

Our surf instructor, Ben, covers the basics of catching waves and pop-up technique.



# Kauai Surf Trip

With Mia's surfboard in tow, our surf instructor leads us into the calm waters of Hanalei Bay.

Kauai makes an excellent family surf destination, but beware of the dreaded “departure blues.”



The proud graduates of Kayak Kauai's family surf lesson.

Story by Matt Niswonger • Photos by Cathy Claesson

We were trying to make our flight home. Leaving the island of Kauai was proving to be a huge pain in the neck. Mentally exhausted, all we wanted to do was return our rental car, for god's sake. Bodies pushed to the limit by ten days of sun and waves, we had somehow managed to stuff all of our muddy clothes and gear into the suitcases and make it back to Lihue Airport. Our flight was leaving in 55 minutes. We thought we were golden. We thought wrong.

The rental car agent wrinkled her nose and told us that she wouldn't take our car back. “There is a \$300 surcharge for extreme dirtiness,” she informed us.

“Just on principle I would never pay that surcharge,” I deadpanned. “I can sweep it out in two minutes. Do you have a broom?”

“You can't clean it here. If you want to avoid the surcharge, the interior needs to be vacuumed.” Her face was completely emotionless. I could see that arguing with her was going to be a waste of time. A polite smile graced her lips but her eyes told the story—*Go ahead, make my day, haole*. Apparently the spirit of aloha did not extend to muddy car seats.

Blood pressure spiking, we left the terminal and began searching frantically for a do-it-yourself carwash. Our flight was scheduled to leave in exactly 51 minutes and the clock was ticking. “We're gonna miss our flight! You should have paid the money!” screamed the kids. “Everyone calm down!” I yelled back, clearly panicked.

In the back of my mind I was thinking of James Cook. He also tried to leave the Hawaiian Islands. Instead of a dirty rental car, it was a broken mast that delayed his departure. Apparently the spirit of aloha was revoked that day as well. The locals killed him shortly after he returned to have his ship repaired. Of course, there is more to the story, but I couldn't help thinking that history always repeats itself.

But the James Cook references were totally inappropriate, and I knew it. The truth is, leaving Kauai was a huge bummer simply because Kauai is incredible and all good things must come to an end.

It all started with the Kilauea Lakeside Estate. Located on the North Shore just south of

Hanalei Bay, this three-bedroom, three-bath villa is a cross between a luxury vacation rental and a Swiss Family Robinson adventure. Located on a peninsula, surrounded by a lake, in the middle of a Hawaiian wilderness preserve, the estate is unforgettable. Steve Hunt, the owner, gave us the crash course on wild Kauai by opening his home to us. With traditional island décor, and luxury accommodations presented with simplicity and elegance down to every detail, we settled into a sense of bemused culture shock. “How cool is this?” I asked the kids upon arrival. Unable able to contain their glee, they ran outside and began hitting golf balls from the private tee.

Our first morning waking up at the estate was memorable. All three of our kids were quiet: no wrestling, no squabbling, just wide-eyed with wonder. Fruit trees provided edible abundance everywhere, and rolling green grass gave way to a private lake as well as private pools and a massive tree house set in a dense jungle. Our kids, Nils, Lukas, and Mia, just wandered aimlessly, trying to process their surroundings. I followed them around, loving every second of their sense of discovery. Meanwhile breakfast was ready and Cathy called us in to eat scrambled eggs and strategize about the day.

We had come to Kauai to spend time in the ocean, and I was determined to make that happen. The plan was to start out with some easy swimming and then graduate to some boogie boarding and then take a family surf lesson in Hanalei Bay. If everything went well, we could then rent boards and surf the beaches of Poipu on our own while maintaining a reasonable threshold of safety.

We were adamant that the focus of the trip would be developing ocean skills, although both Cathy and I wanted to proceed cautiously with the kids. Mia is five and not a swimmer, so the plan was to have her wear a PFD at all times while playing in the surf. Lukas, 8, was not very solid in the ocean, but I wasn't necessarily thrilled about robbing him of valuable ocean skills by making him wear a life jacket the whole time. Nils had been surfing in California for over a year, but his overconfidence in the breakers of California was a point of concern given the stories we'd heard about the powerful ocean currents of Kauai.

