The adventure of Kalaupapa National Historical Park

Like a Gettysburg battlefield or an Anasazi cliff dwelling, the national park at Moloka‘i’s Kalaupapa Peninsula tells a rich and important story about being human. But its human drama tends to overshadow another fact— one that’s equally compelling. Kalaupapa is one of the most thrilling landscapes on Earth. Taken as a one-day adventure, the trek repays your moderate exertion with maximum inspiration.

In fact, you scarcely have to exert yourself at all— just walk a short distance from your car at Pala‘au State Park—to get an airplane-level view of the terrain. Suddenly you’re standing at the top of the highest sea cliffs in the world. The sheer green walls, sliced with waterfalls, go on beyond seeing. So does the ocean, blue as a dark gem. White waves crash against the rocks two thousand feet below.

That’s where Kalaupapa is. Down there, all alone. It’s a wedge-shaped piece of runaway land that seems to have slipped out from the base of the cliff and gotten stuck. You see a few confetti-sized rooftops and a one-lane airstrip that looks as though someone rubbed with an eraser on the grassy lava.

Kalaupapa gives the word “remote” new meaning.

Scarcely more than forty people live there, all of them white-haired. The cargo barge arrives once a year—an annual Kalaupapa holiday, when everyone gets to look at each other’s new stuff and make jokes about it.
Once a day, right through town comes the Damien Tours bus, yellow as a dusty banana, a vintage all-metal school bus with green plastic seats and stainless-steel hang-on poles. When the bus comes through, the residents make sure they’re busy somewhere else. They prefer not to be put on display.

You’d probably hide out, too, no matter where you lived. But Kalaupapa is a special place. The residents are all survivors of a well-known tragedy—now very much a thing of the past—and they’ve been given the privilege of living out their days in peace and privacy.

Starting in 1866, Hawai’i citizens who contracted Hansen’s Disease, the dreaded “separating sickness” or “leprosy” that figures so prominently in Bible stories – were exiled here, virtually cast away. This was the final mission of Father Damien, recently sainted, and other “Martyrs of Moloka‘i” whose sacrifices inspired a global effort to cure the disease.

In keeping with its hard-won spirit of privacy, Kalaupapa offers no lodging, no shopping, and no lunch counter. Visits are restricted to a single day.

Actually, there’s an exception to this rule. The national park has a volunteer work program with three-day-minimum stays. In fact, for people who like to be outdoors and doing something purposeful, the park’s volunteer program offers a startlingly original way to visit Hawai’i – preserving rare native habitat for endangered plants and animals, and working around one of the most valuable archeological preserves in the State. No matter how you visit, you have to be at least sixteen years old and you have to be a guest of one of the residents.

It’s easy to become a guest – call for a reservation with Damien Tours and get on that clattering school bus. The driver is always a resident who knows the stories of this peninsula then and now. As the bus bounces along the rough-graded road from town to
the site of Saint Damien’s church, you laugh and fume at tales of incompetence and injustice. The lingering emotion of the tour is something like awe – especially after you’ve sat in the church that Damien built by hand and heard of saintly people who sacrificed their lives here. In the end, the experience of visiting Kalaupapa is as uplifting as the wall of cliffs beside it.

But when you’re standing up at the top, at the lookout, staring down the long cliff, it’s natural to ask yourself – how? How do you get down there?

Obviously, the airstrip offers one option. Pacific Wings Airlines makes a couple runs a day between the peninsula and Honolulu or Maui.

Or you can walk.

There’s one trail – four miles long and two thousand feet down. The trailhead starts not far from the lookout. Bring lunch and lots of water. And take your time. Stop to savor the impressions – the native forest that cloaks the cliff, the birds trilling, the phenomenal sea crashing below you. The trail is wide and perfectly safe. It’s built to accommodate the maneuvering of mules.

Yes, you can ride a mule down the trail to Kalaupapa. Each mule trek is timed to meet with the old bus. The mules are big and brown, sure-footed and safe – safe as your living-room sofa. It’s important to keep remembering that “sofa” image on your way down the cliff – when you’re mounted tall in the saddle and your steed is casually clopping its hoofs around the outside edges of the trail’s twenty-six dizzying switchbacks.

The ascent, of course, is no piece of cake, not even on mule-back. It’s not easy, nudging and kicking your mulish way all the way back up the switchbacks. By the time you get topside, elated in body and mind, you know that you’ve had an experience. Something completely involving.
And when you get topside, whether by hoof or foot, you are surrounded by something just as rare – the remarkable island of Moloka‘i. The glow of amazing remoteness that you feel on the peninsula does not fade up above. The entire island is a place snatched out of time.

For help planning your Kalaupapa excursion, and for assistance with everything you do on Moloka‘i, be sure to rely on the Moloka‘i Visitors Association, molokai-hawaii.com.

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