



# BELOW THE GAP

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Life in wild, sparsely inhabited and starkly beautiful Kaupō



Weather is the main event on “the back side” of Haleakalā. Out along this rugged coastline sits the small community of Kaupo, today made up of a ranch, a general store, two churches and a few dozen hardy characters. Left: Nick Soon opened Kaupo Store in 1925, well before the road passing by was paved. It’s still the only stop for refreshments in this lonely territory.

**Measured from its submarine base, Haleakalā is taller than Everest. The young Hawaiian volcano shoots up 29,703 feet from the ocean floor—though only a third of that height breaks the surface. You get the full sense of the Maui mountain’s heft when you head east on Pi‘ilani Highway, past the green tufted hills of ‘Ulupalakua to what locals call “the back side.”**

On clear days the view gobsmacks you. Haleakalā’s massive leeward slope slides unchecked into the dark blue Pacific. Jagged black lava plains fringe the coast. The lonely highway—named for an ancient king—unspools like a dropped ribbon across the landscape. Burnt rubber marks scar the asphalt, and street signs bear graffitied enhancements: DIP and NO SHOULDER now read NACHO DIP, SKINNY DIP and NO SHOULDER TO CRY ON.

Remote and slightly lawless, Route 31 wraps around Maui’s parched southeastern coast to reach the rainforests of Kīpahulu and Hāna. Rental car agents forbid traveling this partially unpaved road—though many a convertible Mustang has braved it. Pop a tire out here and you’re on your own: at least an hour’s drive from “civilization” with no cell service or power outlets to speak of.

This land recalibrates your internal scale from human- to giant-sized. Here, behemoths farm the wind. As the road proceeds due east, Auwahi Wind’s eight turbines come into view—so gargantuan that new sections of road were built just to transport the four-hundred-foot-long blades from Kahului Airport. Against Haleakalā, though, they look hardly bigger

than ordinary utility poles. Their fuel, the salt-laden breeze, is bottomless. To exit your car here is to risk having your hat snatched off and blown to Tahiti.

Beyond the windmills, the road snakes through a canyon and over a sea arch. You might spy a wiliwili tree, its octopus-like limbs flush with scarlet blooms. You’ll cross a dry riverbed and cattle guards that rattle beneath your tires like New Year’s firecrackers. Watch out for baleful, free-ranging cows; they believe they have the right of way, and no amount of honking convinces them otherwise. Near mile marker 33, the smooth pavement surrenders to a patchwork of potholes and finally to gravel. At last, with little fanfare, you’ll arrive in Kaupo, population: seventy.

Slow to a stop at Kaupo Store, the only open business for miles. Get a cold drink from the icebox. If you’re curious, stick around. You might be allowed to listen in on the locals talking story next door.

**“You ever get tired** of watching all the cars?” Sam Aina asks his neighbors Linda Clark and Helen Nielsen. The three of them sit on the weathered lānai of Kaupo School. The two-room schoolhouse closed decades ago, but it’s still a good place to watch the



world go by. "When I was little," says Aina, "if we saw a car, we'd jump over the rock wall and hide." He attended school here from '56 to '59—until the sixth grade, he guesses. "We didn't know what grade we were, 'cause we were all piled up in one room." He would climb out the classroom window and run off, he says, his eyes brimming with amusement. His teacher, Dolly Mahalo Ke'ike, was too old to give chase. She'd been scolding kolohe (mischievous) students since at least 1914.

While most Kaupō kids went to Hāna or Lahaina for high school, Aina went to Europe. His father was in the military, so the family moved around Germany and France. Aina ended up attending junior college in England. "I was studying to be a minister," he says. Both women burst out laughing. He scowls and continues. "I was there when The Beatles and The Kinks got popular. I hung out with the rockers and the mods."

In the end, Aina wasn't ordained. He returned to Hawai'i to finish college on O'ahu. As often as possible he came home to Kaupō—but getting out here was tricky. Back then the barely passable unimproved road took hours to navigate. It could swallow cars. Instead of risking it, Aina's friend would drop him off at the summit of Haleakalā. From there Aina would walk nearly twenty miles through the crater's frigid moonscape and down Kaupō Gap. "No jacket," he says. "Just a bottle of tequila."

