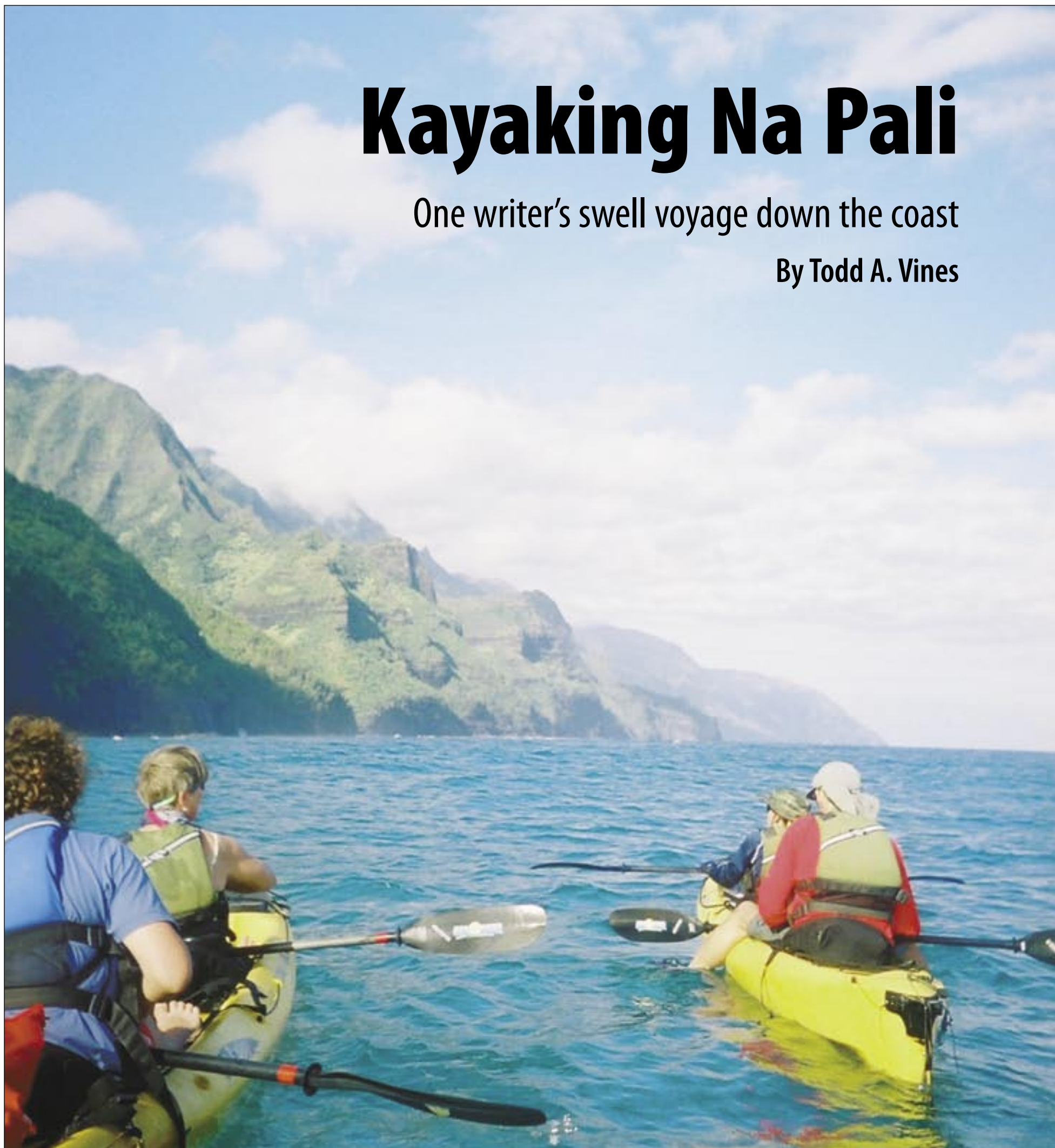
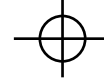


Kayaking Na Pali

One writer's swell voyage down the coast

By Todd A. Vines





it's called a huli

In Hawaiian, the verb describes a “flip” or a “turn,” as in huli chicken (rotisserie chicken to Mainlanders).

