

Courtesy Mauna Kea Resort Archive Collection

# ROCKEFELLER'S HAWAII

Developer, environmentalist and patron of the arts Laurance Rockefeller pursued a progressive vision for Hawai'i tourism while striving to protect its natural and cultural heritage

STORY BY SHANNON WIANECKI

## Rockefeller's Hawaii!

**I**n the spring of 1960, Laurance Rockefeller went swimming at Kaunaloa, a half-

moon of sand at the edge of a roadless lava plain on the Kohala coast. He marveled at the manna rays somersaulting in the bay and the surrounding volcanoes, Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, hunkered on the horizon. This was his first trip to Hawaii; Governor William Quinn had invited the grandson of oil baron John D. Rockefeller here in hopes that he'd invest in what had recently become the fifth state.

The expedition proved fruitful. A year later Rockefeller broke ground on a resort at the site—a resort that would influence future hotel development in Hawaii and set a standard for style worldwide. He furnished the property with one of the most significant private collections of Asian and Oceanic art, and through his patronage injected new life into the art of Hawaiian kapa. He funded the construction of Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway and helped restore a major heiau (temple). His efforts spread to other islands, too: On O'ahu he fostered the development of the East-West Center, and on Maui he launched a drive to increase the size of Haleakalā National Park. His contributions to Hawaii continue to bear fruit.

**I**n 1910 Rockefeller was born into the richest, most powerful family in the United States. Aside from staggering wealth, he inherited a spirit of philanthropy and a reverence for wilderness. On a trip to see the California redwoods, his father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., discovered that the

syrian giants were in danger of being logged. To prevent this he bought 9,400 acres of forest and gave it to the state. The grove remains the largest old-growth redwood forest in the world. The Rockefellers particularly loved Wyoming, where they acquired 33,562 pristine acres that Laurance later donated to Grand Teton National Park.

Unsurprisingly, Laurance Rockefeller became a champion of environmental causes. Alongside his many other pursuits, he served as an environmental adviser to five US presidents. As chairman of the White House Conference on Natural

Beauty, he emphasized the vital importance of public access to wilderness: "Natural beauty must be an integral part of our national life, not regarded as a frill or afterthought or luxury."

Rockefeller arrived in Hawaii 11 just months after the transition from US territory to statehood. Jet airliners had recently cut the travel time across the Pacific in half, from fourteen to six hours. A wave of tourism was poised to break across the archipelago. George Mason, the state's economic development director, planned Rockefeller's itinerary with the aim of developing destinations beyond Waikiki.

Over twelve days Rockefeller toured every potential site for a resort. He peered into the smoking cauldron of Kilauea from the Volcano House, stayed at the Coco Palms on Kauai and inspected bungalows nestled between the rainforest and sea in Hāna, Maui. "We started on Kauai and made sure all beaches were either visited or flown over," Mason recalled in 2004. "Rockefeller] was a great judge of beaches."

Kaunaloa was the last beach Rockefeller visited; he spotted it from the plane. The hard-to-reach oasis belonged to Parker Ranch. Rockefeller and Mason met a small group of paniolo (cowboys) at ranch headquarters in misty Waimea and proceeded

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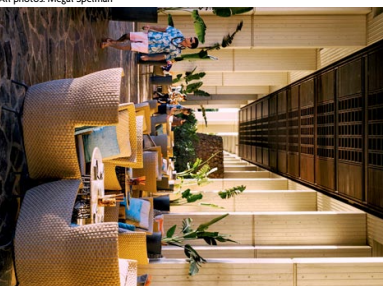
Laurance Rockefeller, seen on the opening page beside a scale model of the Mauna Kea Resort, built environmentally minded resorts in Wyoming and the Caribbean before branching out to Hawaii. The Mauna Kea (above left) opened up the entire Kohala coast (above right) and set a new standard for luxury accommodation. At top, Rockefeller speaking on the Mauna Kea's opening day in July of 1965.

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down the shadeless jeep trail to the shore. Blindingly beautiful, the site lacked nearly every necessity for development—electricity, plumbing, roads, vegetation of any kind. But it met Rockefeller's particular criteria, which included long-term profit potential. The stark scenery could rejuvenate just about any jaded guest. And, with the sugar plantations shutting down, local residents needed work.

The investor didn't waste time. He met with ranch owner Richard Smart and signed a 99-year lease on 1,800 acres of oceanfront. Smart considered it a win-win. "It's on land the cows don't like but the tourists love—hot and barren," he told *People* magazine. Rockefeller returned shortly with Robert Trent Jones, the world's premier golf course designer. Jones sur-

All photos: Megal Spelman



veyed the sunbaked lava plain and assured his boss that not only could he turn it into manicured greens, but the course's third hole would be the most beautiful on earth.

Superlatives defined the project from the start. When the Mauna Kea Resort opened in July of 1965, it was the most expensive hotel ever built. It cost \$15 million—roughly \$119 million in today's dollars. Rates started at \$43 a night, breakfast and dinner included. Travel writers and architecture buffs both loved the off-the-beaten-path destination. *Fortune* magazine named it one of the "10 best buildings of 1966," and *Esquire* called it one of the "three greatest hotels in the world." The American Institute of Architects gave the resort an award of honor.

