

TRAVEL + LEISURE

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Hana Reborn

After years of decline, one of Hawaii's best-loved resorts, the Hotel Hana-Maui, has been given a luxurious new lease on life by the owners of the Post Ranch Inn. STEPHEN DRUCKER checks in

Photographed by Matthew Hranek

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HO JUST KISSED ME?

It wasn't the air-kiss of a summer cocktail party. It wasn't a peck. Nor was it the red stamp of the favorite aunt who squeezed the life out of me as a boy. It was more of a breath, a warm passing breath,

and it came from a woman in a long dress with a maternal aura and a fragrant flower in her hair.

Who just kissed me? The concierge just kissed me, in the driveway of the Hotel Hana-Maui. It happened without warning, after she whispered "Aloha" and wrapped a wreath of pink flowers around my neck. I needed a kiss; that was quite a drive. Between Hana and the rest of Maui lie several hours of switchbacks, precipices, and blind curves; an increasingly ominous series of signs warning SLIDE ZONE, FALLEN ROCKS, ONE LANE BRIDGE, NARROW WINDING ROAD, and SPEED LIMIT 10 MPH; and the occasional overripe mango dropping from a tree into my convertible.

I can't really say why, but that was not just another kiss. A few days later someone tried to explain it to me: "To be Hawaiian, to give your breath—you know, it's a very big thing to give."

I COULD HARDLY BELIEVE this was the same Hotel Hana-Maui I had visited eight years earlier. The legendary resort at

the end of the twisting road slipped into a coma and nearly expired during the 1990's, but it has made a miraculous recovery. In 2001 it was bought by Peter Heinemann and Michael Freed of San Francisco, who couldn't bear to watch its decline any longer. Lawyers turned hoteliers, partners of the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, partners in the Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort, they wanted to create a stylish Pacific retreat where, Heinemann says, "people

can get in touch with their souls."

No need to be uncomfortable while getting in touch with your soul, of course. They wanted the hotel to be luxurious, though there was no going back to the Cristal—and—shoulder pads glamour of the 1980's, when Rosewood remade the hotel into the definitive beige love nest. They also wanted it to be a

little earthy, but not the calculatedly homey family affair that Paul Fagan ran here in the 1950's and 60's.

The new Hana-Maui is gentle, sophisticated, and very Hawaiian, a quality not always easy to find in Hawaii. It's smaller than before, with only 66 rooms—some the original Bay Cottages, clustered around a pretty lawn, but most the larger Sea Ranch Cottages of the Rosewood era, with lanais and Jacuzzis and ocean views. The public areas feel clubby, with a lovely bar, a ravishing pool lighted by flaming torches, a small library that you won't use but which sets the right tone, and, by fall 2003, a big spa that will be reason enough to make the long trip. There are new chefs and impressive new menus in a very relaxed dining room that's never crowded, as well as another restaurant at nearby Hana Ranch.

For your own good, some things have been left out. There are no televisions, no clocks, no radios, and no air conditioners in the rooms, and there's no *USA Today* in a plastic bag on your doorknob each morning. The mini-bar contains only water, juice, and Coke, and it's all free. The pool scene is low-key, and the golf scene doesn't exist. And then there's the staff, not the usual recent graduates of Happy School, but almost entirely Hawaiian. Hana is their universe.

It took a moment to accept being deprived of CNN and *The Sopranos*, and another to convince myself that a ceiling fan would really keep me cool. Then I discovered that the mattress was topped with a feather bed, and the pillows had just the right loft. And before I knew it, my eyes were closing. When I awoke to the fragrance of the lei I had left on the bedside table, I was already thinking that four days would not be enough.

"IT'S JUST A LITTLE BIT...rustico," says Hunton Conrad, the interior designer responsible for the hotel's redecoration. A third-generation Hawaiian, he knows how he likes Hawaii to look: the period from the twenties to the forties, before it all became cartoonlike, back when mainlanders arrived on the SS *Lurline* and took up residence in Honolulu's Royal Hawaiian for weeks. Conrad has designed many a house but just one other hotel (Waikiki's Coconut Plaza), and he says, "My innocence assisted me." He does not believe that a great resort begins with giant sofas. "I wanted a residential scale. I wanted people to feel they could live in these rooms."

I'd never seen colors quite like his. The greenish yellow of bamboo, the reddish orange of volcanic earth, the fresh green of new tropical foliage, the particular blue of the Pacific—such Hawaiian colors. Conrad designed all the new teak furniture, not highly polished but rough-hewn and even cracked, as well as bedspreads with the feel of bark cloth and curtains with traditional kapa patterns. You read yourself to sleep propped against a headboard of padded raffia, and walk around your room barefoot on lauhala mats. Some of the details are simply amazing: the bathroom sconces have shades made of young-



The hotel's lobby fountain.

coconut shell, Conrad explained, while the tissue box covers are made of mature-coconut shell. A shrewd Christian Liaigre-esque touch here and there keeps it all from going over the edge.

