

[Sea Kayaking Na Pali – Tsunami Rangers in Paradise](#)

by Nancy Soares on August 12, 2013

by Tsunami Ranger Steve King



Kayaking the 6 million year-old Na Pali coast of Kauai, Hawaii

After many months of planning and excited anticipation a group of 26 people from Norway, Australia, New Zealand, O’ahu, California and Serbia (by way of Australia) converged in Hanalei, Kauai to make final preparations for 6 nights and 7 days of kayaking and exploring the legendary Na Pali coast (no, not quite like the movie with Harrison Ford and Anne Heche but it was partially filmed there).



First morning landscape of Na Pali paddling

We were standing in a brief tropical shower getting to know each other when the equally legendary owner of [Kayak Kauai](#), Micco Godinez, walked by and mentioned that one of the people in another party he had rented kayaks to was officially “lost at sea” and that search and rescue operations were in the making due to strong winds and large swells breaking on the Na Pali coast. He mentioned that we were unlikely to be launching our fully loaded 4 double and 18 single kayaks the next day. Fortunately it turned out that the kayaker “lost at sea” had pulled out at Hanakapi’ai beach, the first beach that most people who want to see a bit of the Na Pali coast visit on a 3-4 hour hike. By 9 the next morning Micco’s highly capable daughter had hiked to the beach and paddled the kayak back to the shop all safe and sound.



Ancient cliffs where wild goats roam and send occasional rock falls down upon the beach and a few not so desirable campsites in the Kalalau.

Our journey was led by New Zealander Mark Hutson, a fellow Tsunami Ranger and kayak tour operator, and his fiancée, also a skilled kayaker, Sasha Seal. Mark and Sash had not only made the Na Pali trip in kayaks several times but they had also hiked the Na Pali coast as well as swimming it, with gear in tow as they swam with mask, snorkel and fins. Our group was mostly Tsunami Rangers and their friends and family. Michael Powers, aka Don Miquel Padre Tiempo, was the senior Tsunami Ranger on the trip at age 73. The youngest member of the team was Maya, my daughter, almost 15, so we had a big age spread in our group. Don Miquel is about as salty as they come and he managed to seduce a number of his friends away from their homes in Norway and California. They included two Bay Area couples who are noted documentary film makers and producers. These film people were making a pilot documentary on our Na Pali journey.



Double hulled canoes paddled by Hawaiians on a voyage on the Na Pali coast, similar to the vessels that transported local people and missionaries through this landscape in the past.

On our journey we would paddle past ancient settlements built by the first Hawaiians who lived on this challenging but enchanted landscape. The trip included a marriage on a sacred platform above the sea, all night vomiting sessions by some participants (without aid of alcohol or sacred substances) a beautiful Farewell Fire for the ashes of an extraordinary man who was father to three of the paddlers and a dear friend to Mark, incredibly beautiful landscapes, and some spectacular beach dumps as we landed our kayaks.



Hanakapi' ai falls

Due to unsafe weather conditions we spent several days honing up our paddling skills in big surf, hiking to the Hanakapi'ai waterfalls, and visiting Limahuli Botanical Garden. We also learned about ancient Hawaiian fishing techniques and fireworks, and taro fields from Presley Wann (a Punahou High School classmate of Mark's) who is the humble president of a visionary non-governmental organization (NGO) called Hui Maka' Ainana. Hui Maka' Ainana is at the end of the road before the routes down Na Pali begin. The NGO was formed in 1998 by key members of the native community in Ha'ena who had been discussing how to restore Hawaiian values and stewardship practices for some years.



The site of Hui Maka' Ainana

Presley and his colleagues had transformed a parcel of overgrown land into flourishing taro fields using only physical labor. He and some friends including an elder named Tom Hashimoto taught us about the central role of taro in Hawaiian diet and culture. Tom is considered to be the best living fishing net weaver on Kauai. He offers workshops to youths as part of the NGO program on making and using traditional nets and where to use them on local reefs that he knows intimately from fishing them all his life.



