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No. 10 at Wailea Golf Club's Gold Course
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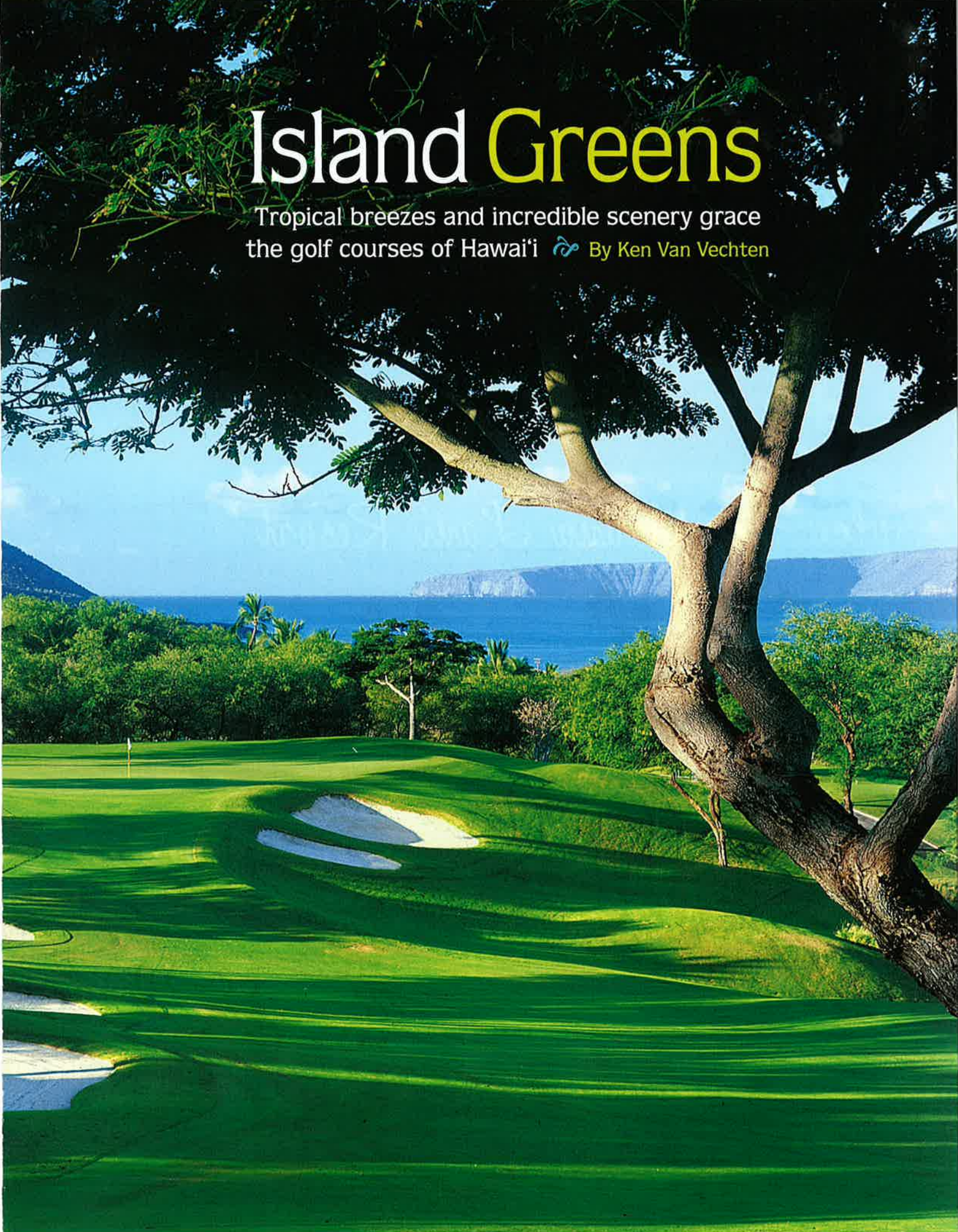
MICHAEL FRENCH, COURTESY: WAILEA GOLF CLUB-GOLD COURSE

Island Greens

Tropical breezes and incredible scenery grace
the golf courses of Hawai'i



By Ken Van Vechten





COURTESY: MAKENA BEACH & GOLF RESORT



COURTESY: TURTLEBAYGOLF.COM

Top: Maui's Makena Golf Course is a picturesque layout.