**Kaupō Gap looms** in the distance behind the schoolhouse. The broad, rectangular valley reaching into the heart of Haleakalā is the defining feature of this region. It formed during a Pleistocene-age landslide, when the volcano's southern flank collapsed and slid seaward. Later, lava and mud flows poured through the gap and down to the sea, leaving a wide spread

of rubble in their wake. The Hawaiians called this nutrient-rich plain Nā Holokū, the cloak, and planted it with sweet potato and dryland taro.

Oral histories indicate that the forest once descended farther down the mountain, and rainfall was more abundant. "This year has been wet," says Aina. "Just like the old days." Everyone remarks how green everything is, greener than they've ever seen it. For weeks the mountainside has been laced with waterfalls tumbling thousands of feet down sheer walls. It's a spectacular, uncommon sight.

Kaupō has always been kua'āina, backcountry, but in ancient times it supported a significant population of fishermen, farmers and ali'i (chiefs). Maui-Loa, the first ali'i to rule the entire island, was born here. Twenty generations later the great ali'i Pi'ilani laid the foundation for the road that would encircle Maui and bear his name. Lo'alo'a heiau, the largest war temple throughout the Islands, sits nearly forgotten on this slope, along with other archeological sites: fishing shrines, petroglyphs and the remains of extensive sweet potato fields. Anthropologist E.S. Handy called the Kaupō field system "the greatest continuous dry planting area in the Hawaiian Islands." It stretched almost four thousand acres and could have fed as many as ten thousand people.

After Westerners arrived in Hawai'i, foreign diseases decimated Native communities. Missionaries recorded 3,220 souls living in Kaupō in 1832—one of the highest counts for any Maui district at the time, but probably much lower than pre-contact numbers. Not long after, a deadly smallpox epidemic swept through the area. In 1889 a whaler-turned-cowboy named Antone Vierra Marciel bought a large parcel of back side acreage at auction. He built a house up in the valley and let cattle loose to range the abandoned



Kaupō's typically parched hillside erupted with greenery this year after an unusual spate of wet weather; the verdant landscape seen here is a rarity in the region. Opposite page: After a big rain, county workers will drive along battered Pi'ilani Highway and scoop fresh blacktop into potholes. This patchwork road is the result of many rainstorms.



Another old Kaupō home (above) falls victim to the elements, while (at right) Huialoha Church has a fresh roof and steeple after its recent renovation. In its prime, Huialoha held two standing-room-only services each Sunday; latecomers listened through the windows. Both Huialoha and nearby St. Joseph Catholic Church (bottom left) were built in the mid-1800s. In those days, the Kaupō population numbered in the hundreds, possibly thousands. Several Hawaiian-language schools existed then, including one at Huialoha. All that remains of it now is an orphaned rock wall and window (bottom right). Visiting priests still hold noontime mass at St. Joseph on months with a fifth Sunday.



sweet potato patches. Kaupo Ranch was born.

Modern-day Kaupō comprises old Marciel's ranch, the general store, the schoolhouse and two churches—all of which date back nearly a century or more. Aina's family has been here throughout it all. "He's too humble to say so," says Nielsen, "but his family is ali'i of this area."

**On calm nights in Kaupō**, when the slight breeze moves through the kiawe trees, the branches squeak like a violin being tuned. Coral and lava boulders clatter in the tide. If the paniolo (cowboys) have rounded up some wandering cattle, you'll hear the penned animals bellowing in the corral like petulant tuba players. "To me, that's like music," says Clark, whose house sits beside the corral. "I sleep like a baby."

Aina deals with different noisemakers at his home: whales. "They sound like cows in the pasture, only a hundred times louder," he claims. During winter humpbacks frequent the small bay beneath his property. When they surface they exhale like pent-up geysers. They moan and slap the water with their tails and extra-long pectoral fins. Aina throws up his hands. "The whales make so much noise, you cannot even sleep!"

He lives on Mā'alo, a bluff "famed for illicit love affairs," according to Hawaiian scholar Mary Kawena Pukui. Whatever humans might have gotten up to in the past, the marine life here is definitely busy. Over the years, Aina has watched monk seals hunt fish and humpbacks birth calves in the bay. "It takes about four hours for the baby to come out," he says. The newborn, its mother and male escort drift toward Huialoha Church. Before they get too close to the rocks, the two-ton calf jumps for its first time.