Taro plantation on the lo'i

The ancient people who lived on Na Pali did not always fish with nets. A missionary who traveled the Na Pali in 1820, Hiram Bingham (whose grandson “discovered” Machu Picchu) described one of the ways the first Hawaiians living there used to stun and catch fish:

Near this settlement, we saw about 70 men, women, and children, employed in fishing. Their method of taking the fish from the sea is remarkable. Diving down, they place a vegetable poison among the stones at the bottom, which being greedily eaten by the fish, immediately produces on them an intoxicating effect. The natives then dive or swim after them, and catch them in their hands, or sitting in canoes, or standing near the shore, take them easily in scoop nets. It was amazing to see my Otaheitan youth, and others of our company, as we passed along, dive off from our canoe, first on one side and then on the other, to seize the bewildered fish, which strove in vain to elude their grasp.



Archival photograph of Ohai or “King’s special fireworks” display as flaming sticks are hurled like javelins into the trade winds that shoot up the cliff creating air cushions which make the flaming sticks rise and fall as glowing embers fly into the sky.

One day while we were waiting out the weather Presley looked up at the steep cliff above the taro fields and described “Ohai” or the fireworks display of the ancient Hawaiians which his grandfather had seen. A description by the botanist Otto Degener helps the imagination fill in what we can see in the photograph above:

Ohai, the fireworks of the Hawaiians, was by far the most spectacular of their amusements. This took place on the northern coast of Kauai where the cliffs drop perpendicularly almost 2,000 feet into the ocean. On these heights the performers stationed themselves with oiled, dried sticks of hau or some other light wood. At night each performer lit one of these inflammable sticks and cast it into the air to the delight of the spectators gathered in canoes hundreds of feet below. The blazing wood was buoyed up by the strong trade wind and able to drop only very slowly into the ocean. As fast as these sticks were lighted the performers cast them into space until, to the spectator below, the sky appeared to be ablaze with scores of comets and shooting stars rising and falling, darting seaward or receding toward the cliffs, crossing and re crossing each other in the most fantastic way. This weird spectacle, sometimes supplemented with glowing kukui nuts that quickly reached their goal, continued long into the night. One by one the oiled sticks were consumed and the blazing firebrands flickered and disappeared, or the winds gradually subsided and they glided slowly and gracefully into the ocean where eager hands were out stretched to receive them. With these burning sticks the agile youths branded their arms as proof of having witnessed the ohai.

Because our expedition was delayed we were afforded an opportunity to delve deeper into the rich cultural and ecological history of the Na Pali Coast. We also learned that in the early 1800’s there was a mass migration of people from Ni’ihau (an island 17 miles away now privately

owned) to Kauai, including to the Kalalau valley, where we would be landing our kayaks. Today the annual mass migration is primarily 1.5 million tourists who come from around the world for a few weeks. Some, like us, are fortunate enough to see the Na Pali coast up close.



Lena King after leaving Ke'e beach en route to Kalalau.

Finally conditions allowed us to launch. It was great to be in our scuppers and on our way. We paddled in two groups. There were strong trade winds at our backs allowing us to surf the following seas. Several of us ventured into large caves containing waterfalls cascading down the cliffs offering freshwater showers. As we feasted our eyes on the amazing landscape we were enthralled by the power of the Na Pali coast. Three hours later we carefully, one by one, paddled onto the long, isolated beach at Kalalau. There was still pretty big surf thumping onto the beach so we had the strong younger paddlers land first to grab the boats as the incoming paddlers exited as quickly as possible. We had one close call as a fully loaded kayak sans paddler roared up the beach on a wave that almost clipped the leg of an eager but dangerously unaware “helper”. Note to readers: never try to “help”.



Sea caves and ancient cliffs emerge as we move down the coast on a glorious morning



Entering a sea cave

After a shady rest and some lunch several of us headed up to explore the forest and the luscious pools in the stream that makes its way out to the ocean close to a ceremonial platform. We were delighted to find small tomatoes and guavas growing among the scrub above the beach. Dinner and a gorgeous sunset ended a wonderful day. That evening a few of us had an unexplained all night session of extreme nausea and intense vomiting. We think it was unrelated to our delicious food or filtered water and that story may be submitted to the New England Journal of Medicine as a case study.