Above: Turtle Bay courses follow the dramatic north shore of O'ahu.

I'm certain Hawaiians have several thousand words for "green," because everything here is green. Everything. Except for all the foliage that's yellow and orange, red and magenta, and purple; and the span of blues that is the ocean; and the marshmallow-white billows of the shore break; and lava in bronze-black.

"Mr. Van Vechten, you're on the first tee.

Mr. Van Vechten. ... Sir."

The starter rouses me from distraction, and I see the brilliance of color around me is reality. Such is the power of Island golf, where the game is as evocative and majestic as the scenery.

And I'm still on the practice tee.



BRIAN OAR, FAIRWAYS PHOTOGRAPHY

KAUAI

Princeville Resort's Prince Course reopened this spring following a revamp by original designer Robert Trent Jones Jr. While some yardage was added, the key restoration efforts included reclaiming fairway margins, improving sight lines, remodeling bunkers, reconstructing green surrounds and re-turfing greens with paspalum. Call it a nip and tuck, as the sturdy bones of the place remain—meaning nonreturning nines, and holes scampering across 400 rolling, banking, leaping, cascading, jungle-tangled acres.

Untouched, blessedly, is the IMAX-grade expanse of visual spectacle: gossamer waterfalls, Bali Hai setting, the north shore break.

Even from ability-appropriate tees, Prince is a stern, rigorous test. In fact, it's just plain hard. I'm cool with that. Flat courses with parallel fairways are boring. Prince is a thrill ride. It's not all perfect—few are. Yet what you see is what you get,

and when you can't see, play to what the full-info GPS system gives you.


Set between Prince and the neighboring Makai Course, Westin's Princeville Ocean Resort Villas offers studio and one- and two-bedroom kitchen-and-laundry villas in a casually elegant residential-resort

Above: The 5th green on the Kiele Moana course highlights the Kaua'i Lagoons golf experience. Below: Princeville Resort's Prince Course has a beautiful Bali Hai setting.



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environment. The bluff-top setting serves up ocean views from many units, waterfall-draped mountains from others. Two secluded adult pools, a family activity pool and one just for the *keiki* provide water-time fun for those who choose not to clam-ber down the nearby path to the shore. Barbecue grills are arrayed throughout the site, with *pāpā'i* and tables.

Other amenities include dining, spa services, kids' activities, cultural activities and a gym. Though this is an ownership property, half the occupants are guests who can book through Westin and third-party sites.

The course names are an auditory twister. The sea spray on No. 5 tells me in no uncertain terms where I am. The renovation is an eye stunner. At the new-look Kauai Lagoons Golf Club, sensory input is an essential part of the playing experience.

As with other top plays on the island—Prince, Makai, Poipu Bay—Kauai Lagoons has had a date with a make-over artist, whose work in this iteration looks remarkably like that of the greatest golfer ever, Jack Nicklaus, who designed the course in the first place. There are several new holes and nine fewer overall—for a total of 27. Additional bunkers and greens re-clad with putter-friendly and less-snaky/more racy TifEagle highlight the ocean side of the course, which sports what is reported to be the longest stretch of contiguous oceanfront holes in the mid-Pacific. For families and the get-in-a-quick-nine crowd there's the Kiele Waikahe Nine, the more user-friendly play.

