

# Backpacking the Na Pali coast

– Dan Styer

In February 1971, when I was 16 years old, my family took a vacation trip to Hawaii. On the island of Kauai my dad rented a car and drove up the northeast coast. As we travelled farther from the county seat of Lihue, the scenery grew increasingly dramatic, the waves larger, the one-way bridges more frequent, the road narrower until it ended altogether and transportation continued as the Kalalau Trail along the Na Pali (“many cliffs”) coast. My entranced mom set off walking along the trail, but the sun was setting and we had to turn back. She examined the trailhead bulletins and saw that this trailhead opened up to sixteen miles of trail, leading to cliffs, waterfalls, and remote beaches: she and I agreed that we would need to come back and hike this trail network not as an evening stroll but as a days-long backpack.

Well, my mom retired from backpacking at age 73 in 2001, and she never did make it back to Hawaii. But that couldn’t stop me. On 21 January 2018, almost 47 years after that abbreviated walk with my mom, I set off from the exact same trailhead for a four-day backpack into the Na Pali coast.



It was a fantastic trip in the literal sense of that overused term. Rainbows. Birdlife: Tropicbirds, Egrets, Red-crested Cardinals, and many others that I couldn't recognize. Plantlife: A riot of new and unfamiliar species: ferns, orchids, the many-rooted Hala tree, the yellow-fruited Noni tree, an aloe-like plant with leaves 6 feet tall and flowering spikes 40 feet tall (*Furcraea foetida*). When I found a single familiar species, the Silvery Glade Fern, I was overcome with home-like comfort. Terrain: I've hiked on sedimentary rock, on metamorphic rock, on granite. But this is the first time I've ever hiked on volcanic basalt. It erodes into fantastic spires and fluted cliffs unlike any rock familiar to me. There are many waterfalls, many rock windows. The cliffs fall dramatically to the sea, and the sea crashes dramatically against the cliffs.



And this is the biggest difference from my familiar hiking. I'm used to grand scenic panoramas and to intimate, detailed vignettes, but I'm used to them being static. When the wind rustles the leaves it provides novel movement, but nothing like the surge and fall of waves that reshape the vistas here every moment. Nor is there anything repetitive about this wave drama: Sometimes the waves simply break against the rocks, sometimes the breakers leave streamers behind (photo below taken at sunset at Kalalau Beach), sometimes they reflect from the cliffs and then merge with the next incoming wave ("constructive interference" as physicists like to say) producing a huge mound of water capped with spray.



Nature is not the sole drawing force of this area. I walked off the main trail in Hanakoa Valley, where a side trail promised a view of a waterfall hundreds of feet tall. I found it, and it was worth going to, but I also found the terraces built by ancient Hawaiians so that they could grow taro. Near Kalalau Beach I actually camped on similar ancient taro terraces. The ancients never intended for their work to shelter hikers. It made me wonder: To what unexpected uses will my creations be applied a thousand years from today?



On the third day, as I was walking back from Kalalau Beach, I was surprised to look down and find a sea arch that I had missed on my inbound hike.



I stood here for some minutes, feeling the strong tropical sun, watching the variety of the waves, listening to the crash and the roar, when the corner of my eye glimpsed something far out at sea. I turned to look carefully: Another blow of spray. A pectoral fin slapping the surface. A fluke lifting above the waves: It was a pod of whales.