Everything on the walls at this hotel is actually worth looking at. Forgotten in some storeroom for decades was a rather serious collection of Hawaiian art, notably by Arman Manookian, who painted Gauguin-like canvases for a few brilliant years before drinking poison at a house party at the age of 27. According to his obituary in the *Honolulu Advertiser* in 1931, "The artist had refused to take part in games being played by a group of guests at the home, and had gone to his room..." Three rare Manookian paintings inspired the new public areas, while contemporary Hawaiian art brings a special energy to the guest rooms.

"Hawaiian design has really just started to come into its own," Conrad says. "We're not copying California and adding a few ferns anymore."

"YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND," says Douglas Chang, the hotel's new general manager, "it's only in the past ten years that it's been okay to be Hawaiian." Chang is the first Hawaiian in memory to run the hotel, and one reason it has come back to life so vigorously.

We were in the dining room for Hawaiian Night. Nobody used the word *luau*. This was not one of those evenings on the other side of Maui that you get to with a coupon. (COMBO SPECIAL! TURTLE SNORKEL PLUS LUAU! FREE PAREU—\$15 VALUE!) The buffet was set with a classic dinner of roast pork and poi and purple Maui sweet potatoes and taro rolls and laulau, or butterfish and pork steamed in ti leaves. The room was unusually full, as much with locals as with hotel guests.

So just who was that older Caucasian woman in the pink muumuu sitting at the best table? I would have guessed she lived

The hotel's designer knows how he likes Hawaii to look: the period from the twenties to the forties, before it all became cartoonlike, when people arrived on the SS *Lurline* and stayed for weeks

behind a gate on a golf course in Scottsdale, but in fact she was one of the great ladies of Hana, who lives in an envied ocean-front house. She'd brought two young Hawaiian women to dinner and the show. Almost every night some member of the hotel staff performs in the bar or restaurant. That night it was a group of eight, all of whom work in housekeeping and catering when they're not playing the guitar or doing the hula.

These were not the professional hula babes I'd seen before on Waikiki, but nothing this genuine could be called amateur. Some of the women were big, really big, and the bigger they were, the more I couldn't stop looking at them. Their sway was the most hypnotic of all. I was assured by a fellow diner that it wasn't my imagination: "The bigger the dancer, the better the sway."

All of the Hawaiian songs sounded much the same to a mainland's ear, except for one. *The Dawning—Ke Alaula*—was a pop



The Sea Ranch Cottages, the poshest rooms at the Hotel Hana-Maui. Cover: The road to Hana, on the undeveloped eastern end of Maui.

hit eight or nine years ago and created a swell of pride in being Hawaiian. Chang said it wasn't unusual for people to cry when they heard it. I didn't understand a word, but I did notice that the local audience sat up considerably straighter. It was like being in Rick's Café listening to *La Marseillaise*.

HANA TOWN IS QUIETER than most people expect. The tour is a quick one. You can spend thousands at the superb Hana Coast Gallery, or a few dollars at Hasegawa's General Store, a local landmark stocked with Spam sushi and vacuum-packed bags of poi. After that, there's the post office.

You can drive another scenic hour to the natural pools at Oheo Gulch, but I don't recommend getting out.

Drive one more mile, until you feel you've fallen off the edge of the earth, to the grave of Charles Lindbergh, who chose the humblest end imaginable. On the way back, pull over at Seven Pools Smoothies, a wooden fruit stand with a devastating view of the Pacific, where the Last Hippie will crack a coconut for you while you wonder how you both got to this particular spot.

You can add to your to-do list a horseback ride, a visit to Blue Pool, and an outdoor massage. Peter Heinemann says if you haven't done these three things, you haven't been to Hana.

A novice rider, I was placed at the mercy of Blackie. There's a Blackie in every corral, the horse that has seen it all and knows what's expected of him. Our hour-long ride took us across Hana Ranch—4,000 acres that envelop the hotel with rolling pastures, bucolic views, and excellent trails for walking and jogging. We toured the grasslands, discovered a black volcanic beach or two, and ventured out on a lava outcropping with the vicious



The hotel's beach, Hana.

surf below. Heinemann was right: there's nothing quite like seeing Hawaii with a six-foot boost into the air and the swagger of a Blackie.

I'm much better in a Jeep. For the trip to Blue Pool, Suzanne, a sunshiny woman born to swim with the dolphins, took the wheel, and I rode it like a pro.