The championship routing consists of the Kiele Mauka and Kiele Moana nines, in respective order. Mature and solid, Mauka harbors a few forced carries over barrancas not anticipated on such a plot of land, with wide, bending fairways side-boarded in dense stands of mango and

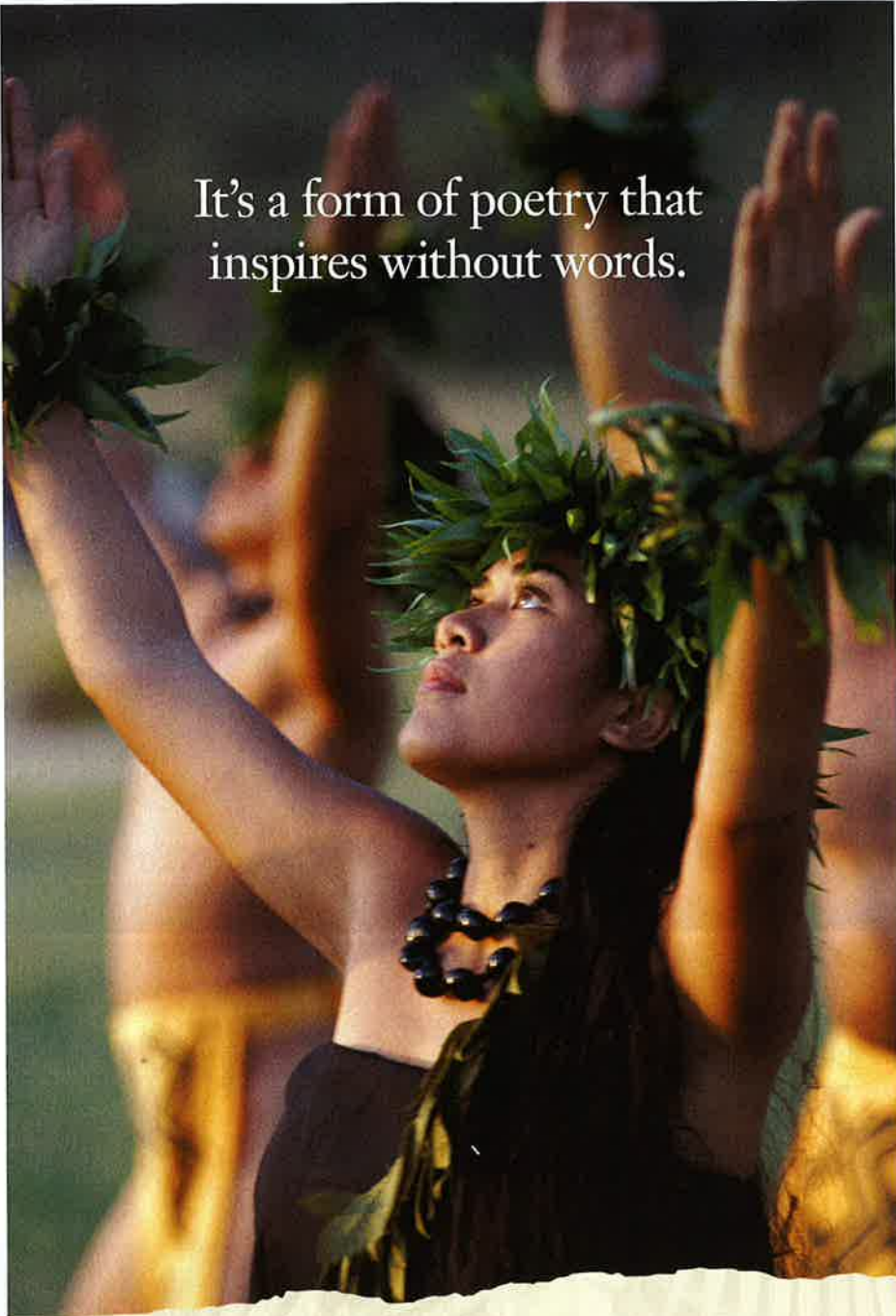
guava and all other manner of tropical foliage. Downwind holes can play mon-strously long, even from other than the hero tees. Proving that the higher powers of golf understand humor, I birdie the 453-yard left-sweeping par-4 fourth despite a hairy lie on tropics-fueled Bermuda green draped in three beaches' worth of sand. Today's wind is definitely not prevailing.

