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Finding King Kamehameha: Charting a path to greatness



Guided tours at the now-restored City of Refuge (Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historic Park), on the south Kona Coast, explore the 180-acre site where law-breaking Hawaiians sought refuge from punishment.

STEVE HAGGERTY/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

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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

Facts

If you go

Visit www.nps.gov/puhe/learn/historycult 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.

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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.

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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