CULTURAL KAUAI

Kauai’i astounds with its physical beauty, its geological drama, its cliffs and rivers, beaches and waterfalls.

But the deepest experience of the Garden Island comes from its cultural richness. Here you can learn about the ancient legends of the island from Hawaiian cultural practitioners.

Attend a Japanese bon dance or visit a Buddhist temple. Sink into a Hawaiian lomi lomi massage. Thrill to ancient chant and hula and learn how to make a lei. Visit one of Kaua’i’s museums and learn about the island’s rich history. Enjoy a Hawaiian lū’au. Attend a festival honoring the music, traditions, foods, and historical figures of the island.

Kaua’i’s singular history casts it as a place apart, the oldest and northernmost of the Hawaiian Islands and the only one not conquered by King Kamehameha. History, archaeology, and oral tradition have revealed differences in the stone implements, language, and styles of heiau (pre-contact temples) between Kaua’i and the other Hawaiian Islands.

Its mysterious fishponds and stonework stand today as monuments to the ancient Menehune, thought to have been physically small in stature, unique to Kaua’i among the islands of Hawai’i, and, by some accounts, directly linked to central Polynesia. Kaua’i’s cultural practitioners know these roots and honor them as they share their traditional knowledge.

There are many free cultural events year-round, in parks, public places, and resorts. You can meet the revered Hawaiian elders of the community, affectionately known as kūpuna, watch cultural demonstrations and hear their stories, and learn about the ways of the ancients—how they made tools, implements, cordage, crafts, and lei, and how these traditions are observed and preserved today.

You can visit cultural sites, plantation festivals, and absorb the mana—spiritual power—of the surroundings. Cultural authenticity is not a given in the modern world, but here on Kaua’i you can count on it.

Here are some highlights of Kaua’i’s multi-cultural world.

CULTURAL EVENTS

Art Night in Hanapēpē — Every Friday night is Art Night Open House in Hanapēpē, the westside town lined with art galleries and shops in historic buildings. Traditionally a hub for enterprising mom-and-pop businesses, “Kaua’i’s Biggest Little Town” has turned its passion to art, and the whole town comes alive around it. Artists—sculptors, painters and crafters—fling open the doors to their galleries and studios every Friday night; coffee houses and cafés follow suit. Moviemakers love Hanapēpē (The Thorn Birds, Flight of the Intruder, Lilo and Stitch), and you’ll see why.

Kōloa Plantation Days—Hawai’i’s first large-scale sugar plantation opened in Kōloa in 1835, making the Kōloa Plantation Days Festival every July more historically significant than most. Residents prepare tirelessly for the festivities in Kōloa and Po’ipū, drawing tens of thousands of celebrants for the weeklong festivities. Hawaiian music and hula, a parade, historic walks, sports events, block parties—it’s all here in old Kōloa town, as well as performances in Japanese taiko drumming and Filipino folk dancing. When the Chinese lion dancers simmer down, the paniolo kick up their heels in the rodeo. The cooking demonstrations, a popular feature, highlight the agricultural bounty of the island.

Mokihana Festival —The Mālie Foundation each year sponsors the Mokihana Festival in September to perpetuate and support Hawaiian music on Kaua’i. Celebrating its 26th year in 2010, the festival is a
benchmark for Hawaiian music lovers and one of Kaua‘i’s perpetually popular events. The weeklong program includes competition in music, hula, and composing, as well as craft demonstrations, Hawaiian cultural workshops, a mini-film festival, and a youth music competition.

**O-Bon Festival Season**—Buddhist temples across the state honor their departed with the months-long summer O-Bon Festival Season. This annual event is a time to honor the ancestors, and Kaua‘i residents give it all they’ve got. Kaua‘i’s O-Bon season is especially festive because of the island’s place in history: Hawai‘i’s first sugar plantation brought the first wave of Japanese immigrants to Kōloa in 1835. Participants don their yukata and kimono and perform traditional Japanese dancing to taiko drums and singing. Food stalls are awash in the heady aromas of teriyaki beef, saimin, and other beloved local foods, and the entire community celebrates.