Aina knows East Maui's seascape as intimately as its landscape. Following college he moved to Hāna,

where he worked for the post office for twenty-seven years. Work came second to fishing. Often he paid two local girls to deliver the mail for him while he went out on his boat. He sold his catch to Mama's Fish House (the nearest fancy restaurant) and helped state wildlife officials tag fish. The Kaupō shoreline drops off sharply into a deep trench, he says. Pelagic fish are abundant here but they don't stay long. The fast-moving 'Alenuihāhā channel sucks them right by.

**On clear days you can see** the outline of Hawai'i Island shimmering across the channel. Kohala lies just thirty miles away. In ancient times, when Hawai'i Island chiefs wanted to make war on Maui, they landed here. Kaupō means to arrive (kau) by night (pō)—a reference to the midnight landing of war canoes. Old-timers pronounce the name of this place with deep-bellied, resonant vowels. Pō, taken by itself, is a much bigger word, one of the biggest in the Hawaiian language. It evokes deep, mystical darkness—the source of all life, according to Hawai'i's ancient creation chant, the Kumulipo. It's a fitting association for a volcanic hinterland yet untouched by electric lights and wedged against the Pacific.

Locals prefer this connotation to another, an old saying that's posted at the Kaupō-Kīpahulu boundary. A road sign reads, "The Kaupō rain that makes one hide under a rock." Nielsen and Clark both scoff at this. No one who lives out here hides from the rain!

Clark's grandfather Scott Ha'i wrote a popular mele (song) called "Ahulili" about a peak above Kaupō. It describes a fragrant mist that drenches the hill but often disappears. Those who perform the song interpret it thus: The mist is a metaphor for a wahine (woman) with two suitors—one a hardworking paniolo who rides the range every morning and the other



a romantic loafer who plays guitar under a mango tree. The burning question is, Why does the Kīpahulu side of the mountain—the loafer—get more mist? The clever lyrics play on ‘Ahulili, the hill’s name, and lili, the Hawaiian word for jealous.

Each ridge and rocky islet on the back side has a name and a story—or several. Both Clark and Aina’s relatives knew of the piko stone, an offshore rock where new mothers hid umbilical cords hoping to protect their infants’ mana (spiritual power). Aina says that Māalo served as a refuge for wāhine (women) who broke kapu (taboos) during menstruation. His grandmother made regular pilgrimages down the coast to harvest pa‘akai, or sea salt—a big commodity before refrigeration. She used a hundred pounds to preserve a year’s worth of meat.

Salt pans and petroglyphs can still be found at Nu‘u bay. The safest landing along Maui’s southeastern coast, it first harbored war canoes, then steamships. It’s by no means calm, but it was the only place to ship out cattle on the back side, so many ranches used it.

“The paniolo wore flower lei on their hats to represent where they were from,” says Aina. “Kaupō wore white crown flower. Kīpahulu wore purple crown flower, I think, and Kahikinui wore wiliwili seed.” Bedecked in flowers, the cowboys swam their cattle out to the waiting ships.

**“If I had to choose** one word for this place,” Nielsen says, “it would be elemental.” Rain. Wind. Rock. Sun: The bare elements have personality here. Weather is an event. Ghostly curtains of rain can be seen offshore, slowly sweeping toward land. Damp gusts run ahead of the deluge, twirling coconut fronds and jostling old windows in their wooden sashes. The first drops begin to fall, followed by a downpour.



During big rains, sections of the road wash away. Dry gulches turn into raging waterfalls—Aina’s driveway, for instance. He shakes his head at the tourists who stop to photograph the dangerous flood.

Rural life requires a hardy temperament. Kaupō residents are intimately bound by blood, disasters or cooperative labors. More than once, earthquakes have severed access to Hāna, isolating Kaupō even further. In 2006 a rockslide blocked the road for two years. People couldn’t commute to work. Kids had to transfer schools. The store nearly shut down for good.

“You’ve got to love this place to live out here,” says Aina. “With no electricity, no water, it’s hard.” More often than not he can be found mowing the lawn at Huialoha Church, where his mother, brother and son are buried. His son hit a cow driving home one night and suffered brain injuries. Aina outfitted the family home with a \$10,000 hospital bed and cared for the comatose boy for six years.

