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Finding King Kamehameha: Charting a path to greatness

August 09 2016 01:43 AM

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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 1812, this was Kamehameha's last home and spiritual centre, 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 theatre presenting Hawaiian styles over the decades on a raised stage. The guests, dining on 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 recognised 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 deities, 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 deity, 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 artefacts 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. —TNS

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