



The Waikolu Valley overlook on Moloka'i's rugged and remote north shore.

# Got Trail—Will Travel

WITH COUNTLESS MOUNTAIN AND BEACH TRAILS RIPE FOR EXPLORING ITS DIVERSE, RUGGED TERRAIN, MOLOKA'I OFFERS THE CLOSEST THING TO MOUNTAIN-BIKING HEAVEN.

BY A.C. SHILTON

The tiny, eight-seat plane I'm in is shaking as we fly over Moloka'i's windswept north shore, but I can't stop grinning. From my seat, I'm gazing down on miles and miles of dirt trails prime for mountain biking.

With a population of just over 7,000 and a single traffic light on the whole island, Moloka'i is pure country to neighboring O'ahu's big city. Still, the island may just be the state's epicenter for great mountain-biking trails, boasting countless miles of double-track roads and dirt trails, on both public and private lands. Having chased such trails unsuccessfully for years on O'ahu, dirt is exactly what I'm looking for.

Weekdays, I'm a Honolulu fashion writer. But on weekends, I'm a reckless practitioner of tomboy. I live to play in dirt, even if it means flying to Moloka'i for a single day simply to indulge myself.

My first stop on the ground is Moloka'i Bicycle. The small shop in Kaunakakai, the island's main town, is run by lifelong Moloka'i resident Phillip Kikukawa. Like me, Phillip has a weekday alter-ego. He's a math teacher. But Phillip and his staff share a passion for mountain biking that is infectious.

I'm usually wary of rental bikes, which are sometimes poorly maintained and pockmarked with signs of abuse. The bike Phillip loans me, however, is clean, peddles smoothly and shifts with purpose. The rental includes a helmet, lock and bike

rack for my car, plus a detailed Moloka'i trail map. Cost for rental: \$20 for the first day, and \$15 for each additional day.

With Phillip's help, I select two trails for the day: the Waikolu Valley Overlook trail, a monster, 10-mile uphill climb to the backside cliffs of the north shore valley; and the Papohaku Beach trail, a gentler ride along Moloka'i's west shore beaches, which I'll save for the afternoon.

At the Waikolu trailhead, I'm welcomed by a daunting view of the lengthy uphill climb ahead of me. Like much of southwest Moloka'i, the area is dry and hot. Sweat beads under my helmet minutes after I begin climbing, reminding me what a bear gravity can be on a trail like this.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MOLOKA'I BICYCLE

## MOLOKA'I BICYCLE

80 Mohala St., Kaunakakai, (808) 553-3931, [www.bikehawaii.com/molokaibicycle](http://www.bikehawaii.com/molokaibicycle), for more Moloka'i visitor info: [www.Molokai-Hawaii.com](http://www.Molokai-Hawaii.com), (800) 800-6367





Lengthy and largely deserted Papohaku Beach, on Moloka'i's west shore.

PHOTO: RON DAHLQUIST

A few miles in, the parched earth allows a few scrawny pines to grow, and the almost metallic odor of bone-dry volcanic dirt gives way to the sweet, musky smell of pine needles blanketing the trail. A bit further, suddenly

surrounded by lush vegetation, I'm reminded of one of the things I love most about Hawai'i—the vast diversity of ecosystems often found within relatively close proximity.

A sweeping expanse of lush valley, framed by bright blue sky and dazzling blue ocean greets me as I finally reach the Waikolu Valley Overlook. Alone at the top of the vast valley, I ponder the stark contrast of mountain meeting sea, green suddenly plunging away into blue.

The trail continues to a boardwalk two miles further upslope where the view is even more breathtaking. Sadly, it also proves a bit too muddy for me. I decide to return back down the trail. No worries, though. This is the fun part for mountain bikers.

I point my bike down the trail and kick off. Immediately, I roll through puddles the color of chocolate milk, muddy water splashing onto my shins. In other words, pure bliss! Picking up

speed, rain forest all too quickly gives way to dry terrain until I'm back at the trailhead and my rental car.


Hitching the bike on the car rack, I dash the 30 miles to Moloka'i's west side and the Papohaku Beach trail. Lengthy and largely deserted, Papohaku is the most stunning of the island's white sand beaches. With only the minor distraction of a few sandpits and rocks, the trail here is a mellower ride, perfect for family or beginning riders. At just an hour's length, it's also just what I need after my five-hour Waikolu adventure. You'll be tempted to take a dip in the ocean while exploring the beaches on the trail. My advice? Indulge.

As evening falls, I'm forced to head back to Kaunakakai to return the bike to Phillip and catch my flight to O'ahu. With many more mountain-bike trails to conquer on Moloka'i, I know I'll be in the island's dirt and sand again soon enough. †

**Want to know more about Moloka'i?**

Stop by the Moloka'i Visitors Association office at 2 Kamoi St., #200, Kaunakakai. We're open Monday through Friday from 9am to noon. We will happily answer your questions.

Can't get to Moloka'i but want some more information? To download our complete Moloka'i brochure, click to [www.hawaiiimagazine.com/molokai](http://www.hawaiiimagazine.com/molokai)



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