



## Seven Summits

By JESSE KATZ

The summit is invisible, lost in a halo of steel-wool clouds. The moon, even ablaze, is of little help, powerless to part the murk that clings to Kaua'i's center. Somewhere out there, inland, upward, is the top, the peak of Mount Wai'ale'ale, the one I saved for last. In the span of a week, I had made my way to the pinnacle of six Hawaiian islands, from the lunar dome of Mauna Lea to the manmade pine forests of Lāna'i to the bomb-scarred knolls of Kaho'olawe, to discover the opposite of what most visitors seek: to know the interior, not just the shore, the mysteries of the land furthest above the sea.

Five thousand feet below, on the tarmac outside the shed that is both his hangar and home, Ken D'Attilio is sizing up the sky, reading the mountain. He had risen in the dark, zipped himself into a jumpsuit and wrapped his head in a bandanna, then aimed his night-vision goggles at Wai'ale'ale, renowned as the wettest spot on the planet. Decades ago, U.S. Geological Survey technicians would ride mules to the top, to check the rain gauges, which collect an average of 460 inches a year, but now the only practical, or prudent, way up is by air. At dawn, I am supposed to be hitching a ride with Captain Ken, the founder of Inter-Island Helicopters, and if all goes according to plan, scaling my seventh summit in nine days. "You might get a window of opportunity," he told me the night before. "Or it could sock in and never open up for a month."

Do not take me for a peak bagger. I am a city boy. Well, more of a suburban dad. My garage is full of Little League equipment, not crampons or trekking poles or even a CamelBak. I am a bit squirrely about heights, truth be told, and my doctor has been on me to do something about my blood pressure. But when *Hana Hou!* dangled a trip to Hawai'i's mountaintops—when I stopped to consider that Hawai'i *had* mountaintops—there was really not much to mull. I had just spent a year and a half working on a book, chained to a computer in a dark, lonely office, which I had taken to calling "the cave," and the chance to get out, away from myself, to be transported to a frontier that surpassed my ability to conceive of it, was more of a rescue, frankly, than an assignment.

Although the premise was to visit every summit—by design, I would be making a list and crossing them off—I understood the pitfalls of reducing my expedition to a conquest, notches on a globetrotting belt. The summits of Hawai'i do not need me, or anyone else, to discover or define them, to pretend that the presence of man somehow elevates what the eons have already sculpted. These are places at once magnificent and subtle, largely untrammelled, often dangerous, and frequently contested, their purity and separateness coveted by everyone from environmentalists to astronomers to hunters to the military to native practitioners and activists. Some peaks require paperwork to



ascend (permits, waivers) and most call for special transportation (boats, four-by-fours, a chopper on standby), which is why I was compelled to stick to an unnaturally tight schedule. I needed to pack for heat and rain, of course, but also for sub-freezing winds and volcanic ash and bogs deep and squishy enough to swallow your leg with one wrong step. The lowest of the summits, at 1,473 feet, was barely a hill; the highest, at 13,796, was capable of shutting down bodily functions.

It is a human trait, I suppose, to reserve awe for the loftiest reaches, those vantages from which we can admire beauty, defend terrain, indulge our egos. Surely, Yertle the Turtle was not the first to proclaim himself “ruler of all that I see.” In the mythology of these islands, though, a summit is something more, a place that transcends scenic or strategic value. The word in Hawaiian is *piko*—a word that also signifies “bellybutton”—and it was from the *pikos*, the volcanic spires that rose from the ocean millions of years ago, that an archipelago, land, was born. The summit of each island, in that regard, is not just the highpoint but a lifeline, its rootstock, the source of power, natural and spiritual. If the flatlands, the communities that lined the coast, were thought of as the *wao kanaka*, the realm of people, then the mountaintops, especially the most imposing, most inhospitable ones, could be deemed the *wao akua*, the realm of the gods.

“Most of the people who try going up there on their own, we end up rescuing,” my pilot mentions, with just a hint of bravado. “That’s the way the mountain is—it likes to keep its secrets.”