The new fairways, greens, white silica bunkers and verve show up on Moana, where along the northerly cliff face of Nāwiliwili Bay—from the fourth hole approach to the climb up to the eighth tee, roughly Ninini Point to Kūki'i Point—players quickly learn the translation of *moana* (open ocean). With that big blue roiling just below and saw-topped, emerald-clothed mountains rising beyond, the either-side-of-200-yard fifth is Kauai

The shot across the cove ...
automatic, if it were tee, turf
and green back home. Here,
it's the cove, and the waves,
in addition to the lava, grass,
sand and green, the palms
consistently swaying and
whales sometimes breaching.

Lagoon's entry into the Islands' best over-the-cove hole contest.

Moana traces an arc around Marriott Vacation Club Kauai Lagoons, a four-story complex of 72 two- and three-bedroom villas with course, moana, bay, pool and mountain (*mauka*) views. A full kitchen in granite and stainless anchors a great room with a slideaway glass wall to a large *lānai*. Rooms are spread to the periphery of each unit to provide needed family and friend space. The resort concierge can arrange off-site excursions, from ATV rides to scuba, and a shuttle gives guests access to



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the course, tennis center and the Kaua'i Marriott Resort & Beach Club. Have dinner on the sand at Duke's.

HAWAII ISLAND

There are times in golf when you just have to play all the way back, indulging in the look, the line, the challenge, the bravura, the tales to ensue. White ain't right, and blue won't do. And most times that hole is a par-3, where one swing determines goat or gutty.

Fifteen at the Mauna Lani Resort's Francis H. I'i Brown South Course provides one of those opportunities. One of the best in the world, in fact. As the signature hole of the 36 at Mauna Lani Resort, No. 15 eats at the neural connections between the ears. The shot across the cove, to cover and at minimum stay dry, takes far less than the 196 yards on the card. Automatic, if it were tee, turf and green back home. Here, it's the cove, and the waves, in addition to the lava, grass, sand and green, the palms consistently swaying and whales sometimes breaching. Maui and Haleakalā are off ahead to the left, throwing in a crossing headwind, and the usual spectator or two is out strolling the shore's edge.

I'd have it no other way.

Owing to maintenance demands, I am treated to a day when the original Mauna Lani layout is in play—nine from South Course, nine from the North. The composite routing pairs the more typical lava-clad holes of South with holes defined by North's woodlands of lacy canopy *kiawe*, the local variant of what we all call mesquite.

The Fairmont Orchid, one of two resorts adjacent the courses, spreads out elegantly between a neophyte snorkelers' dream lagoon—a popular spot for *honu* (sea turtles)—and the run-to-the-sea ninth of the North Course, presenting an easy *aloha* of city-hotel refinement and seaside casual. Pampering comes courtesy of the resort's Spa Without Walls, where patrons can receive services in private waterfall huts within a riot of jungle foliage and trickling waters, or oceanside in cabanas. Like buffets in Las Vegas, island *lū'au* run

the spectrum from regrettable to bon appétit, and Fairmont's Gathering of the Kings resides with the Michelin stars side of the ledger. And after exhaustive research, I can attest that the mixologists at Brown's Beach House concoct the best mai tai this side of a mid-century *Sunset* magazine recipe handed down through the 'ohana (family).

