

# MOLOKAI'S

When a major cruise

...falls on Hawaii's most proudly unspoiled island, residents began reports

...much tourism is too much?

**H**AWAII HAS HAD A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP with big ships ever since Captain James Cook stumbled upon the Sandwich Islands in 1778.

Whalers and sailors, missionaries and fruit barons followed with goods, diseases, and hidden agendas. Lately, however, the cargo has been more benign; the ships now deliver tourists—nearly a quarter-million cruise passengers last year—to see the greatest hits of Polynesia: Kauai's Na Pali Coast, the Big Island's volcanoes, Maui's humpback whales.

But when Holland America Line announced its plans to bring the first cruise ships to Molokai, an island so sleepy it doesn't even warrant a traffic light, the news resulted in protests—and lawsuits. There'd be no aloha from a place still best known for its leper colony.

Molokai's situation echoes that of countless emerging destinations around the globe: Can a poor, untouched place use tourism to jump-start its economy, and will its character ineluctably change once visitors descend? In the context of Hawaii, where prosperity on the major islands is sometimes viewed as a devil's bargain with developers, the choice is especially fraught.

ONLY 38 MILES LONG AND 10 MILES AT ITS WIDEST, Molokai is the antithesis of neighboring Oahu and Maui. The western third of the island is almost completely owned by Molokai

Ranch, which operates the only sizable resort, the grand Sheraton Molokai Lodge, as well as an equally luxe "tentalow" camp for those who want to

horseback-ride, mountain-bike, and skeet-shoot on 54,000 rolling acres of savanna. On the southern, leeward shore is the island's biggest town, Kaunakakai, with a three-block business district of mom-and-pop stores, a pair of gas stations, one art gallery, and plenty of meter-free parking.

When you drive east on the island's main two-lane road, modest bungalows and low-key condos quickly give way to stands of mangrove, centuries-old fish ponds, and the ruins of temples that made Molokai an ancient religious center. Inland, long-dead volcanoes rise nearly a mile into the air. Drivers in the few passing cars wave at each other; on an island with just 7,300 residents, chances are they're acquainted.

Molokai currently attracts mostly outdoors- and adventure-oriented travelers. They come to kayak and snorkel the barrier reef off the south coast (Hawaii's longest), check out the 3,000-foot-tall sea cliffs along the island's north shore (the world's highest), kick back on the sands of the three-mile Papohaku Beach (the state's longest), and take the white-knuckle mule >>



ride down Kalaupapa Trail, a serpentine path that leads to the haunting, isolated settlement where several dozen elderly exiles with leprosy, or Hansen's disease, still live.

More travelers have begun to discover that Molokai is Hawaii's most laid-back island; indeed, there are few better therapies than getting a hot loaf of sweet bread from Kanemitsu's Bakery in the morning, watching surfers ride the curls into Halawa Bay, or sipping a cocktail in the oceanfront bar of the tiki-style Hotel Molokai. Last year, the number of visitors jumped nearly 43 percent, from 70,233 in 2001 to 100,245. But compare that to Maui, which in 2002 welcomed more than 2 million travelers.

TOURISM BOOSTERS ON MOLOKAI didn't envision that limited calls by Holland America's 1,266-passenger *Statendam* would generate an island-wide controversy. They considered the ship an ideal way to attract more visitors without adding to the smattering of condos and hotels on the island.

"We don't want to be like our sister islands, because we have something very special here," says Maria Holmes, an Oahu transplant who directs the Molokai Visitors Association. "If we're not going to build more hotels but we still need to have our economy grow, what else can we offer?"

The MVA imagined that a small piece of Hawaii's burgeoning cruise action—a total of five half-day calls from December 2002 through November 2003—could help stimulate Molokai's moribund economy, which hasn't completely recovered since Big Pineapple pulled out in the early eighties. At 8.6 percent, the island's unemployment rate in 2002 was the highest in Hawaii—more than double the statewide average.

So it seemed like a coup when the MVA announced last year the December 28 arrival of the *Statendam*. The island would reap tens of thousands of dollars from fees and onshore spending, while Holland America would net a new destination.

But in the social, cooperative culture of Molokai, it is customary to "talk story" before big decisions. No review process took place before the MVA broke the news at a community meeting about HAL's impending arrival; state regulations don't require such a process, or even an environmental-impact statement.

**TO MANY NATIVE HAWAIIANS, THE ISLAND IS THE LAST, BEST PLACE TO FOLLOW A TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE. 'MOST PEOPLE WHO GREW UP IN THE STATE REMEMBER IT BEING LIKE MOLOKAI,' SAYS ONE RESIDENT**

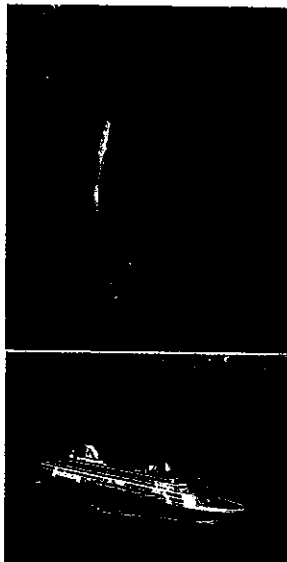
A ship's agent merely obtains a dock reservation from the Departments of Transportation and of Land & Natural Resources.

