

Kayaking Kauai

A pair of amateur water-sports enthusiasts discover the advantages of paddling in the warm waters off Hawaii

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“How’re ya’ doin’,” Wyatt Godinez asked, as he rested his paddle across the bow and waited for us to catch up. “Feeling it in your shoulders?” Godinez, our guide for the day, smiled, that Hawaiian-style “hang loose and chill out” smile that makes everything seem hunky dory.

He’d noticed we were feeling a tad anxious, though the day was perfect for kayaking, with no waves, the sun warming the water, scattered breezes ruffling the palms and a few puffy clouds floating overhead.

As anyone who’s read the fine print in a Hawaii guide book knows, the Pacific Ocean deserves respect. The currents between the islands can be tricky; more often they’re treacherous. Although you can drown as easily in one metre of water as you can in 10, knowing that the Kauai Channel, between Kauai and Oahu, is more than three kilometres deep, was sobering.

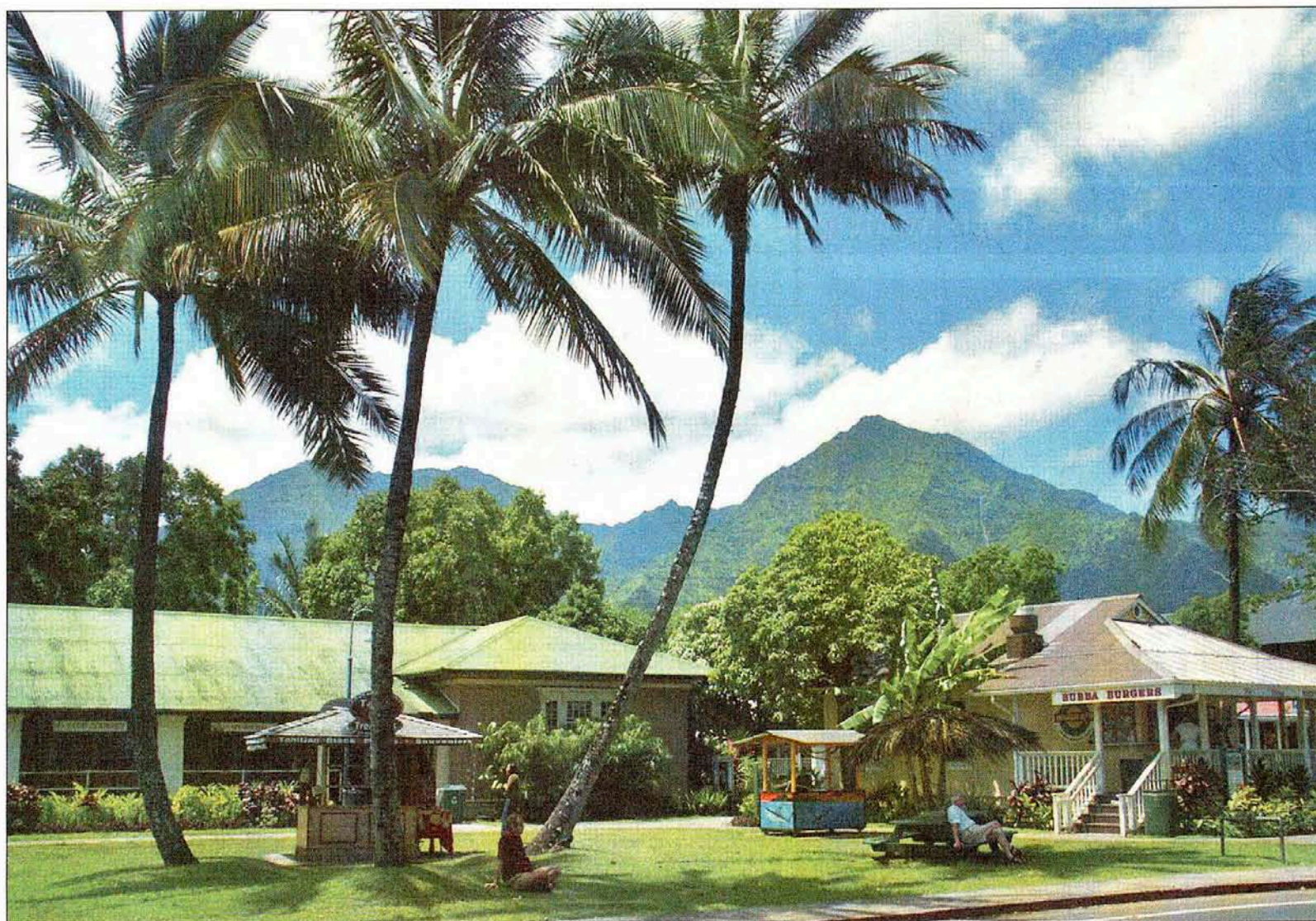
For a couple of amateur paddlers, we’d bested some dodgy waterways in less forgiving climes. We’d kayaked in Alaska’s remote Wood-Tikchik State Park, on Beverley Lake, a mountain jewel utterly inaccessible except by floatplane; people who venture there are on their own. We’d paddled — albeit briefly — on a cloudy afternoon in northern British Columbia, on Foch Lake, a glacial lake periodically whipped up by unpredictable, down-canyon winds. We braved the currents in the mighty Snake River, in Idaho’s Hell’s Canyon.