Clark returned to her family’s land in Kaupō in the early ’80s. She was 18 years old. Raised on O‘ahu, she accompanied her parents on trips to Maui. They would stop at every house between Hāna and Kaupō to pay respects to each friend and relative. “Families were tight and worked together,” she remembers. “Friends delivered each other’s babies. No one had birth certificates because they were all born at home. Their baptism was their first official certificate.”

Clark grew up throwing fishnets and picking limu (seaweed) and wanted to raise her own children to be self-sufficient. “Living off the grid means maintaining your own systems,” she says. “You keep pretty busy.” As president of the Kaupō Community Association, she organizes town meetings. Everyone comes, including Rose Soon, whose father built Kaupo Store, and retired paniolo Uncle Chunga and Carl “Soot” Bredhoff. De-



Linda Clark serves as the president of the Kaupō Community Association. She and the group’s other members are working to restore Kaupo School, pictured here. Small schoolhouses like these were once fixtures in Hawai‘i’s rural communities; one can only imagine how students strained to hear their teachers’ lessons when rain pounded on the tin roof.



Helen Nielsen finds plenty to occupy herself with in Kaupo's hinterlands. She paints, tends to her beehives and keeps abreast of Hawai'i politics via the Internet. She regularly travels to Honolulu for work but prefers the solitude of East Maui. "Here you're just with yourself," she says. "You find out what you're capable of."

spite its minute size and extreme isolation, this community gets things done. Twice Kaupo's recluses and cowboys rallied the necessary funds and volunteers to renovate Huialoha Church from floorboard to steeple. Last summer a thief nicked a firearm from a local residence. Two ranch hands spotted the burglar sitting on the steps of Kaupo Store. They disarmed and detained him until law enforcement arrived.

The association's latest project: turning Kaupo School into a cultural center. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2000, the two-room schoolhouse is a shambles. Missing wooden slats in the walls let in more sunlight than the antique paned windows. Empty chalk trays mark the site of long-gone chalkboards. Despite its disrepair, it's one of the best-preserved examples of the rural schoolhouses that once populated the Islands.

The association's efforts send ripples beyond Kaupo, into a large diaspora. Scores of people trace their roots to this storied place and feel a magnetic connection to it, even if circumstances force them to live elsewhere. "Lots of people all over say their family is from Kaupo," says Aina. A list of only Antone Vierra Marciel's descendants fills five typewritten pages.

And while so many have moved away, a few have migrated here.

**By Kaupo standards,** Nielsen is a newcomer. She and her partner Jonathan Starr left New York City for this remote outpost in the '80s. Upon landing in Kahului, they headed straight to the back side, where Starr's sister lived. Nielsen didn't see the rest of the island for months. She and Starr built two Quonset huts and a house above his sister's. Their catchment water system is gravity-fed, and solar panels power their home. "People ask how far it is to civilization,"

she says. "I think it's the most civilized out here."

Shortly after she moved here, she was hiking in the forest when a red-tailed tropicbird soared right over her head. The elegant seabirds favor windy cliffs; Kaupo is one of the best places to spot them. Nielsen interpreted the encounter as an auspicious welcome.

Nielsen has the qualities of a frontierswoman: grounded, resilient and generous. She's a self-taught painter and beekeeper. Her pale blue eyes reflect a lifetime of staring at the horizon and beyond. From her eagle's nest at Kālepa, she's managed to play a role in state politics and conservation efforts. She helped found the Hawaiian Islands Land Trust and serves on the University of Hawai'i Board of Regents. "A lot of people can't stand being alone," she says. "Here you're just with yourself. You find out what you're capable of."

For a spell in '86, Nielsen worked at Kaupo Store, selling soda pop, canned sardines and Dramamine to whoever wandered in. As many customers arrived by horse as by car. She once overheard a conversation between two tourists who had driven from opposite directions. One man said: Don't go any farther. The road is terrible! The other said the same thing. In the thirty years since, not much has changed on the back side—which is just how the locals want it.

Whichever way you go, getting to Kaupo is an adventure. Many people follow in Aina's footsteps, hiking through Haleakalā crater and down the steep and rocky Kaupo Gap. Walking sticks and layered clothing are advised; it's your call on the tequila. If you're driving Pi'ilani Highway, Nielsen says the trick is to go slowly. "Don't honk around the blind corners. Locals hate that. Just drive five miles an hour." Rose Soon recently turned 91 and still makes the drive. If she can do it, so can you. **HH**

