

Travel and Adventure: Travelers now trek over the tracks that carried Hawaii's sugar cane

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

LAHAINA, Hawaii - "All aboard!"

When visitors come to Hawaii, they expect to sunbathe, swim with the dolphins, scuba dive, snorkel, body board and surf.

But take a train?

You betcha.

My husband Carl, an avid train nut, used to half-joke that he would visit Hawaii with me if only there were a train excursion.

So I found one on Maui. It's the 200-passenger LK&P - the Lahaina Kaanapali and Pacific Railroad, more fondly known as the Sugar Cane Train, Hawaii's only daily steam excursion train. It has restored steam locomotives (circa 1943 and imported from Ohio), one to resemble an 1880s Baldwin tender, with rounded dome and wooden cab; the other rebuilt as a 1900 Dickson engine.

The open-air coaches are replicas of the trains that once ran through these sugar cane fields of West Maui. During the heyday of this industry, from 1890 until around 1950, several trains transported the area's sugar cane to the mills and shuttled plant workers between the fields and their homes.

TRAIN TRAVEL IN PARADISE - This Sugar Cane Train, Myrtle No. 3, is an open-air coach replica of the steam locomotives that used to run through the sugar cane fields in Maui. Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS - Aboard the Sunset BBQ Dinner and Show excursion train from the Puukolii Station, tourists are treated with sights of the West Maui Mountains, and even whale sightings from December to April. Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen.

WELCOME ABOARD - Serenaded by Hawaiian entertainers, passengers board the Sunset BBQ Dinner and Show locomotive. Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen.

VIEW FROM ABOVE - The Sugar Cane Train crosses the 325-foot-long Hahakea Trestle. The nearby islands of Molokai and Lanai are visible from here on clear days. Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen.

In 1969, an entrepreneur, A.W. McKelvey, got the idea to revive the train in celebration of Maui's sugar history. Since opening the Sugar Cane Train in 1970, some 5 million have ridden its rails, currently about 250,000 each year. Open year-round, seven days a week, each day a few hundred passengers travel the six-mile, hour-long round trip between Lahaina and Puukolii, a nostalgic blast from the past of Old Hawaii's sugar cane days.

"Most people hear about us word of mouth," commented Kyle Ishida, spokesman for the unique steam-driven, narrow-gauge railroad. "When you come to Hawaii you think of beaches, coconut trees, the sunset."

Not a train ride, we both chuckled.

Carl and I opted for the Sunset Barbecue Dinner and Show excursion, and showed up at the Puukolii Station the designated 30 minutes prior to boarding to pick up our reserved tickets. Each passenger was handed a complimentary Sugar Cane Train logo kerchief, and there was excitement in the air.

As we heard the steam engine toot and could see the train rolling into the tiny station, a young mother held the hand of her small child, about 3, and exclaimed, "This is just like 'Thomas the Tank Engine!'"

The little boy jumped up and down excitedly - as nearly did my husband. This is definitely a treat for train-loving kids of all ages - and ages ranged from babes in arms to great-grandparents.

Serenaded with Hawaiian ukulele music, smiling, casually dressed passengers boarded the open-air coaches and sat down, waving to people standing nearby, whipping out cameras and clicking away.

"Aloha! Welcome aboard!" the conductor greeted us, introducing herself as Shantel and the engineers as Justin and Scott.

The train tooted and we departed, passing stopped traffic at the railroad crossing (waving to drivers, as they waved back), slowly chugging along the base of the gorgeous West Maui Mountains, taking in the view. We crossed an elevated, 325-foot-long wooden trestle; from here, on clear days, you can see the nearby islands Molokai and Lanai - and during December to April, there may be sightings of humpback whales off the Kaanapali coast.

Passing golf courses and modest houses on one side, where some of the sugar cane fields used to be - and busy Highway 30 with beachfront condos, hotels, restaurants and shops on the other - we learned from our narrator Shantel about the area's history. Lahaina, once used as a summer residence for Hawaiian royalty, was also once regarded as the Royal Capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom and considered the whaling capital of the world from 1820-1860.