But our confidence waned as we parked at Kayak Kauai, a water-sports outfitter based in a rustic bungalow called the Old Canoe House, in Hanalei town (meaning “where leis are made”) on the island’s north shore.

The 22-year-old company runs a low-key business, but its owners, experienced outdoorsmen, have earned their chops. Micco Godinez, 54, and his brother Chino, 56, sport resumé’s that include climbing Denali and kayaking from Seattle north to Skagway, Alaska. Chino’s son, Wyatt, 21, who was hosing the saltwater off a stack of rental kayaks, is following in their footsteps. “The door’s over there,” he called out to us.

“You’ll have an easy time today,” said Chino, who was unpacking and pricing camping gear in the store part of the building. “Not much wind out there. Wyatt will be your guide — he knows the bay inside and out.”

On the official tourist map, the Hanalei looks like a big river, a thick blue line that snakes down the slopes of 1 569m Mount Wai’ale’ale and turns north for 23km. It looks perfect for paddling. In reality, the upper 14 to 16 kilometres of the river are too shallow for navigation. “You can paddle for two or three miles



A lazy afternoon in the town of Hanalei. Mountains can be seen in the distance on the far side of the bay.



Two novice paddlers are pulling together on the Hanalei River.

[3 to 5km] into the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge, but that’s all,” said Chino. “It’s a peaceful trip, with easy paddling. Wildlife? Well, no grizzlies or anything like that, but birds nest in the refuge, and you’ll see flowers and the taro fields. You’ll like the bay better.”

Some outfitters here have to transport their kayaks to a put-in site, but the Godinez brothers are lucky enough to be on a small canal — a former irrigation

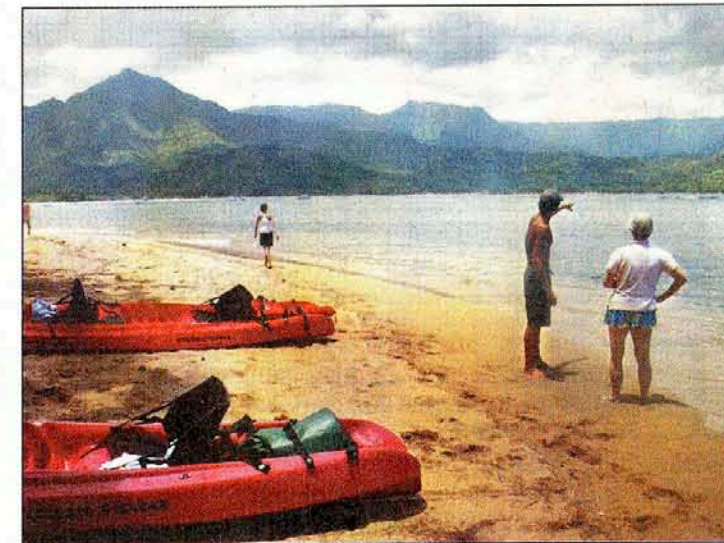
channel, actually — a mere 9m from the Hanalei. Wyatt put the kayaks into the water next to the dock, we climbed in and the adventure began.

