

## **Our Molokai Adventure**

Glenn and Mary Lou Austin

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Back in July, 2003 Mary Lou asked what I'd like to do for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. Instantly I knew I wanted to return to the Moanui Beach house on Molokai that I had briefly visited the previous February. Glenn and Akiko Foster host visitors at both their beach house and at their plantation cottage. They have a nice internet site – which is how I first discovered them. This trip turned out to be the best vacation of our lives and was so special that I wanted to record and share these memories before they fade.

Molokai is a very quiet place compared to the “big 4” Hawaiian Islands. With a population of around 7,000 there may be no more than a hundred or so tourists on the island at any one time. The tiny airport and relatively empty roads let you know right away this isn't Maui or Kona.

The beach house is directly above Murphy's Beach at mile marker 20 on the east end of Molokai, facing Maui. It has the undisputed best snorkeling on the island due to a barrier reef about ¼ mile off shore and a sheltering ring of rocks in much closer. These two lagoons are usually calm and are less than 5 feet deep at their deepest. The beach is a favorite gathering place for the locals on the weekends where the kids play in the sheltered lagoon and the adults cook fish on the grill and play horseshoes. During the week a handful of tourists come to enjoy the sandy cove and the great snorkeling. Mornings and evenings the beach is often empty.

### **Sweet Routine**

This was the first vacation ever for us with 18 days in the same place—no itinerary, no repacking of bags and moving to a new place. This combined with the specialness of the place and the people made our vacation much more relaxing than previous trips.

We awoke each morning first to the loud cluck of the geckos, then to the louder birds singing in the pre-dawn right outside our window. This made it rather easy to get up and pad down for coffee and sunrise over the ocean.

A quick walk down to the beach got our blood going and was usually unaccompanied save for a lone jogger. Breakfast including fresh papaya provided by the Fosters was usually eaten on the lanai while we looked for whale spouts and rolls—which we saw nearly every day. Meditation allowed us to quiet our minds which often focused on the soft warm breeze coming through the window. Stretching completed our morning preparations so we were ready for snorkeling.

We'd get our gear together, adjust the weight belt, apply sunscreen and mask defogger, and walk down the drive, open the gate, across the road, and onto “our” beach. Usually the tide was right for putting on our fins and masks sitting on a bench-height rock right at the entry to the little lagoon. Low tide could leave all the barrier rocks exposed and make snorkeling a belly-scraping experience. We both wore knit garden gloves to protect our hands as we swam.

Oh the variety of fish life!!! Over time we got to know the fish's hangouts so we could dependably track down the male Trunk Fish with his iridescent blue dots, the Puffers, the

Convict Tangs, the Needle Fish, the trumpet fish, the Moorish Idols, many Butterfly Fish, the eels (we saw 5 different kinds including green, reticulated, snow-flake, and a red/black/white striped eel that I can't find in the books).

Just north of the lagoon is a rocky point that I regularly swam to and that Mary Lou, as her expertise built, visited frequently. This deeper area of lava caves, overhangs, and outcrops was home to bigger fish and a large group of sea turtles. It was wonderful swimming and increased the variety of fish dramatically to include many surgeon fish (unicorn fish), more eels, lion fish, lots of Humuhumunukunukuapua and much more. This rocky point sheltered a little sandy beach that provided a nice get-away from the main beach on the busy weekends.

After lunch and a nap we were ready for a hike, another snorkel, or a short drive to one of several of our favorite overlooks. I usually got in at least 2 snorkels a day. Sunset dinner and a dusk beach walk got us ready for TV, movies, or reading. Early to bed-eager for the next day.

### **Amazing Adventures**

#### Weather Added Drama

We had mostly sunny bright days with a few cloudy days and a handful of night time rain showers. However- we had a few short bursts of awesome weather that definitely created a sense of adventure. We arrived immediately on the heels of a 13" rainstorm that washed roads out all over the islands. Midway through our stay the north shore surf leaped to nearly 45 feet and a few days after that windstorms shook the A frame while Oahu clocked gusts to 92 mph. It was raining again as we left.

#### Sweet Music, Sweeter Hospitality

My friend Wayne Wong went to high school in Hawaii and some of his best friends now own businesses on Molokai. He contacted Roy Horner of Molokai Mule rides (and many other worthy endeavors!) and Tuddie Purdy of the Purdy macadamia nut farm to ask them to welcome us. We really enjoyed our tour of the macadamia nut farm but Tuddie was busy with some mowing out back so we never met him. The organic roasted nuts from Tuddie's farm put commercial nuts to shame. When I called Roy, I was bowled over by his friendliness. Wayne apparently tipped him that this was my 50<sup>th</sup> and that I played music. Roy invited me to play a wash-tub bass that he had built at the Hotel Molokai Jam Session—which was a blast—then later invited Mary Lou and me to his Uncle Herb and Aunty Julia's house for music and fantastic food. It would be too easy to write 2-3 pages just describing this magic evening. Herb and Julia have created a little paradise on the south shore of Molokai. Beautiful plantings define outdoor rooms, including dining, living, music, boat house, tree house, bathroom (one for the tub and one for the toilet...both with views!). Uncle Herb served us the most delicious and beautifully presented food. Then, while the sun set, Roy, Aunty Julia, and Audrey played some island songs and old standards. I added a bass rhythm to some of the songs, with on Roy's washtub bass.