According to Holmes, the meeting soured after one board member basically told other attendees: The ship is coming. Get used to it. Many residents, however, wanted to know what could happen if an industrial-sized tourist enterprise collided with their rural island. Could sewage discharge damage the reef? Could a sick visitor spread the Norwalk virus while ashore?

They noted Molokai's limited infrastructure: Kaunakakai's pier has just one public toilet, and school buses would be needed to shuttle tour groups. Because of the reef, the *Statendam* would

have to anchor in windy Kalohi Channel and tender passengers ashore. If rough seas made it impossible to ferry them back, where would the marooned people stay? Opponents also considered the *Statendam* a harbinger; other cruise lines sailing from the West Coast would surely also begin scheduling calls.

"We don't want to be like Waikiki," says Walter Ritte Jr., a leader of Hui Hoopakele Aina ("Rescue the Land"), a group opposed to cruise-ship visits. "Then you bring this ship...they'll be coming like herds of cattle."



**OPPOSING FORCES? Top: A waterfall in the Halawa Valley. Above: The *Statendam*.**

Hui Hoopakele Aina retained a nonprofit law firm, Earthjustice, and filed suit in Maui's Second Circuit Court to demand an environmental-impact statement and public review. "We all want some tourism," Ritte told me, sitting at Subway, the lone franchise restaurant on Molokai. "The argument becomes, what kind? Those people want to do it the same way everyone else did: Increase your capacity, your airport, your harbors. Get big buses. But the end result is terrible."

Ritte is a veteran grassroots activist; it wasn't long before signs sprouted in front yards all around the island. Businesses that depend on tourism were split. Alex Puaa, who operates Molokai Off-Road Tours, told me he had "no problems" with the visits. But Dayna Harris, who leads sea-kayak expeditions, worried that cruise ships would scare off the independent travelers who are Molokai's lifeblood. "My take right now is we don't need them," Harris says.

As the *Statendam*'s visit approached, the MVA hired musicians; the Hui printed T-shirts. On the big day, more than 150 demonstrators assembled on the pier and in canoes. "Neither side wanted to back down," Harris says. "I just left it up to the gods, and they took care of it."

Strong winds kicked up whitecaps in the channel, making it too rough for the *Statendam* to lower its tenders. After a

few hours, the ship steamed away. In January, a second visit was scratched after the ship diverted to assist a yacht in distress.

At that point, the venture seemed star-crossed. In February, Holland America scuttled two scheduled April visits. Princess Cruises, which had planned to call this December, also canceled after state legislators asked the line to meet with residents.

TO MANY NATIVE HAWAIIANS, Molokai is a vestige of the old ways, the last, best place to follow a traditional lifestyle. Aside from privately held Niihau, it is the only island in the archipelago where the indigenous population comprises a majority.

"Most Hawaiians who grew up in the state remember it being like Molokai," says Harold "Tuddie" Purdy III, who owns a macadamia grove. Purdy stands to profit from an influx of tourists, but he staked a sign in his driveway castigating the cruise ships. "We're involved in tourism, on our level," Purdy says. "And our level is: Most Hawaiian Island."

However, Zhantell K. M. Dudoit, who operates a special-events company, calls the Hui's concerns "a lot of bogus hula-baloo." Every fall, she notes, thousands come for the Aloha Week outrigger-canoe races. "It's okay for locals to come," Alex Puaa adds wryly, "but not tourists."

On a clear day, one possible future—of subdivisions and golf resorts and office buildings—is visible across the water on Maui. No one I met on Molokai wants to live in such a place. That's why they came here, or never left. But they have to put food on the table. Everyone was struggling to find a balance that would sustain Old Hawaii a little longer.

At press time, Ritte had just received a surprising request. The two cruise lines wanted to address a community meeting in late September to announce that they would not call on Molokai. Tom Dow, Princess's vice president of public affairs, said the line would speak with Molokai residents first, then possibly explore the feasibility of bringing passengers on day excursions from Maui. "We're there to listen before we proceed," Dow said.

Ironically, at the same moment, another ship, the 340-foot *Clipper Odyssey*, reportedly attempted to land passengers on the pristine North Shore. "The battle looms," Ritte predicts. "This is not Kaunakakai Harbor, but a sacred area." A Clipper spokesman said the line makes one visit a year and does not intend to make a landing.

At any rate, the same strong seas that stymied the *Statendam* thwarted the *Odyssey's* planned visit. On Molokai, the gods still seem to set the ultimate terms. "Molokai does her part," Ritte says. "We do ours." +

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