can play, bounce on foam pieces and watch kid movies.

Wi-Fi and cell phones operate throughout the journey at no extra charge, and there are plenty of electric outlets to plug in laptops.

The Superferry is still growing its reputation and ridership. In July, it averaged 390 passengers and 99 vehicles per voyage, which was a 36 percent increase over the prior month. At capacity, it seats up to 800 and carries about 200 vehicles.

But are the ferry’s features enough to get you to select it over a plane for your next connection between Oahu and Maui? Let’s take a look:

Cost — Ferry fares tend to be less when there’s no vehicle.

Hawaiian Airlines currently charges between \$64 and \$84 for the Honolulu-Kahului connection, although it can hike up to \$129 closer to Christmas.

On the Superferry, through October, standard one-way fares range from \$49 (Tuesday-Thursday) to \$59 (Friday-Monday); \$41 to \$51 for children 2-12, seniors (62 and over) and military. Vehicles are \$65 each, up to 8 feet high and 20 feet long. You can save \$8 on the standard fare by purchasing online at least 14 days in advance.



Starting in November a fuel surcharge kicks in, boosting fares by about 60 percent.

Travel time — Big difference: half an hour by air, three hours by sea.

Boarding — For a plane trip, travelers have to get to the airport an hour or two early.

For the ferry, foot passengers are asked to arrive 60 minutes early, while vehicles making the trip should be there 90 minutes early.

Both air and ferry require an agricultural screening. Air passengers face the rigors of security screening. Ferry passengers will be asked whether they're carrying any weapons, explosives, etc. and a detection wand will be passed around them.

Both have luggage restrictions. The airlines are getting extremely strict about how much you can check and how much you can carry on. On the ferry, each passenger is allowed two checked bags weighing no more than 50 pounds each, and no more than two personal carry-on bags or packs. As on airlines, oversized and excess bags are subject to fees.

Those who want to take a rental car on the ferry must make special arrangements and obtain proper documentation from the rental agency.

On board — Airlines cram you into a seat better suited for a contortionist, serve you a small cup of fruit punch and then you're back on the ground.

As for the ferry — what's wrong with stretching out, enjoying the sun and ocean air, and relishing spectacular scenery? And for \$20 more you can upgrade to a special lounge area with tables, larger, leather seats and a server who'll bring a drink, a snack and free coffee.

The views while sailing are stunning. The catamaran breezes by three Hawaiian islands on its journey: Molokai, Lanai and Maui. And that doesn't count the thrill of spotting Diamond Head and cruising by Waikiki Beach and the impressive Honolulu skyline.

Warning: Smoking is not allowed anywhere on planes or the ferry.

Motion sickness — You can get sick in the air or on the water, but the flights are short and the ferry trip is long — *very* long if you're feeling ill.

If you're prone to seasickness, you might want to obtain a prescription patch or, at the very least, motion sickness pills. One Superferry worker confided to me that the journey to Maui from Honolulu earlier that day was memorable. "You're definitely going to want to take your seasickness medicine," she said. "It was hell getting over here this morning and we had to stop serving food midway into the voyage, it got so rough."

I was quick to slap a seasickness patch behind an ear. In recognition of the rough seas, the ship offers free ginger pills at concession stands to help settle stomachs. Dramamine is sold in the gift shop.

“We seem more susceptible to ocean movement, even though the boat is 350 feet by 80 feet,” said the Alakai’s chief mate, Kanoa Parker. “The ship does have a ride control system, but it can only do so much.”

I was warned that the first 20 minutes of our voyage was going to be bumpy, and it certainly turned out to be a patch-worthy departure until things leveled out.

IF YOU GO

Hawaii Superferry operates a daily round-trip run between Oahu (Honolulu) and Maui (Kahului). A second round trip is added on Friday and Sunday.

Go to hawaiisuperferry.com for the latest schedules and fares and to make reservations.

Reservations also can be made by phone at 877-443-3779 from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Hawaii time. (Hawaii time doesn’t change; add three hours for PDT, two hours for PST).

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