**D**ays earlier, in the wee hours of another inky predawn, I feel my way up Highway 378, to the crown of Maui, the summit called Haleakalā. The road is as steep as any I have ever traveled, rising from sea level to more than 10,000 feet in just thirty-seven miles. The switchbacks would be more dizzying if I could see beyond the shoulder, but there is only vast, empty blackness every time I peek. So I stay glued to the yellow lines on the asphalt, flicking my high beams wherever I can, until I have caught up to the queue ahead of me, and we all snake, an unbroken chain of rental cars, to the lip of the world’s largest dormant volcano.

Although it is a high-altitude wilderness, remote, severe, hard on the lungs, Haleakalā is the most accessible of Hawai’i’s summits, preserved and promoted by a national park that draws more than a million visitors a year. I have to stop at a guard shack and hand over ten bucks—no complaints, but it does add to the impression that I am heading to a show. Haleakalā means “House of the Sun,” a name derived from legend, a feat of the trickster demigod Māui. When his mother complained of the sun’s hasty passage across the sky, leaving no time for her *kapa* cloth to dry, Māui climbed to the top of the great volcano and waited for the first rays of daylight. With a lasso, he snared the sun and held it captive, letting go only after the sun, chastened, agreed to linger over the island. A version of this continues: Sunrise at Haleakalā is an institution, part spectacle and part prayer, at once the definitive photo-op and an occasion for reflection, renewal.

“Things we don’t understand we create a lot of stories for,” says Jordan Jokieli, program manager for the East Maui Watershed Partnership, which protects 100,000 acres of native forest on Haleakalā’s windward slopes. “Wherever there’s a peak, there’s always



myths and lore—yeah?—the ghosts, the spirits. These are humbling, humbling places.” He is standing at the rim of the crater, which is still submerged in night, watching as plumes of tangerine and lavender ripple across the horizon. A carpet of clouds unfurls below us, covering the ocean in wall-to-wall meringue. A few more minutes and a curtain of blue, as placid as a robin’s egg, starts to rise. Then, at 6:57 a.m., the first blinding glint of sun, of fire creeping over slag. It is astoundingly gorgeous and yet less than serene. A good hundred people, most of them huddled in blankets and towels lifted from hotel rooms, are *ooh-ing* and *aah-ing* and blinding us with flashbulbs. “Maybe there’s something selfish, too, about being at the top,” adds Jokiel, with a snort. “There’s a bravado. Like, ‘I was there, man.’ *King of the hill*. There’s no getting around that.”

As soon as the sun is whole, the day officially upon us, the crowd disperses: show over. With Jokiel and his fiancée Abigail Romanchak as my guides, we hike into Haleakalā’s crater, now revealed as a deeply eroded, rust-striped punchbowl. Our boots slide and crunch on the ferrous trails, as if we are trudging over a long-extinguished campfire. I am already aware of the dryness in my throat, the shortness of my breath, but I am happy to be on foot, to be plunging into this strange volcanic desert, with its silverswords and cinder cones, rather than admiring it from a parking lot. “Tourists are always expecting something pretty, that postcard picture, the beach, the sunset,” says Romanchak, a printmaker, with an M.F.A. from the University of Hawai‘i. Her work is all about avoiding the merely decorative, about celebrating the intersection of culture and geography and design. The *kapa*, for instance, that Māui’s mother was said to be laboring over is made traditionally from soaked and pounded mulberry bark, a process that leaves the fiber embossed with intricate watermarks. In Romanchak’s studio those patterns are manipulated—magnified, colored—the accidental transformed into art.

“I try to bring out the hidden,” says Romanchak, shedding a layer of fleece, then slathering on sunscreen. “The unknown in something obvious.”

Down at sea level, at Maui’s Lahaina harbor, I catch the ferry to Lāna‘i, a nine-mile crossing. The channel is calm, the sensation of being sheltered—of being in Hawai‘i’s geographic center, islands on all sides—is comforting. I am met by Waynette Ho-Kwon of the Lāna‘i Visitors Bureau; or rather, she *is* the Lāna‘i Visitors Bureau, a one-woman shop dedicated to refashioning the former Dole plantation isle, home to just 3,000 residents, into an exclusive vacation spot, its economy centered on a pair of Four Seasons resorts. “With Lāna‘i, you either get ‘it’ or you don’t,” says Ho-Kwon, as we take off in a Dodge Ram 2500 Heavy Duty Crewcab Turbo Diesel, driven by her husband Derwin, a game warden. “There’s no in between.”

