

## Kauai Odyssey

I had always had a job. That plus two marriages and nine children meant that I had done nothing for myself in twenty years. At age 44, I needed to face my dragons and rediscover myself. With the refund from my 1977 taxes, I bought a round trip ticket to Kauai for my first backpacking adventure.

Unable to get the required trail permits in Oahu due to the bureaucracy, I decided the risks without one were minor. I caught my flight to Princeville on Kauai where I hitched a ride to the Ke'e trailhead with an elderly Texas couple driving a baby blue Cadillac.

The eleven-mile Na Pali wilderness trail had caught my eye in a National Geographic article. The photos showed the rugged north shore coastline with 2,000-foot peaks separated by deeply eroded valleys, spectacular ocean views and the kind of foliage you'd expect in the Garden of Eden. I pulled my poncho over my backpack and waved goodbye to the Texans.

I had read about Kauai's rainfall of 400 inches a year, but I wasn't prepared to feel like I was walking under a waterfall. So, I waded through sticky clay mud that first two-mile leg of the trail, with a steep mountain on my left and an 800-foot cliff straight down to the rocks and ocean below on my right. My hiking boots stabilized me carrying 40 pounds of gear on the narrow trail, while hikers with daypacks, slipping around in tennis shoes, turned back.

My first camping stop was the beach at Hanakapiai. The trail dropped steeply down to a roaring white-water river. There were a dozen tents on the other side. Others had made it across. My ballet training gave me an edge, but it meant jumping from wet

rock to wet rock with my backpack. To slip or fall was to be smashed against the rocks or swept out to sea. The rain had let up, so it was now or never. I forced my fear aside and grabbed the rope strung across the river. Letting it slide through my hand, I jumped to the first rock, teetered, then caught my balance. The next rock was smaller. No going back. I landed, my right foot slipped off into the river, but hanging from the rope I got my left foot on the rock and pulled myself up. Several campers watched from the sloping beach. Two guys on the boulder above me reached down. "Let us give you a hand." They hauled me up.

I set up my surplus Army pup tent among the others, fired up my Primus backpacking stove and cooked my dinner. I stayed two nights, trying to sleep in rain that pounded my tent. If I touched the inside, water wicked in and soaked my summer sleeping bag.

Rumors abounded about the trail: too dangerous, washed out, impassable between Hanakoa and Kalalau. Some had tried and turned back. The horror stories made my stomach churn. I was alone. What if something did happen? But I couldn't go back, couldn't be a failure. The next morning, I filled my two water bottles, and packed for the six-mile hike to Hanakoa. The trail climbed sharply to cliffs high above the ocean, then dropped back inland into the steamy jungle under a canopy of huge tropical philodendra leaves, primeval amaumau and lace ferns. The sweltering humid still air there was barely breathable. In contrast, the high terrain was like an exposed moonscape along narrow steep slopes with no footholds. My confidence increased for each mile I conquered.

After a steady hike in the persistent rain, I reached a part of the trail covered by jungle that I thought must be the Hanakoa campsite. I set up camp on a flat spot near a

small creek. No one else was there. I wondered again about the impassable trail stories. Had they given up too easily? Hanakoa was a dank site that smelled of rotting vegetation. I stayed only one night.

The next morning, I began the last five-mile leg of the hike, eagerly anticipating the beach at Kalalau with visions of the National Geographic photos in my mind. After all the rain, I was happy to be hiking up and down the steep trail with a bit of sun. Petrels and white-tailed tropicbirds, circled the cliffs. I felt their freedom. A flame-red cardinal watched me from a tree branch. The spell was broken as he flew off just before I heard the annoying thunk, thunk thunk of a helicopter.

A ragged looking character came toward me on the trail. He was short and thin, with a weathered face and scroungy long dark hair. He was hiking in bare feet with only a small daypack. I said, “Hi.”

He looked up. “You better get off this trail, man. The rangers are chasin’ everybody out a here who don’t have permits.”

Thanks to the bureaucracy back in Oahu, I had no permit. I needed to hide in order to finish my quest—probably just until this official roundup was finished. Shortly after meeting the bedraggled hiker, I found a small creek running across the trail and followed it, climbing into the jungle until I couldn’t see the trail behind me. I came on a huge tree branch that had fallen across a deep depression—a perfect hiding place! No one could see me from the air or the trail.

I bushwhacked a clearing with my 18-inch buck knife, stomped a flat spot and setup my little tent under the branch. There had been no rain for a while, so I used my

sleeping bag to create a recliner against the tree. Resting there, I realized that no one knew where I was. For the first time ever, I was completely on my own.

To keep my pack under 45 pounds, I brought only one book, J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit." I leaned back and read the first line. "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit." Perhaps my hole was not as comfortable as Baggins' hole, but nevertheless I felt like a hobbit.

In the waning light of day, I finished the book, even though I had to cook my dinner by flashlight. I made my bed, quickly crawled in it and was asleep in minutes.

An incredibly loud noise woke me, a roar like a jet engine without the whine of turbines. I felt for the zipper and peeked out. It was pitch black, but not raining. Sound was all around me, like an inescapable pressure. I had never heard anything so loud. A wind was tearing through the treetops, but there wasn't even a breeze against my tent. Should I get up? There wasn't much I could do. I zipped up the tent and crawled back in my bag. The last thing I remembered was hoping to live through the night.

I woke in the dawn to dead quiet. Outside my tent a large web glistened with droplets of dew, each containing a tiny rainbow. The owner, a beautiful yellow cane spider, three inches in diameter, with black markings, sat in the middle, waiting. We had both survived. I packed up, abandoned my hobbit hole to the spider and started off for Kalalau.

I hiked under a leafy canopy until the trail took a steep climb onto a prominence, where the view stopped me short and caught my breath. Hundreds of feet below, the water crashed in and out of crevices, forming and destroying tiny beaches. As I faced north toward the open ocean, the Na Pali cliffs rose out of the sea on my left and right. A

warm westerly trade wind pressed against me. Leaning into the breeze, I raised my water bottle in a toast to Laamaomao, god of the winds.

After hiking another two miles, I came upon a wide expanse of hard flat lava flow that sloped 45 degrees from high above on my left, to the sea below on my right. It looked impassable. There were no handholds. If you fell, you died. I scuffed the cold lava with my boot. It was rough, providing traction. A thin line indicated where others had walked. I judged the risk, and measured it against turning back, against failure. I tightened my pack straps. With my balance on hyper-alert, I took a deep breath and started across, placing each step. It seemed like forever, but it was only a few minutes.

Another couple of miles and the trail opened up onto a long sandy beach. In the distance, a naked young woman stood under a waterfall, washing her hair. A naked man sat on a log staring at the ocean. In the warm sun, I pulled off my pack, sat next to him and said, "Hi."

Without expression, he said, "Bad hurricane last night."

Of course, the rangers were warning people off the trail. "I slept through it."

He looked at me. "Wow, man!"

I had faced my dragons and won.