My first huli encounter, however, was considerably less tasty.

We were barely a quarter mile into what promised to be a picturesque but grueling 17-mile kayak along Kauai's majestic Na Pali Coast. Working the rudder of our two-person craft a few feet behind me was Dale Farr, a 52-year-old engineer from northeastern Pennsylvania. As we strived to get comfortable and find a rhythm with our paddling, our molded plastic piece of stability betrayed us. The next thing I knew, I was kissing salt water.

Flipping out

To huli while kayaking on the open Pacific isn't nearly as dramatic as it sounds. In fact, I considered my dunk something of a Na Pali baptism. Kayakers are strapped into a personal flotation device, so you bob like a cork as soon as you hit the water. Your paddle floats too. Provided you grab it with some haste there's no problem there either. And since Dale and I paid close attention to our packing instructions, our gear remained securely in our hold. Even righting the kayak wasn't that hard. Dale launched himself across the overturned craft and pulled it towards him. Less than 30 seconds after our huli, we were paddling to catch up with the rest of our group. The only real damage done was to our pride.

Kayaking Na Pali isn't for everyone. The coast typically calls to those hearty souls who don't mind a reasonable challenge, even while on vacation. A few years back, *National Geographic Adventure* magazine ranked a kayak trip down Na Pali the number two thing to do on its list of America's Best 100 adventures, sandwiched between dogsledging in Alaska (number three) and rafting the Colorado River down the Grand Canyon.

Sometimes referred to as “the Mount Everest of sea kayaking,” the one-way trip spans the entire Na Pali coastline — nearly 18 miles — from launch at Ha'ena State Park to landing at Polihale State Park. All told, the trip involves some six hours of intermittent paddling, with a two-hour lunch stop about three-quarters of the way. And bailing out mid-stream isn't an option, lest a boat be summoned and a hefty price paid. This is some of the most isolated area in the main Hawaiian Islands, which of course is also its appeal.

Kayaking Na Pali can only be done in summer, roughly May through September, when winter's wind-driven white-water decides to take a break. Even in season a trip can be canceled with little notice if the sea awakes from its summer slumber and decides to play sloppy for a few days.

There are currently three companies that will guide intrepid explorers down Na Pali for around \$200 per person. Kayak Kauai was one of the first to offer the organized excursion, and they have been guiding regular Janes and Joes on the trip of a lifetime for more than 20 years. The outfit has made something of a family business out of plying this stretch of the Pacific. Brothers Micco and Chino Godinez own the company and one of the two guides on my voyage was Web Godinez, Chino's son.

“I've been making trips along Na Pali since I was 3 years old,” said Web, who admits he has lost count how many times he's traversed the coast over the past 20 years but says it's well over 100. “I pretty much grew up on the coast.”

Our second guide, Doug Killpatrick, estimates he's kayaked Na Pali nearly 400 times, and he's got the lean, muscular frame to prove it.

When describing the journey down the coast, the folks at Kayak Kauai don't mince words. On their Web site, the company calls the trip a very rigorous adventure, recommended for the very few, and goes so far as to say, “We feel it to be the roughest and longest sea kayak trip offered on the planet.”

Gulp! Who would possibly want to subject themselves to that on vacation?

Jason Farr (Dale's son) and his fiancée Kristin Truman from Johnson City, Tenn. would. As it turns out, it was the younger

Farr's idea to see Na Pali in this unique fashion, and he brought the idea to the rest of his family.

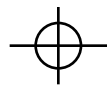
“I wanted to do the coolest trip on the island,” said Jason. “Somehow I talked these guys into it.”

In truth, the trip is hardly the kind of thing one talks another into. Most people are either up for the challenge or they're not. Dale's wife, for example, opted for a day at the spa while the rest of the family went to sea. After our early huli, I found myself wondering if she didn't have the right idea.)