From Highway 440, we swing onto a nameless dirt road, cutting through abandoned pineapple fields. When Dole faltered in the 1990s, large swaths of the company town were left fallow, and its holdings were assumed by patrician investor David H. Murdock, who controls ninety-eight percent of Lāna‘i. As I try to wrap my mind around the notion that a seemingly public space—an entire Hawaiian island!—can be privately owned, we head for Lāna‘i’s middle, toward the spine that rises like the armored back of a stegosaurus. Our plantation road meets up with the Munro Trail, a single-lane, red-earth path, and we bounce and swerve through a corridor of ferns, their tendrils



growing damper the high we climb. It was along this ridge, in the early days of Dole, that cowboys were sent on horseback to scatter pine seeds—to trap clouds over Lānaʻi, creating a fog drip that would feed the island's watershed. The pines are nearly a century old now and close to a hundred feet, a very un-tropical-feeling rain forest.

"So this is it," says Ho-Kwon, who is wearing drawstring cargo shorts that show off a plumeria tattoo coiled around her left calf. She points to a break in the foliage, a narrow, unmarked driveway that dead-ends a few steps away, on the leeward side of the ridge. "Just this little pull-off spot." Her husband does not actually pull off, leaving the truck where it is, in the middle of the Munro Trail. The chances of anyone passing through are slim: Lānaʻi is not Maui, and its 3,366-foot summit, Lānaʻihale, has to be just about the most unassuming mountaintop I will see. It is more of a lover's lane, the site of weddings, a favorite backdrop for graduation pictures. "There used to be a picnic table here," says Ho-Kwon, breaking out an assortment of chips she had rounded up for the occasion. "But I think somebody took it home."

We snack, listen to the crickets, watch the mist swirl through the pines. When I mention that Lānaʻihale seems so tranquil, unburdened by hazard or traffic or conflict, Ho-Kwon nods in agreement—unless, she says, you count the endangered *'u'au* bird, which was recently found to be nesting in the ferns. Because the summit is also crawling with feral cats, a natural predator of the *'u'au*, wildlife officials found it necessary to set traps, a tactic that riled Lānaʻi's feline lovers. "That's the big controversy up here," says Ho-Kwon. "The cat people versus the bird people."

**B**ack on Maui, I head for a different harbor, the Kihei boat ramp, my gateway to a summit that was once nearly bombarded out of existence. For half the twentieth century, Kahoʻolawe was the Island of Death, pounded and strafed with every projectile in the U.S. navy's arsenal. Even closer to Maui than Lānaʻi, it would glow at night, a toxic volcano, simmering under a veil of gas and smoke. "This island is our baby, a very special child," says Atwood Makanani, a founding member of Protect Kahoʻolawe 'Ohana, the grassroots coalition that waged an oft-quixotic, decades-long battle to reclaim the island, ultimately compelling the Pentagon to relinquish control in 2003. Known to all as Uncle Maka, he speaks in rhyme and metaphor, dispensing axioms that range from the hip-hop to the biblical. "The baby is of age now," he says. "It never died. It survived to remind us that we're human, not perfect. When it hurts, we hurt. This is a child that reflects the world."

We have finagled our way onto a flat-bottomed, military-style cargo boat, property of the Kahoʻolawe Island Reserve Commission, the state agency that was created to oversee the island's transition from bombing range to cultural sanctuary. Access is strictly regulated—though not as strictly as cloistered Niʻihau, the one island I am forced to skip—and those fortunate enough to gain clearance are expected to roll up their sleeves and pitch in, to give something back instead of using or buying or taking. "When you get there, you'll know you're there," says Maka, who began making unauthorized trips to the island in 1977, forays that were widely dismissed as radical showboating at the time and that now are considered a milestone in the rebirth of traditional Hawaiian practices and pride. "It's called a dream. Live it. Unconditionally. No regrets."