There are waterfalls everywhere along the Hana Highway, but Blue Pool is the only one you really need to see. Several miles down a dirt road from the highway, you park, then scramble across a few hundred yards of boulders. You round a bend, and there, with the surf at your back, is the waterfall of your dreams, 10 stories high. I sat with my feet in its pool and talked extensively to myself about why waterfalls are so likable, until even I couldn't stand my own inner dialogue. At which point I jumped in the water.

My final afternoon, John the masseur arrived at my door. He's the same John who teaches yoga each morning at 7:30. Lomilomi, he explained, isn't a conventional massage, but more of a holistic Hawaiian treatment, rooted in breathing. He said he was looking forward to helping me on my journey. I was on the massage table when his tone of voice took a serious turn.

"Do I have your permission to be your kahuna?"

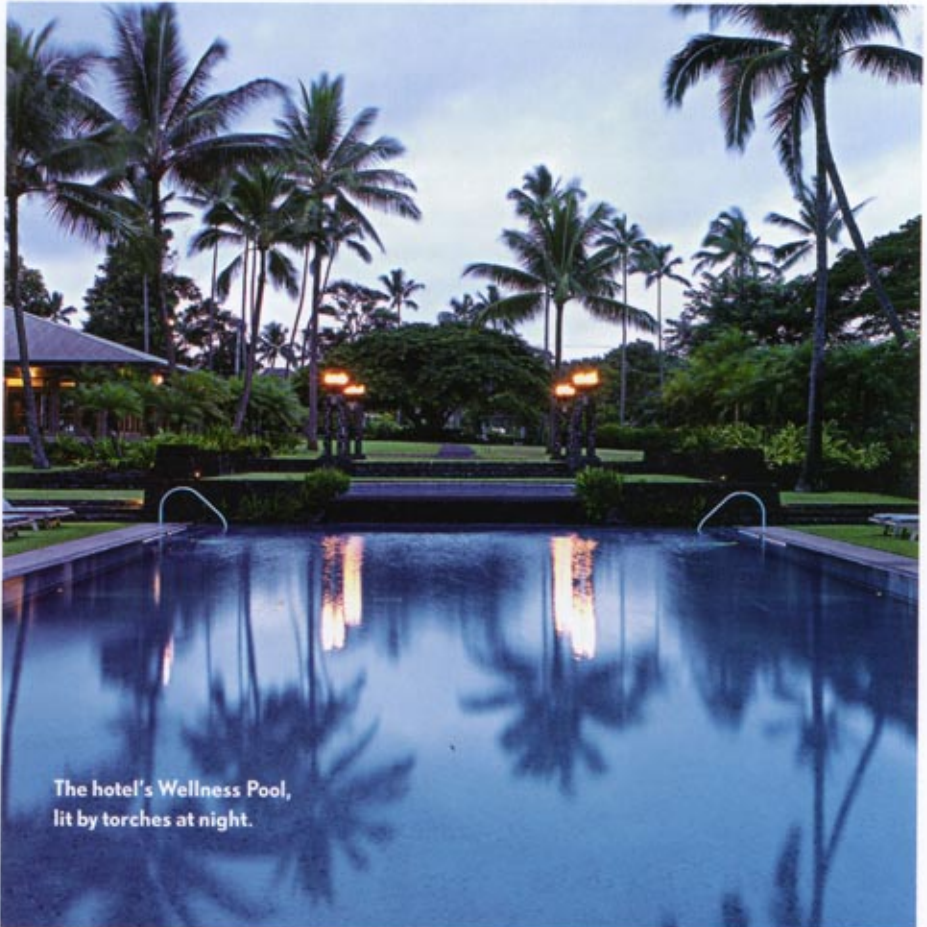
Be my guest.

My kahuna, or healer, then said a little prayer, welcoming input from my ancestors past, present, and future. That gave me something to think about.

Lomilomi is not a sequence of gentle pats. It's Body vs. Masseur. Like shiatsu, it feels interesting while it's happening, good when it's over, and best the next morning. Ninety minutes is an eternity on a massage table, and the time of day exaggerated the feeling. During the massage, the sun set and the warm air grew chilly. I opened my eyes to a full moon over the Pacific. John was pretty excited about that evening. He was headed to a Native American sweat.

I LIKED HANA BEST at night, when the last white rental car, rushing to get back, had scampered off to the other side of the island. At night I always had that safe feeling I have on an island after the last ferry has departed. Nothing can get to you, and there's no better place than your bed. You listen to the palms and the surf, and read a few pages, and begin to drift. And you would be surprised to find out just how early it is, if you had a clock, or cared. +

HOTEL HANA-MAUI, 800/321-4262 or 808/248-8211; www.hotelhanamaui.com; doubles from \$295.



The hotel's Wellness Pool, lit by torches at night.

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