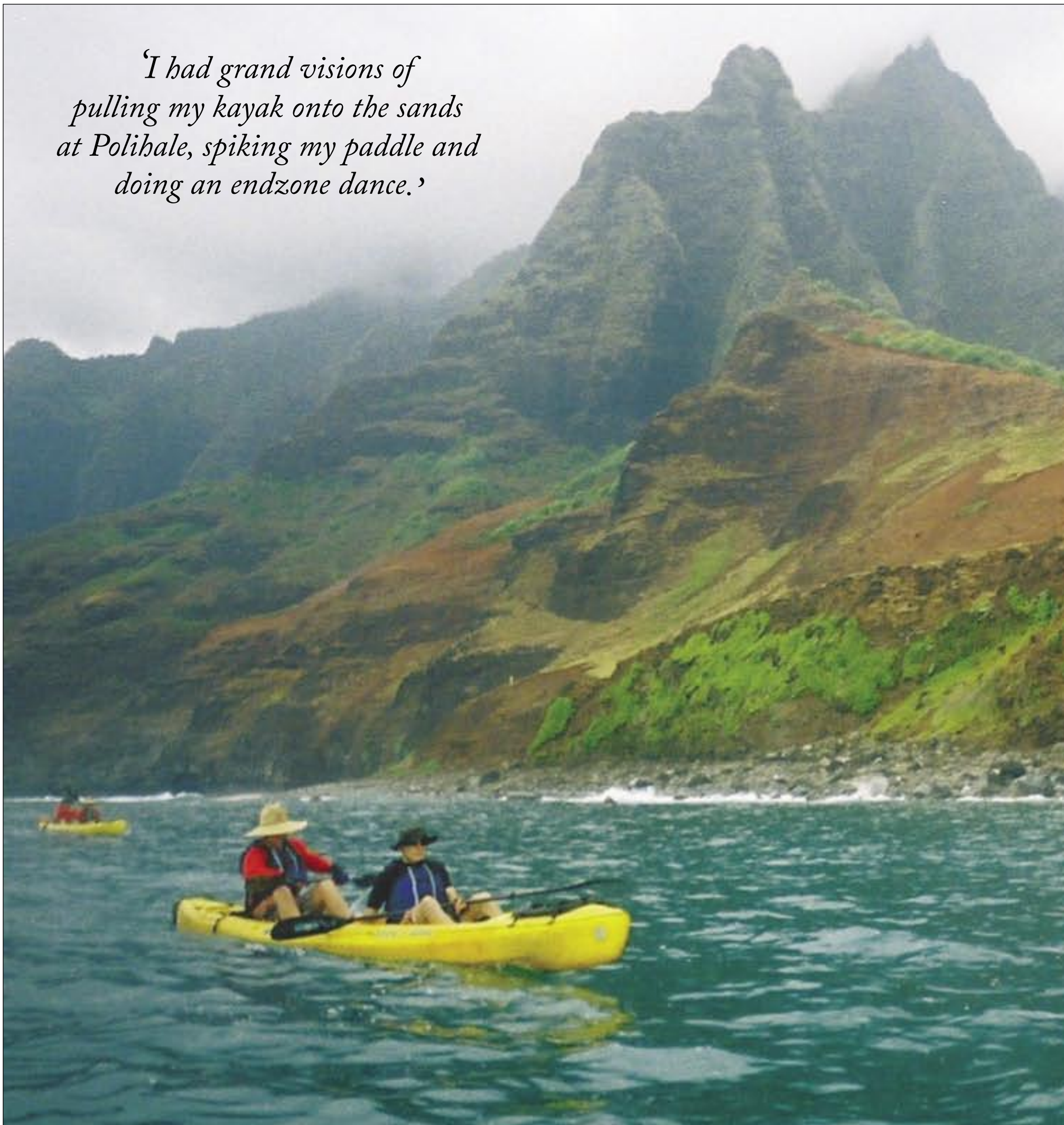
But jagged rocks and man-eating sharks aren't the real threat out there. According to Killpatrick, sea-sickness is the number one malady. One young lad on our voyage — we'll call him Ralph — fed the fish repeatedly throughout the day, and our sea conditions were optimum.