Santa Cruz is filled with surfers who have made the pilgrimage to Hawaii, and typically they are more than happy to wax poetic about the comparative differences. After talking to quite a few veterans, the one thing I heard again and again was to take the power of the ocean very seriously.

Steve's lakeside estate is a five-minute drive from a highly recommended, off-the-beaten-path stretch of coastline. We decided to delay no further and get started with our commitment to ocean skills. Grabbing boogie boards and a picnic basket, we jumped in the car and headed to the beach.

The beach was gorgeous, with a river flowing into the ocean to create an idyllic, postcard scene. Our focus was on the ocean, however. The water was intimidating, especially a couple hundred yards offshore, with large hollow waves pounding onto a jagged reef. A few surfers were riding these waves, but this arena was out of the question for any of us. My main concern was the shore break where my kids wanted to play. There was quite a bit of water energy to contend with. No other children were playing in the water, and there were no lifeguard towers to be seen.

“Let's take this slow,” I said to the kids. I could read the concern on Cathy's face as we laid out the beach blankets. I didn't see any signs of strong lateral currents, just waist-high aquamarine waves crashing onto the beach.

We spent the next three days playing in the ocean and gaining confidence. At the end of every day we crawled back to the estate, exhausted, starving, and ecstatic. After a huge dinner, bedtime was a welcome event for all five of us. A deep state of relaxation had settled into our bones.

The next morning we checked into Hanalei Bay's Kayak Kauai for our first surf lesson ([www.KayakKauai.com](http://www.KayakKauai.com)). Our instructor loaded the truck with half a dozen boards and took us to a mellow beach break that offered perfect knee-to-waist-high rollers. Standing up on ten-foot foam long boards, everyone in the family rode at least a dozen waves right onto the beach. The best part was that our surf instructor was really adept at helping the little ones, and five-year-old Mia was able to walk all over her board while sliding down the waves. This was the Hawaiian surfing breakthrough we needed. We were hooked!

We ended the day with a famous Loco Moco—basically fried eggs over rice, smothered in gravy. We also met local swimmer Bobo Bolyn at the Hanalei Bay Surf Company, a North Shore resident and one of the first people to swim the entire Na Pali coast. Now in her



## Five Tips For Families

- 1. Consider packing your child's car seat or booster seat.** The car rental companies on Kauai charge quite a bit for car seat rentals and they are very strict about weight requirements.
- 2. Bring PFDs.** Have your little ones wear PFDs while playing near the ocean. Also, stay near lifeguard towers whenever possible.
- 3. Talk to the locals.** Certain times of year can bring rough ocean conditions. Talk to the locals about the safest place for your family to swim, surf and play.
- 4. Beware of the Kalalau Trail.** During the rainy season, this cliff-side hike can quickly wash out and become slippery. Consider avoiding this hike until your kids are older.
- 5. Take a family surf lesson.** This is the best money you will spend on Kauai. The success rate for standing up and actually surfing is very high, even for children as young as five. Take photos!



Mia



Lukas



Nils

sixties, we were inspired by her tales of swimming the entire coast with nothing but a pair of fins and an empty water jug tied to her ankle to hold her food.

Excited to check out the south coast, we loaded the kids into the car and headed to Poipu. After a two-hour drive we arrived at the brand new Koloa Landing Resort where we enjoyed all of the comforts of home and our kids had their first opportunity to enjoy one of the resort's two pools.

I was anxious to check out the surfing prospects at the nearby beaches, so the next day I started pressing the issue. The kids said they were just too tired to surf, so we decided to compromise and check out a bodysurfing spot we had heard about called Brenneke's.

As usual, the Hawaiian ocean was inspiring. At Brenneke's we were in for a treat. Weaving our way through packs of wild chickens pecking the beach, we entered the water to check out some of the best bodysurfing waves I have ever

ridden. At first I was concerned; Nils was too deep and Lukas was close to the jagged lava rocks. Since Cathy was snorkeling with Mia, I was torn trying to decide which kid to watch closer. Then a large sea turtle swam right next to me and I decided to just give in to the mini-oceanic religious experience. What can I say? We played in the ocean for three hours and it felt like 10 minutes. Pure bliss.