**Rockefeller** wasn't merely a financier. He took a personal role in crafting the hotel's ambience and limiting its footprint.

The hotel's construction was a massive operation—the largest construction project on Hawaii's island at the time. Barges delivered ton after ton of Mexican flagstone, marble and cement to Kawaihāe Harbor. Workers stayed in a temporary camp onsite. All to realize Rockefeller's progressive vision of a resort integrated with its environment.



He wanted the resort to disappear into its surroundings, in contrast to the high-rises at Waikīkī. He advised architects: "The design should follow the natural contours of the land, incorporate lava rock, and in every possible way, make the hotel invisible."

The first schema—a series of futuristic pods with open skylights—was scrapped after Rockefeller spent a night in a prototype that flooded during a typical North Kona rainstorm. Architecture firm Skidmore, Owings and Merrill came to the rescue with a mid-century modern design.

At first the concrete structure appeared monolithic, but it masterfully incorporated natural light and ocean breezes. Guestrooms opened to a garden atrium, and exposed stairways connected each floor. There were no claustrophobia-inducing hallways or air-conditioning, which Rockefeller loathed. Blue tile floors mirrored the ocean, the exterior paint matched the color

of the Kāua'ā sand, and a large lava rock wall on the ground floor paid homage to nearby Hawaiian heiau. The lobby featured Hawaii's first retractable roof, which could close during rain showers.

Developing environmentally sound resorts in areas with little infrastructure was Rockefeller's forte. Before Hawaii he built in Puerto Rico, the Grand Tetons and the Virgin Islands. "He went to areas that were in need, not just beautiful," says Adi Kohler, former general manager of the Mauna Kea. "At Dorado Beach [in Puerto Rico] the people had only three months of work a year cutting sugar. Here, too, the people were out of work." Kohler worked at three Rockefeller locations before landing at the Mauna Kea, which he ran from 1973 to 2000. Kohler says his boss was a perfectionist but not a micromanager: "He never asked about financials—only what we needed. He was the most incred-



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"Who king closely with nature was much in my mind when planning the Mauna Kea, but because of its location in Hawaii—between East and West— I sensed an opportunity that should be considered," Rockefeller said. Hawaii, he felt, is a natural nexus between the East and West, and he tried the resort with some 1,500 works of art that reflect this connection.



Both photos: Megal Spelman

ible, sophisticated gentleman I ever met." Rockefeller relied on a technique he called "exporting," recruiting the best brains for the job. Aside from golf architect Trent Jones (who made good on his promise), he invited Elizabeth Arden from New York to bring female employees up to speed on the latest fashions. Glamour was in no short supply on this remote coast. "We entertained a minimum of three nights a week with long gowns and everything," remembers Adl's wife, Chacha Kohler. The first guests flew to the tiny airport in Kamuela and motored down the buckled Jeep road. Such inconvenience didn't deter the jet set; the hotel opened to 97 percent occupancy and remained popular through the years.

Celebrities and power brokers routinely booked the prized corner rooms, including Rockefeller's brother Nelson, the vice

president of the United States. "The whole family is very, very special," says Chacha. "They'd come and go without any big announcement." Locals enjoyed the swanky destination, too: Rancher Anna Lindsey Perry-Fiske brought panino here to celebrate after a roundup. Duke Kahanamoku spent his seventy-fifth birthday here.

After the Kona airport opened, Rockefeller financed the construction of Queen Kaahumanu Highway between the airport and hotel. True to form, he insisted that the utility lines be set back from the road so as not to spoil the view.

**One of the Mauna Kea's chief legacies** is its remarkable art collection, an assemblage equal to any museum in the Pacific and greater than that of any other hotel. Rockefeller amassed over 1,600 original artworks for display throughout the resort.

Every foyer and alcove features a dynamic expression of creativity: lacquered horses from Edo-period Japan, bronze Burmese drums, Maori canoe prow, and wooden masks from Papua New Guinea. Among the most impressive is the Great Buddha, a pink granite sculpture dating back to seventh-century India. It sits in serene meditation at the top of the grand staircase beneath a bodhi tree.

Rockefeller chose pieces for their spiritual significance. An arden philosophy student in his youth, he felt that Westerners could benefit from exposure to Eastern spiritual traditions—and that Hawaii was perfectly situated to serve this purpose.

"I saw the Mauna Kea as providing a unique opportunity to bring an awareness of the spirit and wisdom of the East," he said. "We decided to incorporate Asian and Pacific arts into the design in such a way that the art could become, just as the elements of nature, a constant influence."

Rockefeller didn't just collect antiquities; he commissioned new works from Hawaiian artists. During the hotel's construction, he befriended the Reverend Abraham Akaka, the influential minister of Kawaiaha'o Church in Honolulu. Akaka introduced him to Meari'i Kalamā, a church member and expert quilter, who agreed to produce thirty quilts for the resort. Hawaiian appliqué-style quilts are highly symbolic, thought to hold the mana (spiritual energy) of the quilter and whoever sleeps beneath. Each quilt requires over a million stitches.