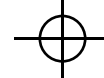
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*'I had grand visions of
pulling my kayak onto the sands
at Polihale, spiking my paddle and
doing an endzone dance.'*





For myself, the more I heard about how grueling the voyage was, the more excited I was to test my mettle. I had grand visions of pulling my kayak onto the sands at Polihale, spiking my paddle and doing an end-zone dance.

Along Na Pali

Six in the morning comes early for everyone, but especially for those on vacation. That's when we met our guides and organized our gear at Kayak Kauai's Hanalei headquarters. Still trying to wake up, we piled into a van and headed for our launch site at Ha'ena State Park. On the short drive, Micco Godinez promised a "Na Pali Sea Kayak Diploma" for all of us that made it down the coast, holding up a slightly worn copy of the document.

After a safety briefing and touching on the finer points of open-water paddling, we paired up and headed out. The launch from Ha'ena State Park offers one last opportunity for participants to bail out about a mile away at Ke'e Beach. After that, the next non-emergency exit is in Polihale some 16 miles away.

When we reached Ke'e, Web asked the group if anyone wanted out. Every kayak remained pointed toward Polihale.

Na Pali is said to be the second most rapidly eroding coastline in the world, behind only the white cliffs of Dover. The elements have sculpted a natural wonderland of emerald spires, hanging valleys, sand dunes and sea caves.

If the boat traffic and incessant parade of helicopters overhead are any indicator, Na Pali would be awash in a sea of timeshare units and ABC Stores if it were possible to carve more than a footpath along its steep shoreline. As it stands, however, this is protected land. Na Pali Coast State Park covers more than 6,000 acres of the most inaccessible raw wilderness on the planet. Some 150,000 people visit the park annually, mostly by hiking along the Kalalau Trail or via charter boat. Only a handful experience this place under the power of their own paddle.

As we came upon a dark, domed sea cave that easily accommodated our fleet of kayaks, we tucked in for a rest, maneuvering around a waterfall that spills over the mouth of the cave. On the way out, we paddled through it, letting the cool island water refresh us.

Farther down the coast, we paddled into yet another cave, this one with a collapsed ceiling. We floated to the rear of the space and I downed a handful of wasabi peanuts that had somehow remained dry despite our early-morning huli. My arms were beginning to tire and I'm sure Dale's were too, but we didn't speak of it. I shut the ache out of my mind. We still had a long way to go.

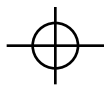
Passing more waterfalls and surfacing green sea turtles, we journeyed on. Craning my neck to take in the ancient coastline I found it easy to feel small in more ways than one. Who would have thought being at sea could be so grounding. Na Pali possesses that special kind of magic.

By the time we got to Kalalau Beach, Dale and I had found a groove. We stayed near the front of the pack, conversing occasionally, but mostly paddling diligently in silence and drinking in the view. Other than the sea sloshing around our kayak, the prevailing sound was our breath and the occasional call from a wild goat on the steep hillside above.

At one point I watched a bulbous ladybug enjoy a short ride on the bow of our kayak. It crawled around a bit, stretched its wings in the morning sun and took flight.

Web acknowledged that the day's conditions were almost ideal. A light wind-driven swell helped push us on our way, and the surface stayed

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glassy most of the day. Most of the voyage I could see the seafloor 20 feet below through the clear Pacific.

About half a mile beyond Kalalau we approached Honopu Beach and its mammoth arch shaped by sea and time. The lava formation spans what may be the most remote strip of sand on the island — no landings of any kind are permitted here — and a waterfall spills into a pool not far from the arch. Honopu has made several cameos on the big screen through the years always representing extreme isolation, places like Skull Island, the homeland of King Kong in the 1976 remake, and the pirate-plagued island Harrison Ford and Anne Heche get dumped on in “6 Days, 7 Nights.”