Our landing craft hits the beach at Honokanai'a Bay — there are, intentionally, no docks on Kaho'olawe — and I am given a government-mandated safety briefing. Although the military spent ten years and \$400 million removing ordnance, much of the clean-up was superficial, and the risk of stumbling across some half-buried shrapnel or even an unexploded shell remains considerable. Not that I had planned to be using the cell, but I am instructed to power down, lest the wireless frequencies detonate a long-lost, radio-controlled device.

We pile into a battered pickup, Maka at the wheel and Kim Ku'ulei Birnie, the 'Ohana's access coordinator, acting as copilot. At forty-five square miles, Kaho'olawe is the smallest of the eight major Hawaiian islands, and without the elevation to hold clouds in place, it is also the driest and most desolate. As we jangle up the main road, a rutted aisle of hardpan, it becomes clear why the 'Ohana focuses so much of its efforts on revegetation: Whatever napalm failed to destroy, erosion has scoured and cleaved. Of Kaho'olawe's two summits, one fifty feet higher than the other, it is the lower peak, Pu'u Moaula'iki, that most appears to rise above the island. From there, nearly all of Kaho'olawe's shoreline is visible, and in ancient times, young seafarers would ascend for their first training in the ways of the water and sky. Pulling up to its base, Birnie suggests that we approach barefoot, as would be customary in a *makahiki* ceremony, to signal the season of Lono. We are in city clothes, with a crackling walkie-talkie and a hissing old Ford, but we remove our shoes and socks, standing silent while Maka — a *mo'olono*, or priest of Lono — blows a conch shell.

I take a tentative step, trying to avoid the jagged stones and thorny vines underfoot, then another. We only have a few hundred yards to walk, but my soles are ill-equipped, pampered. As I continue inching my way up, tiptoeing, stifling yelps, I am suddenly struck by what it means to tread gingerly on the earth, to return to Kaho'olawe the respect that was robbed by a generation of warfare. "You see the pain the island has gone through," Maka tells me. "In the process of healing the island, we begin to heal ourselves."

Once more back on Maui, I head this time to the airport, to catch a twin-prop puddle-jumper to Moloka'i. I find myself wondering if there can be any surprises left, if each ascent can possibly be as distinct, as exceptional, as the last. I feel like I am getting a history lesson at every stop, a primer on the collision between civilization and nature, on the miracles of isolation and Hawai'i's tenuous grip on it. As the plane lands, I recall for a moment my unfinished book — I had expected to be obsessing about it and the fact that I am not has left me alternately worried and relieved — but then I am on my way back up to nearly 4,000 feet and marching into the Pēpē'ōpae Bog, a sump of primordial moss and ooze. I have been greeted by Dan Bennett, a Nature Conservancy docent, and prompted to sign a release, swearing not to sue him or his organization if I should vanish in the muck. "It's easy to get lost and easy to disappear," Bennett says. "And people do, from time to time."

The tallest peak in Moloka'i is Mount Kamakou, another thousand feet above us, but there is no trail to the summit and because of its fragile state, the Nature Conservancy



actively discourages anyone from poking around. The next best thing is the bog, part of the larger Kamakou Preserve, which sustains more than 250 native plants, some ninety percent of which are found nowhere else in the world. To get me there, Bennett pulls off Highway 460 at the Homelani Cemetery sign and onto Forest Road, a baked dirt alley that fast turns into a muddy gulch. The higher we climb, the more we swim from side to side, careening off the dense hedge of herbs and roots and fungi lining our route. "The nice thing about this," says Bennett, a retired high school math teacher and part-time potter, "is you can't slide very far off the road."

We park at the Pēpē'ōpae entrance, where a 1.5-mile boardwalk leads into the bog. Bennett offers me a walking stick, which strikes me as superfluous, at least until I take a few steps and discover that the boardwalk is more akin to a gangplank, squishing and bowing under our weight. Everything around us is seeping, weeping, as if a damp sponge were being held above the island. We have entered a wonderland of greenery: olive, emerald, lime, artichoke, wasabi. Jurassic fronds sprout and spiral, threatening to swallow our path. Even with a cane, I end up losing my balance, landing rear first in the peat. My good man, Bennett, asks if I need help, but I am laughing too hard – and hoping like hell my hotel has a blow dryer – to give him much of an answer. Halfway in, the forest suddenly parts, revealing a swampy meadow of stunted shrubs and sedge, the bog itself, before the canopy closes up again. "If you want nightlife, you have to go somewhere else," says Bennett, prodding me to the end of the trail, where we catch a glimpse, through the brume, of Kamakou's silhouette. "On Moloka'i, this is what we have to offer."