Back at Koloa Landing we desperately needed food. The ocean-infused relaxation was so deep that Cathy and I barely had the energy to make quesadillas to feed our hungry brood. After dinner we flopped into our beds and slept for 10 hours straight.

The next day it was time to actually do some real surfing. After some time spent settling

## Need a Break from Surfing?

### Get a Bird's Eye View

Taking an aerial tour of the island is a great way to see Kauai and was one of the highlights of our trip. This is the best way to see the Na Pali Coast, which is inaccessible to cars. Check out Wings Over Kauai, which is a top-notch husband-and-wife operation that comes highly recommended. Utilizing a GA8 Airvan turbo prop, Wings Over Kauai offers great customer service and a thrilling experience that is a fraction of the price of helicopter tours. [www.wingsoverkauai.com](http://www.wingsoverkauai.com)

### Waimea Canyon

Waimea Canyon is known as the Grand Canyon of Hawaii and the largest canyon in the Pacific. The 40-mile Waimea Canyon Road has excellent lookouts and spectacular views, but there are no gas stations along the way so be sure to fill up before you make this trip. The main road climbs over 4,000 feet and the temperature can drop quite a bit, so bring extra layers. With over 45 miles of trails through the canyon, be sure to take advantage of the hiking opportunities. The kids loved the museum at the end of the road; make sure to check it out. At the end of the day, make a stop at JoJo's Shaved Ice in Waimea (mile marker #23) for the best shaved ice on the island.

### Kalalau Trail

The rugged 11-mile Kalalau Trail offers breathtaking views of the Na Pali Coast. Permits and reservations are required to camp. If you are physically fit and looking for a challenge, try to do the entire 11-mile

trail (one way) in a long day. Plan to arrive early as the parking area fills up very quickly. The hike is strenuous with steep steps and big drops. During the rainy season the trail gets very muddy and slippery so come prepared with good hiking shoes. If you are going with children be prepared to do very little, if any, of the hike.

### Friday Night Music and Art in Hanapepe Bay

Hanapepe, the inspiration for the hometown in Disney's "Lilo & Stitch" is lined with quaint storefronts that are mostly used for art galleries, antiques and gift shops. Every Friday the town hosts "Art Night in Hanapepe" which proved to be a relaxing and enjoyable night with the family. Check out the swinging bridge that crosses the Hanapepe River and make sure to grab something to eat at the Mele Kusing's Roach Coach. It was some of the best food we had on the island.

### Snuba at Poipu Beach

A cross between snorkeling and SCUBA, "snuba" provided the best of both and proved to be an excellent mother/son outing for Cathy and Nils. Air is supplied via hoses from the boat, allowing snorkelers to dive much deeper without the danger and complications of traditional SCUBA diving. The adventure factor is high and the scenery is spectacular, making this an excellent half-day activity for families with older kids. [www.snubakauai.com](http://www.snubakauai.com)

For more tips and resources, start with the official website for visiting Kauai, [www.gohawaii.com/kauai](http://www.gohawaii.com/kauai).

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in to our new luxury accommodations at the Grand Hyatt, we researched the surfboard rental prospects at the local beaches.

Once again I found myself competing with a gorgeous swimming pool while trying to sell the surf adventure to my kids. This time I was at a disadvantage because the pool at the Hyatt is unlike anything we had ever seen. A huge waterslide connects two complex man-made lagoon systems to create a watery environment that is so large and multifaceted that one could literally get lost in it—and we did. We gave in and let the kids spend a day at the hotel while we plotted our final surfing exam. Our trip was coming to an end, and a sense of depression was already settling in. How could our regular life back in California ever compare to this adventure?

“Don’t think about it—just live in the moment,” counseled Cathy. This was wise advice and I decided to take it.