**Kaua‘i Concerts**—The Kaua‘i Concert Association is a fount of cultural options for lovers of the performing arts, bringing artists from all over the world for a series of concerts each year. Most of the concerts are in the 560-seat Kaua‘i Community College Performing Arts Center, an acoustically superior, state-of-the-art venue. Contemporary dance, classical violin and piano, jazz, contemporary banjo, and an impressive roster of musical traditions have or will come to Kaua‘i as the result of this organization. Some names, past and future: Hiroshima, Ernie Watts, the San Francisco Opera. Most of the artists also participate in the Educational Service program by teaching or performing in schools, senior centers, and other public venues on the island.

**Emalani Festival**—Launched in 1988, this October event is one of the most powerful and authentic Hawaiian experiences, held in a picturesque meadow in front of the Kōke‘e Natural History Museum in the uplands of Kōke‘e. The songs of rare honeycreepers ring through the forest as the queen, representing Queen Emma, enters on horseback as part of the royal procession. Festival organizers focus each year on a different aspect of the legacy of Queen Emma, the philanthropist ali‘i who visited Kōke‘e in 1871. As the dancers, artists, crafters and storytellers honor the queen in the meadow, her enduring legacy is recalled. Groups have journeyed from as far away as Japan and Europe for this event, and there are food booths, too.

**Waimea Town Celebration**—An annual party on Kaua‘i’s west side celebrating the Hawaiian and multi-ethnic history of the town where Captain Cook first landed. This is the island’s biggest two-day event and offers continuous island entertainment with loads of food, crafts, a canoe race, ‘ukulele and hai lei contests, and even a rodeo.

**Hawaiiana Festival**—Rarely does such a constellation of Hawaiian cultural practitioners gather in one place and at one time. Held each October on the south shore, the Hawaiiana Festival features masters from throughout the state who share their knowledge in all things Hawaiian: ancient hula and chant, lau hala weaving, kapa making, gourd carving, traditional Hawaiian tattoo art, the Hawaiian creation chant, and the practices and protocol that make up the indigenous core of Hawai‘i. At the fun-filled evening lū‘au, the performing and culinary arts converge; and in the workshops and demonstrations, the level of learning and exchange is transformative. The festival is held in indoor and outdoor venues, and many events are free of charge.

**Malama ‘Ola Festival**—Think aerobics, lomi lomi massage, Ayurveda, la‘au lapa‘au (Hawaiian herbal medicine), ho‘oponopono (Hawaiian balancing, “making things right”), martial arts, yoga, antioxidants, nutritional cooking, acupuncture, and Hawaiian ocean cleansing—and you have an idea of the scope of the three-day Malama ‘Ola Festival, held each October in Po‘ipū. This is a celebration of health, wellness, and rejuvenation, a time to honor and learn from the healing traditions of multiple cultures from Hawai‘i and around the world. Japanese, Filipino, Indian, Chinese, and other healing traditions are highlighted by those who practice them, in an ocean setting with its own restorative powers. The program is open to the public.

**Prince Kūhiō Celebration of the Arts**—This weeklong festival every March honors Prince Jonah Kūhiō Kalaniana‘ole, a devoted royalist elected to the U.S. Congress in 1902. Pageantry reigns, and there’s a royal ball along with the hula and Hawaiian music, guided hikes, storytelling, films, and lectures on
Hawaiian healing and Hanapepe salt-making. Experts in tapa making, wood-carving, Hawaiian lomi lomi massage, archaeology, genealogy, and many other cultural domains share their knowledge, and some of Hawai‘i’s finest entertainers take the stage.

**Kaua‘i Music Festival**—Kaua‘i’s passionate love of music reaches a crescendo at this four-day celebration, held in July in east Kaua‘i. The event unites prominent and aspiring songwriters, performing artists in all musical genres, and music scholars and industry icons from Hawai‘i and throughout the U.S. Mainland. Participants have ranged from 13 to 82 years of age, including Grammy-award winners, celebrated songwriters, and some of the finest performers in the industry.

**CULTURAL PLACES**

Kaua‘i is peppered with culturally significant places that date back to pre-contact, and even mythical, times. The ‘Alekoko Menehune Fishpond, located up the hill from Nāwiliwili Harbor near the Hulē‘ia River, is a monument to the mysterious Menehune, the race of pre-historic people who are said to have completed their prodigious feats in a single night. What the Menehune may have lacked in physical size, they have made up in modern lore. Their presence looms large in sites like the Menehune Fishpond, 900-feet-long, and in stories of the Menehune Ditch, covered over with time but at one time a marvel of masonry.