#### Whale Songs

Near the end our stay I had seen enough locals snorkeling past the barrier reef in search of larger open water fish that I felt confident in swimming out there. Upon reaching the wall, a drop to about 60-80 feet, I immediately heard whale song. The visibility on that

first trip was over 80 feet and I spent many dives down to the edge of the reef at around 25-30 feet listening to the whales, admiring the huge schools of fish, and swimming with green sea turtles who seemed much more interested in finding something to munch on than in the strange “fish” swimming next to them. I went down so deep so often that I broke some blood vessels around my eyes from mask squeeze...but what an experience!

### Hiking and Driving in Paradise

Even though we stayed put much of the time to enjoy our routine, I still put 700 miles on the rental car! This is because there are so many wonderful places to visit, each with its unique character. Among our favorite destinations were:

- The west end beaches, including the bay where they launch the outrigger canoe races to Oahu where the giant surf pounded the cliffs, and the 3-mile sandy beach.
- The Halawa Valley, a mystical green valley with high ribbon waterfalls and a perfect half-moon beach.
- The wooded overlook above the Kalaupapa leper colony

### Paddling in Paradise

Glenn and Akiko were gracious enough to loan us their kayaks which took us out past the lagoon to a beautiful view of the beach and the island. I got a couple of little surf-rides off the reef break. Akiko also invited me to paddle a 7-man outrigger canoe during her paddle club's regular Sunday workout. Paddling in unison with 6 others with the islands of Molokai, Lanai, and Maui slipping past was a thrill.

### Kalaupapa—Spiritual and Beautiful

We hiked down the 26 switchbacks on the north cliffs above Kalaupapa just ahead of the mule train. The 1700-foot vertical drop was definitely vertigo inducing. At the bottom we were greeted by an ancient rusted school bus which we climbed aboard for our tour--about 4 hours of driving and walking through this unique peninsula landscape. For me the height of this day was the view along the northern cliffs of Molokai (the highest sea cliffs in the world!) from Father Damien's grave site and the church he built with his own hands. The incredible natural beauty combined with Father Damien's act of selflessness and love was inspiring. When we finally got to the top of the trail (the mules passed us on the way up) we were dead tired, and I was ready for a dip back at Murphy's beach. Mary Lou's pedometer read 8.66 miles most of it on the cliff!

### **Life Energy Renewed**

It's been over a week since our return to the gray Pacific Northwest and some memories are fading, not quite as fast as our tans. Preserving and sharing the memories are the major reasons I'm writing this.

For 18 days I did not dream or even think much about work. For 18 days I realized increasingly how blessed we were to be there. As we took the return flight back I asked myself what I was looking forward to at home and realized that we have many blessings in our “regular” life and that I have nearly endless options in directing my life into its next chapter. So far a calm, peaceful, and very joyous and grateful feeling has persisted.

Mahalo to those fine folks on Molokai who made our trip so special. Mahalo to those of my teammates at PATH who made my absence and return go so smoothly. And Mahalo to the great spirit that has brought us so many blessings.

### Diving Details (for those who like it UNDER the water!)

There was frequently a strong tidal current flowing northward from the beach fast enough to require a sprint swim to get back to the lagoon. Visibility ranged from a worst of around 6' after a storm to over 80' one day past the reef. Usual visibility was around 40-50 feet. I used my Canon A-80 digital camera with the Canon built underwater housing.

The tide went out so far at it's peak that it was impossible to snorkel in the lagoon...a tide chart is essential (The Fosters post a tide calendar).

I wore about 9 pounds of weight in a soft belt to achieve neutral buoyancy at around 20' depth. I added 5 pounds when I wore my 3mm wet suit. Past the reef I frequently came upon turtles with their heads stuck deep in a hole in the coral munching on something. This allowed me to get very close to them although I stayed a respectful distance and tried not to startle them. Several times I heard 4 or more distinct whale voices singing together.

### Photography Details

I took nearly 2 gigabytes of photos and movie clips. I reviewed them on the TV at the beach house each day and threw 10-30 away-mostly due to out of focus or accidental exposures. I came home with 1500 pictures and I'm still sorting them out! I wound up underexposing by ½ stop to limit the sky from blowing out. At first I shot at 1600x1200 resolution but upped it to full resolution of 2200 x 1700 after I realized I'd have to crop most of my underwater shots.

I was thrilled to get the whale song and some good dives on video clips and am trying to figure out how to make them available (at least on CD- playable by Windows Media Player)

### Gear

Canon A-80 4mp camera with tilt LCD

As many Compact Flash cards as I could gather

Underwater Case

Lens adapter

Wide angle add-on (used almost constantly)

Tele add-on (used just twice for whales and surfers)

Fish-eye add-on (used a half dozen times)

I had to clean the lenses almost daily when shooting in salt air. I was glad I brought liquid lens cleaner to dissolve the salt off.