The next day we put on our family game face and prepared to take our surfing to the next level. We rented foam boards and tackled the beach breaks right near the famous Marriott Hotel on Poipu Beach. Nils, Cathy and I actually got some short rides, but we found the conditions challenging. Lukas and Mia were totally content to play in the waist-high shore break.

The surfing at Poipu reminded us of the beach-break at Manresa State Beach back in Santa Cruz. The biggest challenge was lining up correctly. Quite often we found ourselves too deep or too shallow upon take-off. We caught some decent rides inside, but I could see that the skilled gamers knew exactly where to line up every time. Also, the real

quality rides were to be had farther off shore, where hollow waves jacked up over a reef. That night we decided that today was just a practice test. The real final exam would be taken tomorrow, farther out in the wild blue ocean. On our last full day in Kauai, Cathy, Nils and I would finally and decisively test our mettle as Hawaiian surfers.

The next morning we paddled right out to the far break. From up close, the action zone looked totally intimidating. Going for it on a medium-sized wave, I was weighted too far forward on the board and, predictably, I pearled into the reef and was promptly hammered, washing machine style.

After observing my lackluster performance at the far reef, Cathy and Nils decided to skip the final exam. We had found our limits. The surfing portion of our Kauai trip was over, and not a second too soon. The exhaustion factor was high. That night we fell asleep as soon as our heads hit the pillow.

I guess I was a little disappointed that I wasn’t able to stand up and surf any “gnarly” breaks in Kauai (or anything except beginner breaks, for that matter), but hey, why complain? I had a great time surfing with my family. Everyone got to stand up and ride waves. How cool is that?

The next day was not easy in terms of logistics, and nobody was happy about having to remove our entire pile of luggage just to vacuum the car. Stressed to the max, we avoided the \$300 surcharge and barely made our flight. On the other hand, how could we complain? History has shown that it is never easy leaving paradise. **as**

## Where We Stayed

### Kilauea Lakeside Estate, North Shore

In 2011, the Kilauea Lakeside Estate received the State of Hawaii Green Business Certificate for its second year in a row, and remains the only private property to be so awarded.



The Lakeside Estate is a non-profit, ecological retreat with a private well and solar energy providing all of the energy for the property. All gardens and fruit orchards are organically grown and mulched with local green material.

Since 1980, 100% of the annual profit from the property has been donated to numerous charitable causes. Part of the proceeds are donated to the Save Waiakalua Foundation established by estate owner Steve Hunt to help preserve the environment in this area of Kauai.

Ten miles of beaches and secluded coves are across the road from the estate, offering a full variety of water sports including surfing, swimming, body boarding, snorkeling, diving and windsurfing.

For more info visit [www.kauaihoneymoon.com](http://www.kauaihoneymoon.com) or [www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/kilauealakeside](http://www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/kilauealakeside).

### Koloa Landing, South Shore

Set on the sunny side of the island, Koloa Landing by Wyndham Grand is the first residential resort built in Poipu in nearly 25 years. These villas are the perfect cross between practical luxury and family living.

Koloa Landing boasts the largest guest accommodation on the island. One, two, three and four-bedroom villas range from 1351 square feet to 3664 square feet of interior and exterior living space. A home away from home, each villa has a fully equipped gourmet kitchen, laundry, daily housekeeping and countless other property amenities and services.



For more info go to [www.koloalandingresort.com](http://www.koloalandingresort.com) or [www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/koloalanding](http://www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/koloalanding)

### Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort and Spa, South Shore

The Grand Hyatt Hotel boasts a private lagoon and an immense, multi-level swimming pool with a water slide. Visitors will be hard pressed to find a more beautiful hotel anywhere in the world. Lush tropical gardens fill the lobby area to create an indoor/outdoor feeling that is amplified by the presence of wild macaws. Kayaking and snorkeling are available in the lagoons, and visitors are sorely tempted to stay put and never leave the resort. This would be a mistake, however, as the nearby Poipu beaches are unforgettable.



For more info visit [www.grandkauai.e-hyatt.com](http://www.grandkauai.e-hyatt.com) or [www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/grandhyattkauai](http://www.adventuresportsjournal.com/travel/grandhyattkauai)



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