The advantage about kayaking in Hawaii is that the water is warm. In Alaska, kayaks are fitted with watertight skirts intended to keep both paddler and boat dry. If the kayak tips over with you in it, you’d better know how to roll over and back upright, a trick that neither

of us has ever mastered. In Hawaii, where it doesn’t matter if you get wet, most kayakers are the sit-on-top type.

“If it capsizes and you fall out,” said Belt, “you grab it, flip it right side up, climb back in and keep going.” Trapped air pockets make the kayakers buoyant, holes through the hull drain excess water and most have hatches to hold “dry bags” for storing cameras and lunch.

Following Wyatt, we paddled clumsily



Na Pali Coast can be seen from the northeastern side of the bay.



There’s barely room for two kayakers in the channel, leading to the river.

down to the river only to find a crowd of beginners practising — and discovering that paddling in tandem is a mixed blessing.

On the one hand, two can share the work. But kayaking as a team demands compromise. The lead paddler has to adjust his pace to his partner’s, and that partner, in the rear, has to maintain the same rhythm and strength. After crashing into one weedy clump after another, we hit our stride and reached the entrance to Hanalei Bay.

The pastoral Hanalei Valley, lying between two mountain ridges, has been cultivated since ancient times. Fringed by waterfalls and softened by mist, the hills are scattered with green and gold, and long sand beaches edge the bay. Four movies, including *South Pacific*, were filmed nearby and the site remains in demand.

Underwater reefs across the entrance slow down waves from the ocean, keeping the bay relatively calm and making our loop trip easier than I’d expected. Finally we pulled into a deserted cove on the east shore.

“This is a good place to look for *kahelelani* shells, like the ones on Niihau

that they string into necklaces,” said Wyatt, kneeling down and digging his fingers through the sand. “If the colours are good, a film canister of these can go for as much as \$80 [2,419 baht],” he said, dropping a few of the pinhead-sized, pink and tan shells into my hand. “But these aren’t valuable,” he added laughing. “They have to be perfect.”

Back at the Old Canoe House, we asked Wyatt to recommend his favourite kayak outing, something a little more strenuous. “Do the Na Pali Coast trip,” he said. “But you’d have to get in shape.”

“I agree,” said Andrew Belt. “The Na Pali Coast trip is rated among the top 10 kayak trips, but it’s not for everybody. It’s 17 miles [27km] of paddling, yes, but that’s not all. There’s the van ride to the put-in at Haena State Beach. Then the sun beats down, the kayakers rock in the swells and even the strongest guys get seasick. When you’re puking all over it’s hard to have fun.

“Sure, the guides are sympathetic, but once you’ve passed Ke’e Beach there’s no turning back. Still, the scenery is magnificent with huge cliffs and empty beaches. Do it if you can. Next time.”

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Kayak Kauai, in Hanalei, rents its kayaks for 24-hour periods. Double kayakers are priced at \$52 (1,571 baht) and single kayakers, \$28 (847 baht). On-site facilities include showers, toilets and a changing room. Guided three-hour trips, including a lunch stop and snorkelling, cost \$60 (1,815 baht) per person. The full-day Na Pali Coast trip, with van transportation at both ends, goes for \$185 (almost 5,600 baht) per person. Visit www.kayakkauai.com/.

Kauai Waterski, Surf and Kayak, in Wailua, leads guided, half-day trips on the Wailua River, with an hour of kayaking and a hike to the waterfall, at 8:30am and 11:30am. Deluxe trips include an orientation, lunch and drinks go for \$70 (2,117 baht) per person. The regular guided trip is \$50 (1,511 baht) per person.