Two miles beyond Honopu we swung wide around Nualolo Kai, another stunning valley and the site of an abandoned fishing village and an intricate reef. As we did, our lunch stop was finally within sight.

Out to lunch

My triceps burned like a four-alarm blaze and my butt was completely numb. We were 13 miles into our trek and it was time to stretch and refuel on the beach known as Miloli'i.

Standing in about three feet of water, Web and Doug held our kayak for us as we hopped out. I wobbled from the surf like a newborn fawn, my legs threatening to give way after more than five hours of being immobile.

The state has added simple, yet sufficient facilities for campers and kayakers just off the sand, including bathrooms, covered picnic tables, even showers and sinks fed by a nearby stream. As we gathered in the shade, Web and Doug laid out our lunch — sandwiches, taro chips, juice, fresh pineapple — and ran down our after-lunch options



The pre-launch line up at Ha'ena State Park.

— explore the valley, go shelling, soak up the sun. Without a doubt, however, Web said that the most popular activity was sleeping.

I fought the urge to beach myself alongside a pair of Monk seals at the water's edge and instead inhaled my turkey sandwich and set off exploring.

Empty as they are today, the valleys along Na Pali haven't always been uninhabited. In early Hawai'i, this shoreline was home to several thriving villages and hundreds of people. Even as late as the 1870s, Miloli'i had a small school and about 30 students that attended class there. Their teacher, a man by the name of Kanuikino, lived beyond Polihale in Mana and would commute to the valley each



On the inside looking out from the sea cave with the collapsed ceiling.



A kayaker enjoys the healing touch of Lomi Falls.

day by foot. Eventually however Na Pali's inhabitants moved away, and before long Miloli'i — along with the rest of the coast — was deserted. Though the people are gone, the valleys are still home to heiau and burial caves, and are considered sacred by many.

Working my way up into the valley and wading through waist-high weeds, I came upon a gently flowing stream with a natural waterfall that drops several feet.

“We call it Lomi Falls,” Web had said. “Lomi means ‘massage’ in Hawaiian, and people get under the water for a little massage.”

I promptly hopped in and thrust my head under the running water. The cool stream kicked in my second wind and I remembered my endzone dance. The quiet valley was a slice of paradise, but Polihale and the end of our adventure was only four short miles away.

Earning my diploma

In the end, there was no endzone dance at Polihale. My paddle wasn't spiked, but instead slipped from my fingers onto the hot sand with little fanfare. The only shimmy I did was to shake the sand out of my shorts. (Dale and I did one final huli in the surf as we tried to land our

craft — a poetic, full-circle finale.)

Again on dry land, the tired group congratulated one another on a successful sojourn. The mood was overwhelmingly positive, even from “Ralph.” My cohort in kayaking agreed it was a worthy experience.

“I've seen the coast on a helicopter tour, hiked the trail, seen it by boat — this is the ultimate,” said Dale.

By the time the van carried us back to Hanalei, everyone had their mind on food, or sleep, or putting their feet up and downing a cold beer or two. I fell into the latter category. I never was given a diploma, but that mattered little. I knew that I had earned it.

I hopped in my car and headed to the store for a well-earned six-pack and some huli chicken. ❁

the ESSENTIALS

Kayak Kauai

www.kayakkauai.com
808-826-9844 • 800-437-3507

What: 17 mile “Na Pali by Sea Kayak”

When: Daily May through September, conditions permitting

Cost: \$185 per person, plus \$9.25 State of Hawai'i (Miloli'i) landing fee (gratuity and tax not included)

Age requirements: Paddlers under 16 years need guide approval to participate

Physical requirements: No kayaking experience required, but participants should be comfortable in the water, in good physical condition and not prone to sea-sickness.

Special notes: Group size is limited and trips can be canceled due to poor conditions. Book your trip early to allow for rescheduling.