

CHICAGO

# Travel



# HAWAIIIAN PUNCH

## KAUAI CHANNEL | Kayaking in Pacific is thrilling as well as treacherous

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

**H**ANALEI, Hawaii — “Everything OK?” asked our guide, Wyatt Godinez, resting his paddle across the bow and waiting for us to catch up. He smiled, that Hawaiian-style “hang-loose and chill out” smile that makes everything seem just a little easier.

As he’d noticed, we were feeling a tad anxious about kayaking in Hanalei Bay, though the day was perfect for paddling, with the sun warming the water, the trade winds ruffling the palms and a few puffy clouds floating overhead.

But as anyone who’s read the fine print in a Hawaiian guidebook knows, the Pacific Ocean deserves respect. The currents between the Hawaiian Islands can be tricky; more often they’re treacherous. Equally sobering was the knowledge that the Kauai Channel, between Kauai and Oahu, is more than two miles deep.

For a couple of amateur paddlers, we’ve bested some seriously edgy waterways in less forgiving climes. We’ve kayaked in Alaska’s remote Wood-Tikchik State Park on Lake Beverley, a mountain jewel utterly inaccessible except by float plane. People who venture there are on their own.

We’d kayaked — albeit briefly — on a cloudy afternoon on the icy waters of Foch Lake, in northern British Columbia, an alpine pool where an unpredictable down-canyon wind can change an outing from a nature idyll into a nightmare. And we’ve braved the current in the mighty Snake River in Idaho’s Hell’s Canyon.

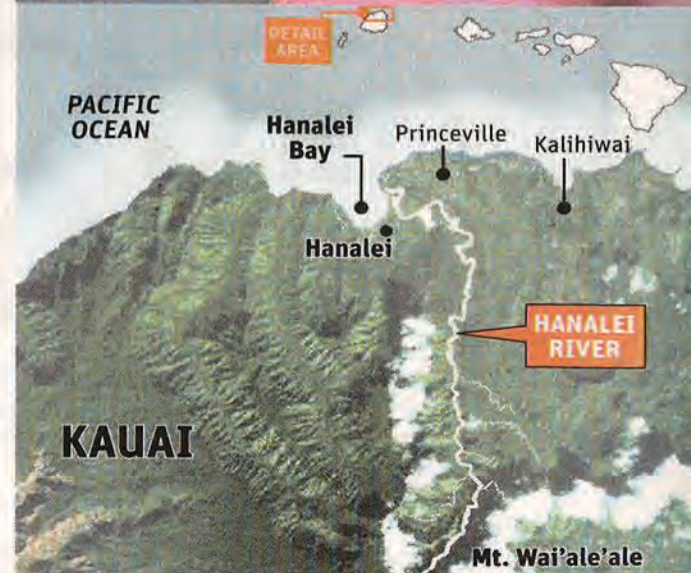
But our confidence faltered as we parked at Kayak Kauai, located in a rustic bungalow called the “Old Canoe House,” in the town of Hanalei (meaning “where leis are made”), on the island’s north shore.

The 22-year-old company looks low-key, but it’s earned its chops. The owners, Micco Godinez, 54,

and his brother Chino, 56, are experienced athletes with a resume that includes climbing Mt. McKinley and kayaking from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska. Chino’s son Wyatt, 21, who was hosing the salt water off a stack of rental kayaks, was following in their footsteps.

“You’ll have an easy time today,” said Chino, who was unpacking camping gear that was for sale. “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 appears as a wide



It’s a tight fit for kayakers in the channel that leads to the Hanalei River in Hanalei, Hawaii. | STEVE HAGGERTY/COLOR WORLD ~ FOR THE SUN-TIMES

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Colorful kayaks await passengers outside of Kayak Kauai in Hanalei, Hawaii. | STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD-FOR THE SUN-TIMES

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## KAYAK | Hawaiian island boasts many kayaking opportunities

blue line, snaking down the slopes of 5,148-foot Mount Wai'ale'ale and running north for 14 miles. It looks perfect for paddling. But 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," Chino said. "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," Micco said — paddling is less effort and more fun if done right. So unless you're experienced, Kayak Kauai insists on a brief orientation. Handing out life jackets and paddles, Wyatt demonstrated the preferred method, with arms outstretched, thumbs around the handle, blades at right angles to the ground. Nor should you dig the paddles into the water; you dip them in at an angle in a kind of rowing stroke.

"You don't want your arms to do all the work," said Andrew Belt, a kayaking guide at Kauai Waterski, Surf and Kayak, 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."

Unlike some outfitters, who have to truck the kayaks in to a put-in site, the Godinez's base in Hanalei sits on a former irrigation channel flowing into the Hanalei River. The kayaks go into the water here, at the dock, about 30 feet from the main channel. Where they intersect, you can paddle left toward the wildlife reserve or right toward the bay.

The advantage about kayaking in Hawaii is that the water is warm. In Alaska, kayaks are fitted with water-tight 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, a trick that neither of us has ever mastered. In Hawaii, it doesn't matter if you get wet, so the kayaks are the sit-on-top type.

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

We could have rented a "deluxe" model with a rudder controlled by foot pedals, for easier steering. But our standard two-seater had no such luxury. Putting it into the water we followed Wyatt to the river, a popular place for learners to practice. And as some of them were discovering, paddling in tandem is a mixed blessing.

It helps when two can share the work. But this is one team effort that demands compromise. The lead paddler should adjust his/her stroke to his partner's pace, but the rear paddler has to maintain the rhythm. Fortunately, we managed to get in sync before reaching the entrance to Hanalei Bay.

The pastoral Hanalei Valley, cultivated since ancient times, is still unspoiled. Tucked between two mountain ridges and fringed by waterfalls, it's a moveable canvas of greens, browns and golds. The bay, itself, gouged out between misty cliffs, is fringed by sand beaches. Four movies have already been filmed here, including "South Pacific," and the site is still

## IF YOU GO

**Kayak Kauai** in Hanalei rents its kayaks for 24-hour periods. Double kayaks are \$52 and single kayaks are \$28. Guided three-hour trips, including a lunch stop and snorkeling, are \$60 a person. The full-day Na Pali Coast trip, with van transportation, is \$185 a person. Call (800) 437-3507 or visit [www.kayakkauai.com](http://www.kayakkauai.com).

**Kauai Waterski, Surf and Kayak** in Wailua leads guided half-day trips on the Wailua River. Deluxe trips include an orientation, lunch and drinks for \$70 a person. The regular guided trip is \$50 a person. Call (808) 822-3574.

in demand. Underwater reefs inside the bay slow down breakers from the ocean, making it an ideal for pleasure boating. So for the next two hours we paddled steadily, then pulled into a cove on the east shore.

"This is a good place to look for kahelelani shells, like the ones they find on Niihau and string into necklaces," said Wyatt, running 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 pin-head sized pink and tan shells into my hand.

"Next time do the Na Pali Coast trip," Wyatt said as we headed back to the Old Canoe House. "It's my favorite trip."

"The Na Pali Coast trip is rated among the top ten kayak trips, but it's not for everybody," Belt said. "It's 17 miles of paddling, and that's just part of it. First 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 some of the strongest guys start to feel seasick. When you're puking all over it's hard to have fun."

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

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