Mauna Lani Bay Hotel & Bungalows appears like the prow of a ship heading into the sundown sea, with several long reaches of dig-your-toes-in Kohala coastline cresting off as port and starboard wakes. The grande dame of the area, the resort's multi-suited bungalows long have been favored as private retreats. Other sea-view guestrooms are arrayed around the hotel's signature pond-and-open-air atrium. Home to the legendary Canoe-House restaurant, where Alan Wong cut

his culinary chops, Mauna Lani always has been a leader in sustainable, local cuisine. CanoeHouse is now under the watchful eye of Chef Allen Hess, a rising star who previously worked with Wong and Peter Merriman.

Mauna Lani North's No. 17 is a short par-3 nestled in a deep lava bowl on Hawai'i Island.



COURTESY: MAUNA LANI BAY HOTEL & BUNGALOWS

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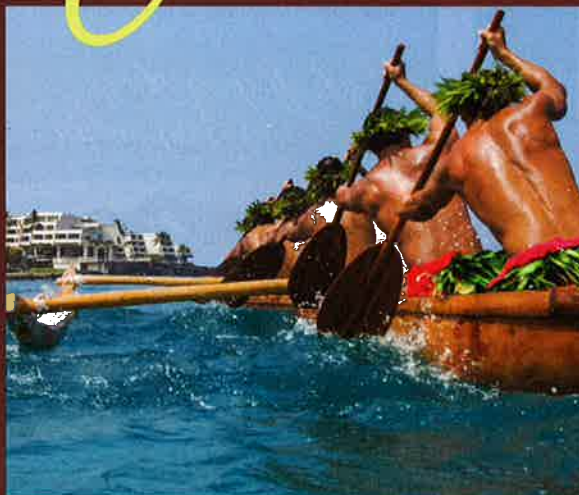
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Golf fans will know Hualālai Golf Course from its many years hosting the PGA Championships Tour's season-opening event, the Mitsubishi Electric Championship at Hualālai. The TV shot is No. 17, a calm-day 7-iron par-3 stretching out like a fallen layer cake of lava, grass, sand, lava, grass, lava and, if you're really amped, blue. Sea holes always are cool.

Hualālai is far more than the local amen corner—approach to No. 16 through the drive at No. 18—at the beach. Hawai'i Island itself, its topography, geology and

Ko Olinā is the handiwork of Ted Robinson, and that means broad shoulders, nursery-grade flowerbeds, exacting approach shots. ...

associated colors, defines Hualālai. Blue sky, cobalt water; inky lava, dark-shadowed volcano; emerald course, green up-country slopes; white bunker sand, beach, cloud and, in season, snow on Mauna Kea. The course is open and embracing within its generous Nicklaus-crafted corridors and its setting.

Hualālai plays out and back; stop at the *hale* at the turn and stock up on the gratis cookies. By not returning, Nicklaus was able to flow the course throughout. With the ever-outward vistas, golfers experience Hualālai as much with eyes up as with clubs in hands. Fairways are wide and fair, with angles to work for those who know how. And I putt like Luke Donald, dropping four long-rangers once it sinks in that this isn't grandpa's Bermuda, so the speed is nicely up and the breaks lessened.

The resort is a playground in the larger, same-name private preserve of übercool villas and homes, beautiful beachfront, a

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members-only Tom Weiskopf course and getaway retreat. Access to the Hualālai Golf Course is limited to club members and guests of the Four Seasons Hualālai—where I'm greeted with a lei and mai tai. The Four Seasons is a beckoning village of spacious rooms and suites clustered around ocean-fronting pools and a for-every-keiki lagoon brimming with fish, rays and anyone who wants to take a snorkel. Hawai'i regional fare—culinary fusion reflective of the many cultures that came together on the islands—is offered evenings at Pahu i'a; just-opened Hualālai Grille brings Pacific bounty to surf-and-turf; and sunset should be feted with Beach Tree's Mediterranean-hued California comfort food and a west-facing table or barstool.