The south shore town of Kōloa has never lost its character since Hawai‘i’s first sugar plantation was established there in 1835. Small mom-and-pop shops and restaurants line the one main street in old-fashioned wooden storefronts, as they have for decades. Nearby, Kōloa Landing, at one time the third-largest whaling port in Hawai‘i, is a throwback to the whaling heyday of the 1800s.

In nearby Lāwā‘i Valley, the Kōloa Plantation laborers, largely immigrants from Japan, built 88 Shingon shrines that were a source of comfort in their new home. Built in 1904, the shrines are a cultural treasure, the only site outside of Japan to replicate the 88 shrines of Shikoku, Japan. A massive volunteer effort has restored the shrines and the site, and today the non-denominational, non-profit Lāwā‘i International Center opens its doors by appointment or on the second and last Sunday afternoon of each month. Every July, hundreds of observers from around the world attend the center’s Pilgrimage of Compassion, when shakuhachi Grandmaster Riley Lee plays his haunting melodies from the top of the hill.

In Līhu‘e, the Kaua‘i Museum—itself a cultural artifact, a two-story, 1923 stone structure—houses a permanent collection of historical treasures: vintage photographs, stone implements, precious feather work, native-wood calabashes, kapa, and other emblems of Kaua‘i and Ni‘ihau. The building, originally a library, opened as a museum in 1960. A few minutes away, across from the Līhu‘e Sugar Mill, the island’s plantation heritage springs to life in the manorial architecture of Grove Farm Homestead Museum, a monument to the island’s plantation history. Down the road, in Puhi, the Kaua‘i Plantation Railway recalls the plantation era as it runs through Kilohana, a working 105-acre plantation anchored in a Tudor-style mansion from the 1930s now housing a restaurant, art galleries and gift shops.

In east Kaua‘i, the Wailua River area is considered one of the most sacred regions in Hawai‘i. Beyond the gaiety of the beachgoers who snorkel and swim in the protected lagoon of Lydgate Beach Park, there is a strong sense of the past. Starting at the mouth of the Wailua River, prehistoric Hawaiians built a string of temples—heiau—that follow the river to the remote interior of the island. Some plaques are displayed in the Lydgate area explaining the purpose of the heiau. At least eight major heiau—some say 11, some say more—were built along the river to honor the Hawaiian gods, grant sanctuary to lawbreakers, honor the prophets and orators, serve as a royal birthplace, and perform other rituals of pre-contact Hawai‘i.

You’ll hear some, but not all, of these stories on a riverboat ride up the Wailua River, one of the three navigable rivers on Kaua‘i. While the river today is a recreational and scenic waterway, popular among kayakers, boaters and moviemakers, its place in Kaua‘i’s cultural history is beyond measure.

On the north shore, the view from the Hanalei Valley Lookout, of glistening taro fields still in cultivation, bespeaks the town’s enduring roots in agriculture. Beyond the trendy galleries and contemporary
restaurants is a rich legacy of taro and rice farming. The Haraguchi family’s rice mill museum, open to the public and on the National Register of Historic Places, is in its sixth generation of operation. So is the family’s taro farming, which produces the taro for the poi, smoothies, taro burgers, and other popular specialties sold at the family’s lunch wagon, Hanalei Taro & Juice Co.

**CULTURAL PRACTITIONERS**

Kaua’i has an esteemed corps of dedicated cultural practitioners who share their knowledge in workshops, classes, and events year-round. Some of them work quietly behind the scenes, restoring *heiau* with their students or participating in grassroots environmental and cultural programs. These cultural treasures often share their knowledge at local festivals and events, and in resort-sponsored activities. Many hotels offer cultural programs and events free of charge, so check with your concierge.

*The Kauai Visitors Bureau is a division of the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau, which is contracted by the Hawaii Tourism Authority (HTA), the state of Hawaii’s tourism agency, for marketing management services in North America. The HTA was established in 1998 to ensure a successful visitor industry well into the future. Its mission is to strategically manage Hawaii tourism in a sustainable manner consistent with the state of Hawaii’s economic goals, cultural values, preservation of natural resources, community desires, and visitor industry needs.*

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