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Sleeping Over at Hāna's New Cultural Hub

Ala Kukui, a nonprofit community-based center, lets visitors in on local life

I was walking through the cluster of lipstick palms that graces the center of the 12-acre property. Their trunks were bright red, a bursting contrast against the milky, overcast sky. I paused to admire them. It was late November in Hana, and the rains had come. The sea was rough, but the calm of the land wrapped me up like a warm blanket.

If you think I'm being dramatic, perhaps you've never spent time in Hāna. It's considered one of the last unspoiled Hawaiian towns in the state, and most certainly on Maui. This land belongs to the town's newest cultural retreat, Ala Kukui, at which I've reserved a room. There's a half-built hale just beyond the palms, and a hula studio at the bottom of the hill. There's even a giant ahu up at the top. I am told you can see the ocean, but I haven't ventured up there yet.

Ala Kukui translates rather directly to

Traditional hale building at Ala Kukui.

mean "path of enlightenment." I'm not sure you can get any closer to Hawaiian culture than staying at a place by that name in a place like Hāna. I'm counting my blessings, and for one other reason as well: This is not my hotel.

Path of Enlightenment

Don't get me wrong - I'm welcome. But if you think for one second this place was built for me, or with me in mind as a visitor, then you're kidding yourself. This is not my hotel.

"This is a place that services the community first," said Kau'i Kanaka'ole, Ala Kukui's curator. "It needs to empower and elevate the people here. And then that experience can be shared with people who come here to listen, learn, appreciate, and reciprocate."

Overall, the goal of the not-for-profit Center is to deepen and inspire people's connection to their own sense of place. Hāna is a stronghold for Hawaiian lifestyle, but there is still progress to be made and traditions to uphold, specifically as current

community leaders look

to ensure the baton is passed to the next generation.

"The thing I want to feed is cultural depth and spirituality," said Kau'i. "What's happening is that we are still fishing at the same spots and still growing and gathering, but that spiritual connection that has to do with understanding our culture at a deeper level needs to be constantly nourished."

Sense of Place

Specifically, Kau'i holds workshops on two longstanding Hawaiian practices that have connected its people to the land for thousands of years: Hunting and hula.

Hunters, gathers, and growers have

place-based intelligence. That is, a keen understanding of a particular environment and its cycles, qualities, and changes. Because of this, they know how to adapt, to gather and grow food to feed their families, and to respect the 'āina. It makes them an invaluable part of any society, then and now.

Likewise, hula was created as an intricate dance that's completely in-tune with nature. In fact, it's more than a dance. It's a ceremony, based around the kuahu, or hula alter. Its themes relate an understanding of the natural cycles of water and the forest.

"I feel like we don't celebrate [those talents] like we should - we just say, 'Oh, they're going fishing or hunting or dancing," Kau'i said. "I want to highlight the intelligence of our

> men and women, and inspire them to pass down their knowledge in an important way. To introduce a deeper understanding of culture and how we are connected to our environment and traditions."

> In other words, it's not about relearn-

ing how to be Hawaiian. It's about understanding and recognizing how the connections one already has makes them Hawaiian.

"All cultures hunt, fish, farm, and dance, but to be Hawaiian means to be connected to this particular land and sky, this language, these skill sets that are tied to place," Kau'i said. "Getting from point A to B might make us navigators, but what makes us Hawaiian is the connection to the stars and the sea and the land.

A Room That Costs More Than Money

Though Ala Kukui is for the community first, there are five apartments and a retreat center that help keep the lights on. Kanaka'ole said she wants guests to be a part of the process, to



Ala Kukui in Hāna features a gorgeous 12-acre property, five apartments, and a cultural retreat center.

appreciate her people. But it comes with a small caveat.

"What I really want is for guests to experience the learning experience that the community is having here," said Kau'i. "It's real in that way. So to stay here, you have do a program."

Don't fret - she's not taking the fun out of your visit. The point is not to punish. Rather, it's to attract a certain type of traveler, one keen on learning a thing or two about Hana and its people. The "program" can be simple. Options include a tour of nearby Kahanu Gardens, or receiving a traditional lomi-lomi massage (tough life!).

Another option is to participate in one of Ala Kukui's on-going community offerings, like hale building or hula classes.

Can You Take Me Higher?

Kau'i is the perfect fit to head up a center that services the community first while simultaneously keeping the door open for visitors to be a part of it. As a kumu hula and former school teacher, she brings a balanced combination of heritage and world perspective. "Going away to teach on the Big Island was all about refining my world view," Kau'i said. "Then coming back and reimmersing into the community I grew up in, I could step back and see the missing links and how I could help

to fill them."

"This is a place that services the community first. It needs to empower and elevate the people here. And then that experience can be shared with people who come here."

DISCOVERY

This sort of physical and spiritual caretaking is easy to take for granted, but if you look around the world and see what's happening development-wise in almost every destination, the stance that places like Hana (and Moloka'i) have made is absolutely incredible. To think of all the deep pockets that have tried to touch Hāna and that they have been turned away, and the thousands of people that pass through there each month - it's a whole new level

of respect.

Which is why being here amongst it all, looking up to the tops of the lipstick palms, is powerful and humbling as a visitor. Because I mean, if Hāna needs work, then the rest of us might as well burst into flames right here and now.

But Hāna wouldn't be where it is today if it ever got caught napping. It's a remind-

er that no matter how far we feel we've come, there's always room to grow. Ala Kukui is the latest example in a long line of Hawaiian leadership.

"Hāna's beauty is no accident," Kau'i said. "It's the result of people protecting it, keep ing it the way it is. We are very aware of what's happening in our town. If we see construction, we're going to go over and ask, 'What's going on here?" Learn more at www.alakukui.org

Local Advice: Experiencing Hāna

According to Kau'i, the slow, twisting drive on the Road to Hana prepares you for the change in mindset and lifestyle you'll find upon arrival, shaking off the hustle of Kahului or O'ahu. Want to live like a local? Follow these tips:

Food Trucks: When it comes to dining in Hāna, there are not many traditional restaurants to choose from, and the ones that do exist will cost you an arm and a leg. Kau'i always points visitors to the surprising number of food trucks, all run by locals. Check out Chow's for plate lunches; Thai Food by Pranee; and Hana Burger Truck at Hana Ranch.

Double Dip: It's a given that you'll visit a local beach, like Hamoa, for a swim. But Kau'i advises not to forget about the cool fresh

> water pools, such as those out at Kīpahulu.

"The goal when you finally get here is to rest and cleanse yourself," she said. "A combination of ocean and fresh water is how you do that."

Stay Awhile: Even though most tourists see Hana on the fly as they complete the Road to Hāna and continue on, Kau'i said

her town is not to be experienced "on the fly."

"You don't get Hāna if you just drive in and drive out," she said. "If you really want to understand it here, you have to stay at least two nights. It's how you get into the pace of this place, which is 4Low."



Kauʻi Kanakaʻole, Ala Kukui