Kalamā and a group of women sewed day and night to complete their masterpieces in advance of the hotel's opening. Each featured a different floral motif: hibiscus, silversword and the resort's signature orange plumeria. The women gifted Rockefeller with an additional quilt, styled after the Hawaiian flag. Such quilts have special historic value: They signified loyalty to Queen Lili'uokalani during the overthrow of the monarchy. The Mauna Kea quilts represent the largest standing exhibit of this medium in the state; they can be viewed on the hotel's seventh floor.

For many aficionados of Hawaiian art, the eighth floor is an even bigger draw: That's where the kapa pieces reside. Rockefeller commissioned Mary Blanchard Solomon, a.k.a. "Aunty Malia," to create fourteen large wall hangings made of kapa. The bark cloth, painstakingly pounded out of wauke (mulberry) fiber, has been made for generations by people throughout the Pacific. Hawaiian kapa is known for its

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superior quality — soft and supple and decorated with watermarks and brilliant natural dyes.

By the 1960s, kapa hadn't been produced on any large scale for more than a century. Because of the size requested, Solomon could not possibly pound the cloth from scratch, so she looked for existing pieces. She found an antique kapa moe (blanket) at a shop on Bishop Street. Deconstructed, it yielded five layers of unprinted kapa. Not enough. Solomon finally traded some of her personal stone artifacts for kapa belonging to a friend. Then she hiked into Pololu valley to forage plant dye material. Using ancient patterns as inspiration, she meticulously hand-stamped the kapa with rich colors and geometric shapes. She's credited with bringing the art form back to prominence. As years of public display have taken a toll on both the Mauna Kea's kapa and quilts, the resort is currently partnering with Bishop Museum to restore them.

The value on display at the Mauna Kea was not lost on Don Amari, who came to teach art at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo in 1974. He brought students to tour the grounds at Rockefeller's urging. Eventually the pair co-authored a book about the resort's collection, a collection that Amari believed to be groundbreaking. Until the mid-century, he writes, "Oceanic art was considered primarily of ethnographic interest, not 'art.' ... Thus the resort was in the vanguard of a trend to present the arts of the native peoples of Oceania as valuable examples of creativity, spirituality and above all, humanity." Just north of the resort, a massive example of Hawaiian ingenuity had sat neglected for decades. Pu'ukohola, the war temple Kanehamaha I raised before conquering the Islands. Rockefeller paid for the archaeological studies and restoration of this historic heiau, without fanfare. He helped with its subsequent donation to the National Park Service; Congress designated it a national historic site in 1972.

**The hotel** that Rockefeller *didn't* build had an impact of its own. On his initial tour of the Islands, he fell in love with East Maui. He bought fifty acres in Kipahulu, including the famed "Seven Sacred Pools" of 'Ohe'o. He had no intention of developing there; according to park historian Russ Apple, he felt the area was "generally too beautiful and rural a community for commercial exploitation." Instead, he offered the land to Haleakalā National Park.

But there was a hitch: The park could accept only donations of "adjacent or contiguous" lands, so Rockefeller needed to figure out how to link his sea-level acreage to the summit.

He teamed up with The Nature Conservancy and Kipahulu's most famous resident at the time, Charles Lindbergh. Together they launched a fundraising campaign to acquire various parcels above Rockefeller's coastal tract. Cocktail parties at the Waldorf Astoria in New York drew wealthy philanthropists and celebrities such as Arthur Godfrey and Doris Duke. The money was raised, the deals forged, and on January 10, 1969, Haleakalā National Park grew by more than ten thousand acres. The Kipahulu section of the park contains what is possibly the most pristine native forest in all of Hawai'i. A 1967 expedition identified an assortment of native plants and birds thought to be extinct — exceptionally rare species found nowhere else on earth.

In 1998 Rockefeller donated another fifty acres at nearby Puhihale. This spared Pa Kua-Holo, a Native Hawaiian society of modern warriors, to show their appreciation. They invited Rockefeller and his family to a ceremony at Pi'ihani Heiau, where they named him an honorary member of their group and presented him with a Khei (cloak) and the (spear). Rockefeller, in turn, lauded Lindbergh's efforts on behalf of East Maui. After the famous pilot died, his friend pledged \$50,000 to help relocate the Argonaut. Lindbergh's house, to park land, where it could serve as an education center.

Convinced that Hawai'i was the logical meeting point between East and West, Rockefeller helped found the East-West Center on O'ahu. The first major private donor, he gave close to \$16 million to support the center's arts and cultural activities and served five years on its board. A pioneering venture capitalist, Rockefeller leveraged his influence to bolster emerging institutions and industries. He invested in aviation, aerospace, lasers, data processing and nuclear power.

Above all, Rockefeller considered himself a steward of wild landscapes, responsible for protecting places like Canal Bay, Kaunā'oa and Kipahulu. Once during a congressional hearing, he identified his primary occupation as "concerned environmentalist." In his view, "How we treat our land, how we build upon it, how we act toward our air and water will in the long run tell what kind of people we really are." ■■■