Sunset at Kalalau

The next day most of the group wandered up into the “ginger pools”. We soothed our tired muscles in one of many lovely pools under a cascading waterfall. We understood that this place was inhabited not just by hikers, kayakers and occasional scientific expeditions but by the ghosts of families and communities. Scholarly descriptions of the area became vivid and some of us were transported back in time as we ran our hands along the ancient walls:

With abundant rivers and flowing waterfalls, fresh water was in plentiful supply. Fish, as well as kalo, or taro, provided sustenance along with sweet potatoes and breadfruit, which were cultivated through sophisticated irrigation systems in hanging valleys and along the shorelines. The small ruling class of ali'i (royalty) held the power and enjoyed any luxuries that may have come from a lifestyle that was demanding for most living on the isolated Na Pali.

This coastal region was known as a central location for commerce between Hanalei, Waimea and Ni`ihau, as well as the western islands of the Hawaiian archipelago. Trade was done via canoe and various foot trails that rose up to 4,000 feet in some valleys. Traces of this lifestyle still remain today in the rock walls and terraces found in places along the Na Pali, like Nu`alolo Kai.



One of the dozens of exquisite waterfalls and “ginger” pools in the Kalalau valley, above the beach campsites



Kalalau beach as one emerges from the forest and streams

Later in the afternoon most of us had made our way back to our beach campsite and were resting in the shade when Mark and Sasha appeared, wearing glowing smiles and fresh leis of leaves and flowers. They announced that they had just been married on the ancient ceremonial platform right above the sea! We all jumped up to congratulate them. The ceremony had been performed by Bill, who is Mark's good friend and a priest as well as a Punahou graduate. Bill had also chanted a ceremonial Hawaiian blessing when we started our journey. The Best Man was another Punahou buddy. As the sun set a lot of us disrobed and plunged into the waves laughing and splashing as we bid good day to the Sun and the Ocean, thanking them for blessing the new union.



Sacred vows of marriage being exchanged on a ceremonial platform in Kalalau



Cave dwelling campers at sunset

The following day we loaded our boats and launched again heading to the take out at Polihale State Beach. We passed a restricted access archeological site called Nu'alolo, which had been occupied for 800 years from the 12th through the 20th century. This site contains the remains of impressive structures and has been extensively studied. Mark also pointed out several "hanging valleys" that contained fertile soil and abundant fresh water. At the back the valleys were surrounded by steep cliffs, the pali, making the only access via the sea. Some valleys were accessible only by rope or by simple ladders hanging down or propped up on the rock faces above the crashing surf. These ladders or ropes could be pulled up by the residents, providing protection from any potential attack.



The Tsunami Rangers with friends and family on Kalalau Beach before departing on the last day of the journey.



The intrepid Michael Powers aka Don Miguel Padre Tiempo, elder Tsunami Ranger in repose.

As we paddled a light rain cooled us and whipped up the sea with chop and wind. We stopped for lunch and then began our final paddle to the take out. Mark had prepared us for possible headwinds as we came around a sharp bend in the landscape and we did encounter a bit of wind briefly but it soon died down.



Paddling with rain showers as the group heads to Polihale State Park for one more crashing surf landing

We made one final surf landing at Polihale State Park. The total distance paddled was 16 miles. There were a few spectacular end over end dumps on the beach but many more graceful, smooth and Tsunami-worthy wave rides, ironically mostly executed by non-Rangers both young and old.



Another Tsunami adventure comes to a close...

There was a real Tsunami connection on this expedition. Ranger Don Kiesling had paddled the Na Pali coast on a day trip which can also be done in summer, weather permitting. Tsunami Ranger Captain Jim Kakuk paddled the Na Pali coast many years ago in spring when conditions are more intense. In fact Jim and Eric through many trips to Kauai had forged a friendship with Micco, our outfitter, and Micco was keen to hear how Jim was doing. Don Miquel Powers presented Micco with a copy of Eric's latest book as homage to their friendship and deep kayaking bond.

If you are one of the lucky people who has experienced the Na Pali coast let us hear about your experience!