**E**ven where Hawai'i does boast nightlife, where mai-tai and tiki-torch fantasies are bought and sold, the summit is still a refuge, a step back in time. One moment I am in Honolulu, a metropolis of a million people, and the next I am creeping up the side of Mount Ka'ala, the prehistoric, 4,025-foot roof of O'ahu. At the top of the plateau is a military installation, officially under the command of the FAA or possibly the Air Force, but home to "a lot of other three-letter agencies, the 'we-could-tell-you-but-we'd-have-to-kill-you' kind," says Betsy Gagné, executive secretary of the state's Natural Area Reserves System commission, which oversees nineteen sanctuaries, on five islands, encompassing 109,000 acres. While the top-secret post may be more focused on defense than ecosystems, it does provide a bulwark for the Ka'ala Reserve, keeping out the vacationing throngs below. "Having limited access – that's been the saving grace," says Gagné, who has led me out Farrington Highway, past Waialua High School, then up an unmarked road and through three padlocked gates, all with warnings: No trespassing. No hiking. No bicycling. No skateboarding. No rollerblading. No hunting. And for good measure: "Beware of dog."

As a representative of the state, a biologist entrusted with maintaining the balance between conservation and recreation, Gagné is more keenly attuned than most to the interests that compete and often clash atop each island. Feral ungulates – deer and pigs, mainly – are forever devouring pristine forest, and yet when officials seek to fence out or exterminate herds, they are met by howls of protest from hunters, who demand the right to track and harvest game as their ancestors did. Non-native plant species – strawberry guava, most notoriously – have choked off rare and endemic flora, and yet plans to



release predatory insects or bio-agents are seen by traditionalists as a threat to longstanding sources of fruit and wood. "Without natural history, you'd have no cultural history," says Gagné, who likes to quote from *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss' environmental fable: "*I speak for the trees.*"

Like the Pēpē'ōpae, Ka'ala has a boardwalk that leads first into a tunnel of dripping 'ohi'a lehua trees, alive with the chatter of nectar-feeding 'apapane, then opens into a bog. Within minutes, the drizzle that had greeted us turns into an epic downpour, rain whipping sideways, fog billowing across the mire. My glasses are steamed and smudged, but I have no trouble seeing that Gagné, a widow and cancer survivor, could not be more delighted. "Welcome," she says, "to my home."

**T**owering over all other Hawaiian summits, in every respect, is Mauna Kea, the snow-capped lid of the Big Island. Just the idea that a peak on par with the Rockies could exist in the tropics, that a summit nearly 14,000 feet above sea level might actually be *in* the sea, is almost unfathomable. Even more so, if you consider that Mauna Kea, measured from its base at the floor of the Pacific, is 33,476 feet: the tallest mountain in the world.

Its name has been said to mean "white mountain," a literal translation, but Hawaiian scholars also know it as Mauna a Wakea — the mountain of Wakea, the Sky Father — and in creation lore, the Big Island is Wakea's first-born child. The top of Mauna Kea, as such, is not just another *piko*, but the navel of that progeny, a symbol that is both genealogical and sacred. The connection is not abstract: For ages, Hawaiians have scaled Mauna Kea to deposit the umbilical cords of their newborns at Lake Waiau, near the summit, to draw upon that cosmic energy. "It's not a trivial place," says Paul Coleman, an astronomer at the University of Hawai'i's Institute for Astronomy who is believed to be the only native Hawaiian with a doctorate in the field. "When we get up there, you're going to realize it. You won't feel good. You'll understand, this is not a place for man to be."

As exalted as Mauna Kea is for its mystical forces, it is equally revered as a high-tech perch for the study of space. With its exceptionally dry weather and infinitely dark skies, the mountaintop is the best place on earth from which to aim a telescope at the heavens. Thirteen of the most sophisticated observatories in the world are stationed on the summit, a multibillion-dollar celestial city that stirs to life every night. When the first telescope was installed more than thirty years ago, no voice was raised in protest. As the compound has expanded, though, so too has the renaissance in Hawaiian identity, the calls for sovereignty and secession, and now the gleaming, metallic spheres are frequently compared to pimples, assailed as a desecration.