COURTESY: KO OLINA GOLF CLUB


O'AHU

Ai Miyazato pocketed \$255,000 going 12-under and winning by four shots during April's inaugural LPGA LOTTE Championship at Ko Olina Golf Club. I rinse 18 bucks worth of logo'd balls on a single par-3, with a short iron. Or make that an 8-iron, an

The Ko Olina Golf Course on O'ahu hosts the LPGA LOTTE Championship each April.



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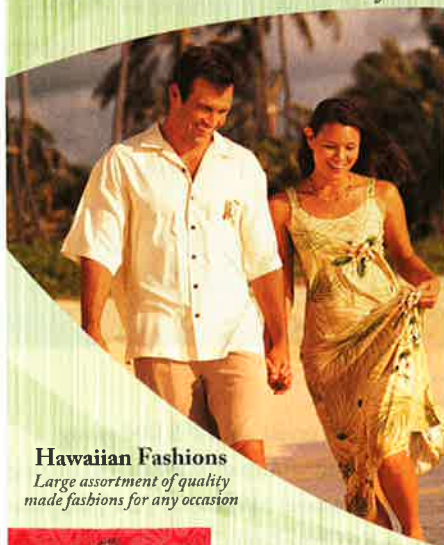
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8-iron, an 8-iron, and a successful 8-iron. Drop zones are for wimps, and the website tells me "par is a great score" on this hole—with my one-putt that makes my snowman simply pathetic.

The return of the world's leading women's sports organization to O'ahu is a boon for the island, a boon for the state—five PGA, LPGA and Champions tours events now take place in Hawai'i each year—and a boon for the ladies, who need more domestic events. And it's always good for recreational players to tee it up where the game's best do battle, comparing notes if not notability.

Ko Olina is the handiwork of the late Ted Robinson, and that means broad shoulders, nursery-grade flowerbeds, exacting approach shots, greens that resemble the steppes of Eurasia, and trickling waterfalls and water in play on, typically, half the holes. Ironically for an island course, none of that water is salty. And let's not forget dueling signature-hole par-3s. I bag an "8" on the eighth, which is fitting given the club of choice. The same club, with a putter assist, notches a circled "2" on No. 12.

The JW Marriott Ihilani Resort & Spa rises tall above Ko Olina, west of Honolulu on O'ahu's sundown shore. Standard digs serve up tons of elbow room, with warming marble, plantation shutters and breeze-kissed lanai. The seaside accommodations that catch a view of the Wai'anae Coast are particularly spectacular. Four huge, manufactured saltwater lagoons are big hits at Ko Olina, which the JW shares with several large fractional properties, including Disney's Aulani. And since you are on the islands, partake of restorative lomi lomi massage, an indigenous healing practice of long strokes using hand, elbow, knuckle and forearm, and gentle body manipulation.

The LPGA previously touched down in O'ahu for a crack at Turtle Bay's Arnold Palmer Course, a parkland-meets-Pacific exercise in wind and hazard management. Crafted by long-time Palmer associate and lead designer Ed Seay, the tournament course is the stern challenge to the resort's

Turtle Bay's Fazio course catches interest with sweeping doglegs and gnarly rough, and twice passes by for glimpses of the moana. ... Film crews inevitably make for the par-4 17th, which sprints to a windy wave-spray conclusion after skirting a giant's footpath expanse of bunkers—and I mean lots of bunkers.

Fazio 18, an open-armed affair where walking is allowed and, to my mind, mandatory. Maxing out under 6,600 yards, the Fazio course catches interest with sweeping doglegs and gnarly rough, and twice passes by for glimpses of the moana.

Seay/Palmer countered with subtle dune contours and sinuous fairways skirting wetlands with an Audubon-worthy array of birds, and some Smart Car-size bullfrogs, on the opening nine of the tournament venue. Walls of ironwood, color-spotted with riots of wild ginger in sear red, close in where the back nine heads to the coast. Film crews inevitably make for

the par-4 17th, which sprints to a windy wave-spray conclusion after skirting a giant's footpath expanse of bunkers—and I mean lots of bunkers. The course can be a beast, playing to a rating of 72.5 and a slope of 140 from the penultimate tees, so don't even inquire about the tips; whites here play short of 5,600 yards, which speaks volumes about the challenge.