A "royal coconut grove" - a line of 80 trees first planted in 1827, then re-planted in the early 1960s - is, according to legend, said to represent the children born to the wives of King Kamehameha I, who unified the Hawaiian Islands and formally established the Kingdom of Hawaii by 1810.

"No one knows how many wives he had," Shantel noted. "We think about 21."

Since the Hawaiian language was not "put on paper yet when he was king," the legend was passed down through the generations via oral stories.

We also learned, as we slowly rolled along the tracks, that nearby Lahailaluna High School, opened in 1831 for children of protestant missionaries, was the first school in Hawaii, and today reportedly is the oldest school west of the Rockies.

The train stopped for about 15 minutes at Lahaina Station, which is designed to resemble a turn-of-the-century boarding platform, where a working turntable reversed the engine for the return trip. As steam blew from the engine (it holds 1,500 gallons of water), the men and a few women snapped photos and held small children up for a better look. Most of the women quickly headed to the station gift shop, which has numerous, reasonably priced train-themed T-shirts (yes, even various versions of Thomas the Tank Engine, a popular seller) and other souvenir items.

Once we re-boarded, we learned some more history: The nearby Pioneer Mill Co., opened in 1860, harvested its last crop in September 1999. At its peak, more than 45,000 tons of sugar cane were produced on more than 5,000 acres. In 1910 it employed 1,600.

"People came from all over the world to work in the sugar cane field," Shantel noted of those days. "Originally ox carts transported the sugar from the field to the mill, and the owners, realizing that they needed a more efficient means of transportation, wrote a letter to the king."

What followed was the construction of the railroad in 1882, which immediately expanded production and opened many jobs - until later years, when competition with foreign markets badly hurt the industry, shutting it down. Today the fields are being planted with other crops, such as coffee beans.

The sunset journey was slow and relaxing, and we soon stopped at the Kaanapali Station, also designed to resemble a turn-of-the-century boarding platform, where charming children danced the hula for us as adults played the guitar and ukulele, chanting Hawaiian songs.

The price of the ticket - about \$80 per adult, \$50 per child - may seem a bit high. For those on a budget, the day excursion might be a better bet, at about \$20 per adult, \$15 per child. The 2 1/2-hour dinner excursion does include an all-you-can-eat barbecue buffet, catered by a nearby hotel, with long tables heaped with various dishes, including salads, mashed potatoes, potato salad, corn on the cob, hot dogs, pork ribs, chicken and numerous desserts. As we sat at picnic tables and dined under the setting sun, a local family continued to entertain us on a small outdoor stage with Hawaiian music, jokes and cultural anecdotes.

With tummies full and feet stretched, we re-boarded the train for the short final journey, back to our point of departure.

"How did you like that?" I asked my husband, who has taken several steam train rides - mostly in England and Scotland - but never imagined he'd ride one here.

"That was great!" he responded.

"The sugar industry is still a big part of our local history," summed up Shantel. "And we try to keep that history alive to everyone who rides our train."

IF YOU GO

For more information and to make reservations (there are several daily excursions): Lahaina Kaanapali and Pacific Railroad (Sugar Cane Train), 800-499-2307, 808-667-6851, www.sugarcanetrain.com. Price for the Sunset Barbecue Dinner excursion (on Thursday night only, but another night is usually added during the summer months; check the Web site for details, schedules and holiday closures) is about \$80 per adult, \$50 per child, and should be booked at least a week ahead. The daily round-trip (which normally needs no reservation) is about \$20 per adult, \$15 per child; one-way trips are also available. For all excursions, children

under 3 are free. There are AAA discounts, as well as discounts if tickets are booked online, or a tourist brochure coupon is used. Complimentary parking is at the Puukolii and Lahaina Stations.

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