



Kayaking Kauai Hawaii

Anne Z. Cooke



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"How're ya' doin'," Wyatt Godinez asked, as he rested his paddle across the bow and waited for us to catch up. "Feeling it in your shoulders?" Our guide for the day, Godinez smiled, that Hawaiian-style "hang loose and chill out" smile that makes everything seem hunky dory.

He'd noticed we were feeling a tad anxious, though the day was perfect for kayaking, with no waves, the sun warming the water, scattered breezes ruffling the palms and a few puffy clouds floating overhead.

As anyone who's read the fine print in a Hawaii guidebook knows, the Pacific Ocean deserves respect. The currents between the islands can be tricky; more often they're treacherous. Though you can drown as easily in three feet of water as you can in 30, knowing the Kauai Channel, between Kauai and Oahu, is more than two miles deep, was sobering.

For a couple of amateur paddlers, we'd bested some dodgy waterways in less forgiving climes. We'd kayaked in Alaska's remote Wood-Tikchik State Park, on Beverley Lake, a mountain jewel utterly inaccessible except by floatplane; people who venture there are on their own. We'd paddled -- albeit briefly -- on a cloudy afternoon in Northern British Columbia, on Foch Lake, a glacial lake periodically whipped up by unpredictable down-canyon winds. We braved the currents in the mighty Snake River, in Idaho's Hell's Canyon.

But our confidence waned as parked at Kayak Kauai, a water sports outfitter based in a rustic bungalow called the "Old Canoe House," in Hanalei town (meaning "where leis are made"), on the island's north shore.

The 22-year-old company runs a low-key business, but its owners, experienced outdoorsmen, have earned their chops. Micco Godinez, 54, and his brother Chino, 56, sport resumes that include climbing Denali and kayaking from Seattle north to Skagway, Alaska. Chino's son Wyatt, 21, who was hosing the saltwater off a stack of rental kayaks, is following in their footsteps. "The door's over there," he called out to us.

"You'll have an easy time today," said Chino, who was unpacking and pricing camping gear in the store part of the building. "Not much wind out there. Wyatt will be your guide -- he knows the Bay inside and out."

On the official tourist map, the Hanalei River looks like a big river, a thick blue line that snakes down the slopes of 5,148-foot Mount Wai'ale'ale and turns north for 14 miles. It looks perfect for paddling. In reality, the upper nine or 10 miles of the river are too shallow for navigation.

"You can paddle for two or three miles into the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge, but that's all," said Chino. "It's a peaceful trip, with easy paddling. Wildlife? Well, no grizzlies or anything like that, but birds nest in the refuge, and you'll see flowers and the taro fields. You'll like the Bay better."

Though recreational kayaking isn't technically demanding -- "anybody can do it."

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said Micco -- paddling is less effort and more fun if you do it right. To remedy that Kayak Kauai starts with a brief orientation. Handing out life jackets and paddles, Wyatt demonstrated the preferred method: Arms outstretched, thumbs around the handle, blades at right angles to the ground. Digging the paddles into the water is a no-no; you dip them in at an angle in a kind of rowing stroke.

"You don't want your arms doing all the work," said Andrew Belt, a kayaking guide at Kauai Waterski, Surf and Kayak, an outfitter on the Wailua River. "Sit up straight, anchor your legs and use your abs and the muscles around your waist. If you're doing it right, you'll feel it."

Some outfitters here have to truck their kayaks to a put-in site, but the Godinez's are lucky enough to be on a small canal -- a former irrigation channel, actually -- 30 feet from the Hanalei River. Wyatt put the kayaks into the water next to the dock, we climbed in and the adventure began.

The advantage about kayaking in Hawaii is that the water is warm. In Alaska, kayaks are fitted with watertight skirts intended to keep both paddler and boat dry. If the kayak tips over with you in it, you'd better know how to roll over and back upright, a trick that neither of us has ever mastered. In Hawaii, where it doesn't matter if you get wet, most kayaks are the sit-on-top type.

"If it capsizes and you fall out," said Belt, "you grab it, flip it right side up, climb back in and keep going." Trapped air pockets make the kayaks buoyant, holes through the hull drain excess water and most have hatches to hold "dry bags," for storing cameras and lunch.

We could have rented the "deluxe" model with a foot pedal that controls the rudder and makes steering easier. But our standard two-seater had no such luxury. Following Wyatt, we paddled clumsily down to the river only to find a crowd of beginners practicing -- and discovering that paddling in tandem is a mixed blessing.

On the one hand, two can share the work. But kayaking as a team demands compromise. The lead paddler has to adjust his pace to his partner's, and that partner, in the rear, has to maintain the same rhythm and strength. After crashing into one weedy clump after another, we hit our stride and reached the entrance to Hanalei Bay.

The pastoral Hanalei Valley, lying between two mountain ridges, has been cultivated since ancient times. Fringed by waterfalls and softened by mist, the hills are scattered with green and gold, and long sand beaches edge the bay. Four movies, including "South Pacific," were filmed nearby, and the site remains in demand. Underwater reefs across the entrance slow down waves from the ocean, keeping the bay relatively calm and making our loop trip easier than I'd expected. Finally we pulled into a deserted cove on the east shore.

"This is a good place to look for kahelelani shells, like the ones on Niihau that they string into necklaces," said Wyatt, kneeling down and digging his fingers through the sand. "If the colors are good, a film canister of these can go for as much as \$80," he said, dropping a few of the pinhead sized pink and tan shells into my hand. "But these aren't valuable," he added laughing. "They have to be perfect."

Back at the Old Canoe House, we asked Wyatt to recommend his favorite kayak outing, something a little more strenuous. "Do the Na Pali Coast trip," he said. "But you'd have to get in shape."

"I agree," said Andrew Belt. "The Na Pali Coast trip is rated among the top 10 kayak trips, but it's not for everybody. It's 17 miles of paddling, yes, but that's not all. There's the van ride to the put-in at Haena State Beach. Then the sun beats down, the kayaks rock in the swells and even the strongest guys get seasick. When you're puking all over it's hard to have fun.

"Sure, the guides are sympathetic, but once you've passed Ke'e Beach there's no turning back. Still, the scenery is magnificent with huge cliffs and empty beaches. You'll stop to look at waterfalls and explore arches and sea caves. About three-quarters of the way you'll stop at Miloli'i Beach for lunch and a swim, and by then you're almost there, at Polihale Beach. Do it if you can. Next time."

IF YOU GO:

Kayak Kauai, in Hanalei, rents its kayaks for 24-hour periods. Double kayaks are \$52 and single kayaks are \$28. Onsite facilities include showers, bathrooms and a changing room. Guided three-hour trips, including a lunch stop and snorkeling, are \$60 per person. The full-day Na Pali Coast trip, with van transportation at both ends is \$185 per person. Call 800-437-3507, 808-826-9844, or visit www.kayakkauai.com.

Kauai Waterski, Surf and Kayak, in Wailua, leads guided half-day trips on the Wailua River, with an hour of kayaking and a hike to the waterfall, at 8:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Deluxe trips include an orientation, lunch and drinks for \$70 per person. The regular guided trip is \$50 per person. Call 808-822-3574.

HANALEI, Hawaii



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Anne Z. Cooke

As a frequent visitor to Hawaii, it's the islands' physical beauty that captures my attention: the impossibly steep green peaks, brilliant sunsets and roving trade winds. Intoxicating, yes, they are. But my lasting memories are of people, of the strangers who greet you with a smile and friendly families who offer hospitality.

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