Turtle Bay Resort's bring-the-outside-in, tri-arm hotel hugs a rocky cape splashed on one side by a bay, named for all the honu that love this spot, and Kuilima Cove, an inlet of sandy beach and protecting reef. This is the North Shore, after all, and big

surf is all about. The setting and orientation give the hotel a special attribute: a Pacific panorama from every room and no torqued neck from trying to find the ocean from a "partial ocean-view room." Turtle Bay is an active property, even on shore, with tennis, hiking trails, Segway tours, moped rentals, horse stables, those two courses and, in a perfect island twist, ukulele lessons.

MAUI

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the island slips beneath the sea, with Hawai'i Island rising into view some 20-odd miles away, there is one: Makena Beach & Golf Resort.

A one-time 36-holer, Makena has been operating in recent years with the course once known as North. I always like more, but what's here now rocks the joint to a level that in some other locales requires those additional holes. The opening and closing holes date back to Jones Jr.'s first routing on the site; the original layout was

The Gold Course's opener is sweetness perfected, a drop-away par-4 that sweeps sharply left, leading into a front nine that ambles about rolling terrain. The course reaches its zenith at the obligatory eagle-nest par-3 eighth.

split, with new holes being appended to create North and the presently mothballed South Course.

At No. 6 the course turns, well, joyously visceral. The hole is a short uphill par-4 with a cleaved fairway and perched green, and play here switches to risk and reward options, with high chump potential. Makena skitters about the lower slopes of 10,000-foot-tall Haleakalā—and that, of course, is just the third of the mountain that rises above the waves—through a mantle of kiawe, ravines, streams and ancient Hawaiian-built lava walls until taking the elevator shaft back down on the double-bending, 600-yard 14th. Up near

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the top, the 6-iron, par-3 12th runs straight away toward 'Alalākeiki Channel, making it the Valley Isle's, and perhaps the Islands', most stunning ocean hole that's nowhere near the ocean. Makena's visual relation to the waters between Maui and Kaho'olawe—with dive-central Molokini in mid-view, sometimes accompanied by vacationing humpbacks—goes a long way toward making 18 holes at Makena something more than a round of golf.

On the green side of the ledger, the course's ongoing maintenance program is reintroducing drought-tolerant native plants—Haleakalā acts like a giant umbrella down here—and irrigation has been turned over to a reclaimed system half powered by solar energy.

Makena Resort is nicely removed from

the bustle of Wailea and South Maui without being isolated. It's just a few minutes to the other grand hotels of the strand, high-end shopping and two of the island's best restaurants, Bev Gannon's Joe's and

Pacific Ocean waves crest along the lava shores of Hawai'i Island and Hualālai Golf Course's 17th hole.



COURTESY: HUALALAI RESORT

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Peter Merriman's new sports bar/gastropub concept, Monkeypod.

The resort wraps around a water-and-blossom, open-air atrium, with internal up-country views to Haleakalā that are as compelling as the views seaward. And the resort could have the best beach of any on the island. Room and public-space remodeling was completed in January, and includes a new fitness center, restaurants, shops and resurfaced courts at the tennis center.

One thing remains as it was, a simple yet cornerstone feature of this place: the locking front vestibule that allows cooling breezes to pass through.

Wailea Golf Club sings like its southerly South Maui neighbor Makena, but with more voices in the choir: 54 total, to be exact. The A-flight is the Gold Course, with Emerald just a pop or two behind, at least according to the stats. Both came to be in 1994, at the hands of Jones Jr., and both play out of the same stunning clubhouse, which sports another of Hawai'i Regional Cuisine co-innovator Gannon's compelling establishments. Wailea easily competes with Kapalua's Plantation Course Clubhouse for the top spot on the this-is-more-than-a-place-to-change-shoes medal stand, when talking food and panorama. (Gannon's early eater, 5:30–6:30 p.m., \$29 three-course fixed-price selection is an island value leader.)