"I understand all that sacred stuff, the pimples, blah, blah, blah, but astronomy is so much a part of being Hawaiian that it's kind of silly to deny it," says Coleman, as we drive up Saddle Road from Hilo, the long, sloping grade of the mountain deceptively gradual. "The first Hawaiians came here on canoes, two thousand miles through open ocean. How do you think they did that? If you're Hawaiian, you owe your *existence* to an astronomer." The only shame, as Coleman sees it, is that Hawaiians have ceded the field



to outsiders, mostly scientists from the Mainland and Europe, rather than training local kids to run the show. "What we're doing," says Coleman, who was born and raised on O'hau but had to spend two decades away, earning his degrees and conducting research, before he was recruited by U of H, "is we're teaching our children to leave."

We climb from Saddle Road, through parched grasslands and gnarled koa, the soil eventually giving way to an iron moonscape. Just bucking along in Coleman's four-by-four, I am starting to feel breathless, which I attribute more to anxiety than the gain in elevation. A visitor's center sits at the 9,200-foot mark, and we stop there in hope of warding off a bout of the ol' hypobaropathy. Although it is recommended that everyone spend at least half an hour getting acclimated, I am surprised to find that access to Mauna Kea is essentially unregulated: no checkpoints, no fees, no permits. A mountain of such gravitas, of sensitivity and strife, a mountain that can kill you if you treat it cavalierly – and you can pretty much hop in a car and zip to the top.

The summit of Mauna Kea is otherworldly, the only place that has ever made me feel like I am standing on a different planet. Or maybe it is the only place I have ever stood that has made the Earth feel so much like a planet, cold, barren, silent, curvaceous, a rock hurtling through space and time. My head throbs, my feet seem to be floating. We have an invitation, at sunset, to tour the Gemini Observatory, to witness its eye swing open and the massive, silver-coated, 26-foot sheet of glass at the heart of its telescope peer out at the unknown. But first Coleman leads me to the side of the road, where we climb over a guardrail and slog across the cinders, half a step at a time, to Pu'u Wekiu, the true geological summit.

"I really need to come here for sanity," says Coleman, who figures he has scaled Mauna Kea at least a hundred times. There is a shrine at the top, a three-legged wooden frame over a cairn of volcanic stones, adorned with leis and coconut husks. He recites an ancient prayer, the sci-fi village shimmering behind him. "This mountain," he says, "it's brought me back home."

**F**lying to Kaua'i, the final leg, my lone shot at Wai'ale'ale, I am struck by how little time I have spent anywhere near a beach. For a place so associated with water, with sand and surf, it is the land – the *aina* – that defines Hawai'i's spirit. Maybe that is too obvious to even mention: If you are surrounded by ocean, the ground is what allows for life. Beaches attract us because they are the fringe, an end and a beginning, the intersection of water and land, and yet summits are not so different. They are at the edge, too, islands within islands, the convergence of land and sky.

When I get to Ken D'Attilio's hangar, near Port Allen, he shakes his head. There are perhaps fifty days in a whole year that the clouds part long enough to allow his helicopter in, and it should come as no surprise, he tells me, that this is not one of them. I was to be accompanied on my ascent by a research botanist named Ken Wood, a gentle, empathetic soul with a graying beard and a backwards Red Stripe cap, and instead we head for breakfast. Over coffee Wood tells me that Wai'ale'ale is for him a place beyond humans, beyond our intellect, our devising. It is a place even beyond beauty, beyond pictures and poetry. "I don't know the language for it, the noun – maybe



*that-ness, or such-ness, or is-ness, God, the divine, whatever*—a place where somebody can see that all things are connected,” he says. “Anything you can conceive is small compared to what *is*. That gives me solace.”

I had been feeling disappointed about missing my chance, about falling one summit short, but in an instant, that worry vanished. If I understood the lesson, maybe I did not need to get to the top of every peak. Maybe nobody does. Maybe just having them, knowing they are up there, somewhere, is enough.