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Finding King Kamehameha: Charting a path to greatness

HIGHLIGHTS

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KAILUA-KONA, HAWAII — "King Kamehameha fought lots of battles on this island," said Kahakahi'i, who was sitting cross-legged in the sun, carving what he described as a battle knife, when we stopped to watch him work.

"But there was no fighting here, not in the City of Refuge," said this docent, naked to the waist as a traditional warrior would have been, at the Pu'uhonua o Honaunau National Historic Park, on the Big Island's south Kona Coast.

"This was a sacred place, a retreat where kahunas performed secret ceremonies," he explained to a group of visitors from Iowa who crowded around the thatched, Polynesian-style shelter to listen. "The king was a great general. But he came here to pray."

When the talk turns to famous generals, you could make the argument that King Kamehameha I, also called Kamehameha the Great - who conquered the Hawaiian Islands between 1781 and 1810, was every bit as skilled as his better-known contemporary, George Washington.

Unlike Washington, however, Kamehameha the man remains something of a mystery. Though the number of rival chiefs he defeated and the valleys and coastal villages where he pursued each campaign for weeks or months was legion, his reputation rests primarily on oral histories.

Burnished in the glow of the past, he's described today as charismatic, powerful, confident and a fair but autocratic leader. Beyond that, what little we know comes from the few foreign visitors who, after having met him, recorded his commanding presence, courteous hospitality and thoughtful intelligence. Indeed, the very qualities we sometimes despair of finding in today's leaders.

But there's another way to see this remarkable man and the culture and era in which he rose to power. Set aside a day to go where he went, to some of the places, parks and historic sites on the Big Island that mark his evolution from fiery youth to revered leader.

We hadn't expected to trace Kamehameha's footsteps when we flew into Kona International Airport, on the Big Island, and checked into the Courtyard King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel, in Kailua-Kona. The Volcano National Park was first on our agenda.

But you can't walk into this hotel's lobby without spotting the wall-size mural of Kamehameha dressed in a simple pareo, surrounded by his chiefs in their robes, painted by Herb Kane, Hawaii's best known and most prolific artist. But what was it doing there?

"Because it shows this place right here, Kamakahonu Bay, the king's royal compound," said the desk clerk, pointing out the window toward the beach, where hotel guests splashed in the water.

And there on the edge of the bay was the thatched Polynesian hut on a rock platform, the restored Ahuena Heiau (sacred temple), as shown in the painting. Constructed in 812, this was Kamehameha's last home and spiritual center, a refuge from a vanishing culture. By 1819, when the great king died, most Hawaiians had adopted Christianity. But Kamehameha, firm to the last, vowed he would die as he lived.

Today the hotel grounds are the venue for the award-winning Island Breeze Luau, an outdoor dinner theater presenting Hawaiian styles over the decades on a raised stage. The guests, dining on "kalua pig" and other luau specialties, sit at family-style tables below. As night falls and the drummers and dancers chant, you can't help wondering if the king is still there, listening.

Kamehameha, born in north Kohala, on the Big Island (some say as early as 1740, others say 1758, the year that Halley's Comet appeared), was raised in the remote Waipio Valley. But it was on the

Kona coast where he first showed his chops.

Twelve miles south of Kailua-Kona, by the coast road, turn west toward Kealahou Bay, where the young Kamehameha, accompanying his uncle, King Kalani'opu'u, first met Captain Cook in 1778 and again in 1779.

Soon invited aboard Cook's ship, Kamehameha looked around and quickly recognized that the strange newcomers' iron tools, knives, muskets and canons were far superior to stone clubs. The conclusion: the white men would someday make useful allies.

A mile farther south, near the present-day village of Ke'ei, is the site of the Battle of Moku'ohai, in the bay now called Moku'akae. Here, in 1782, Kamehameha defeated one of two hostile cousins, earning the support of Kona's leading chiefs and consolidating his control of north Kohala and the Waipio Valley.

Several miles farther south look for signs to the City of Refuge, Pu'uuhonua o Honaunau, overlooking the ocean. A spiritual sanctuary, this was where criminals fleeing a death sentence were absolved of their crimes and where members of the ali'i (ruling class) - Kamehameha and others - could join secret prayer ceremonies.

Stop at the Visitors Center, then walk through the site to see traditional Hawaiian thatched shelters and cultural and craft demonstrations. At the heart of the site is the sacred heiau (temple), guarded by carved figures of Hawaii's many gods, and gawked at by the dozens of tourists that walk past every day.

For sites in the north, follow Kamehameha's footsteps for 35 miles from Kailua-Kona to the Kohala Coast and the Pu'ukohola Heiau National Historic Site, set aside to preserve one of Hawaii's largest heiau.

Dedicated to Kukailimoku, Kamehameha's family war god, the king built this enormous monolith in 1791, an offering in hopes of good fortune in the battles still to come. A perfect stack of countless rocks, carried to the site by thousands of workers, it was piled together without cement in less than a year, forming a giant polyhedron. To sweeten the gesture, the king also restored an adjacent, smaller and much older heiau, once used for human sacrifices.

With paths circling the hill, this spot is ideal for ocean views, photos, fresh air, and long or short walks. If you follow the path downhill through a shaded grove you'll come to tiny Pelekane Bay, where Kamehameha defeated his last Big Island enemy, another rival cousin. Learn more about it at the Visitors Center, staffed by informed rangers who sell history books, maps, charts, prints and souvenirs.

As for the Ahuena Heiau, at the Courtyard Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel, it is believed that when Kamehameha I died, a loyal follower prepared his bones according to an ancient ritual and hid them in a secret burial place nearby, most likely a cave somewhere along the coast.

Shortly after the king's death, his son and heir, Kamehameha II, a Christian, destroyed many of the

sites and artifacts associated with the old religion. Not until many years later was the Ahuean Heiau finally restored.

As for Kona, the town, when the young Kamehameha became chief of Kona, he designated it as his seat of government. And it remained the capital of all the Hawaiian Island after Kamehameha became the sole ruler.

If you've got time to squeeze in one more site, visit the ancient village settlement, now an archaeological site, and the man-made fish ponds at the heart of Hawaiian cultural life, in Kaloko-Honokohau National Historical Park, near Kona. I had trouble finding the road, so ask for directions.

JUST THE FACTS

Visit www.nps.gov/puhe/learn/historyculture/kamehameha.html for more information. For tickets to the Island Breeze Luau, a dinner theater, call (808)329-2911. The venue is at 75-5660 Palani Road, Kailua-Kona, HI 96740.

The Courtyard King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel is at 75-5660 Palani Road, Kailua-Kona, HI 96740. A three-star property, the hotel has restaurants, free parking, pool, spa, beach, shop and other amenities. Rates for two in a room vary according to the season. In September, rates range from \$163-\$214; in November, from \$152-\$203; during Christmas holidays, from \$263-\$343. At www.konabeachhotel.com.

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