The Gold Course's opener is sweetness perfected, a drop-away par-4 that sweeps sharply left, leading into a front nine that ambles about rolling terrain. The course reaches its zenith at the obligatory eagle-nest par-3 eighth with the bring-the-camera backdrop, and the closers staircase to a slightly higher elevation.

Emerald has a similar start followed by returning nines that carry players gently upward. Less yardage and somewhat toned-down risks make the course appear less daunting, but its back side's four-points-of-the-compass meander feels more organic.

The Old Blue course, dating from the early 1970s, is an open, sporty track that's

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No. 3 on Hawai'i Island's Mauna Kea Golf Course has a storied past.

The Big Man Makes His Return

Gary Player stood on the tee, hitting balls into the Pacific.

I make the green on my first try.

Mauna Kea Golf Course's over-moana 272-yard par-3 third is iconic, trend-setting. If it's true—that adage about imitation and flattery—then the club has adulation to spare. Designed way back in the early 1960s by Robert Trent Jones Sr., long before the Kohala Coast of Hawai'i Island was studded with all-star golf

just the ticket for a first-day warm-up or a last-day wind-down.

At The Fairmont Kea Lani, I have two activity pools, connected by a 140-foot waterslide, plus an adults-only pool, from which to choose. Fairmont's "Heavenly White" all-suite resort does family well, from massive rooms with separate living

courses and world-best resorts, the hole and the course set the bar high for seaside golf to come on all the Hawaiian islands.

Jones' kid, Rees, orchestrated a complete overhaul of Mauna Kea, and the course reopened in December 2009 with new turf throughout, reclaimed bunkers (and a host of new ones), a couple-hundred-yard tweak on the score-card and, most importantly, reclaimed relevance. There's quite a bit of room to "err" things out on most holes. The payback for that generosity is wavecrest

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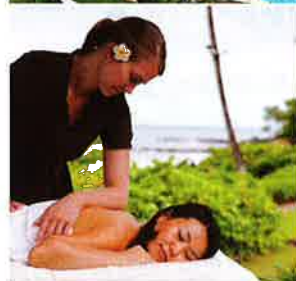
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bunkering that Rees designed to ensure little chance of successfully reaching in regulation. After that, players still have to deal with the elder Jones' prototypical green complexes—acutely raised, deep and rambling, robed in false fronts and sides, and more sand.

Welcome back, old friend.

Gary Player? The story goes that warming up for a grand-opening exhibition, the Black Knight, playing alongside the King and the Golden Bear, had trouble spanning the oceanic expanse from the then 250-or-so-yard back tee. So they moved up.

Even facing 20 more yards, I have a huge advantage over Player—the titanium club I'm swinging is probably three times the size of his old driver.

But Player hit the green when it mattered. And he's not the one who three-jacked the third. —K.V.V.

areas and Grand Central-size bathrooms to beach and pools, to supervised activities at the Keiki Lani Kid's Club. Fear not, couples or unattended golfers, Kea Lani is a Fairmont, with seamlessly easy, care-for-all-needs service, culinary sophistication at newly added Kō—where the presentation of island fare is inspired by the sugarcane-plantation era and by family recipes that originated in locales ranging from Portugal to the Philippines—warm sand and languid nights under the celestial dance.

Stars? Yes, stars. Not everything that is spectacular in Hawai'i plays out in the spectrum of daytime color.

Or, gulp, on the golf course. ▲

Ken Van Vechten is a freelance golf and travel journalist.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers daily service to O'ahu (Honolulu), Maui, Kaua'i and Kona/Hawai'i Island. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Hawai'i, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.

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