

## NI'HAU

Nicknamed the 'Forbidden Island,' Ni'ihau remains an intriguing mystery due to its private ownership and unique isolation. Accessible only to its owners, its Native Hawaiian residents, government officials, occasional US Navy personnel and invited guests, Ni'ihau is the last bastion of traditional Native Hawaiian culture.

Captain Cook anchored off Ni'ihau on January 29, 1778, two weeks after 'discovering' Hawaii. Cook noted in his log that the island was lightly populated and largely barren – a description still true today. His visit was short, but it had a lasting impact. Cook introduced two things to Ni'ihau that would quickly change the face of Hawaii: he left two goats, the first of the grazing animals that would devastate the island's native flora and fauna, and his men introduced syphilis, the first of several Western diseases that would strike the Hawaiian people.

In 1864 Elizabeth Sinclair, a Scottish widow who was moving from New Zealand to Vancouver when she got sidetracked in Hawaii, bought Ni'ihau from King Kamehameha V for \$10,000 in gold. He originally tried to sell her the 'swampland' of Waikiki, but she passed it up for the 'desert island.' Interestingly no two places in Hawaii could be further apart today, either culturally or in land value. Mrs Sinclair brought the first sheep to Ni'ihau from New Zealand and started the island's longstanding, but now defunct, ranching operation.

Today the island is owned by Mrs Sinclair's great-great-grandsons Keith and Bruce Robinson, brothers who also own a vast expanse of former sugarcane land, which they now lease to big chemical corn-growing operations on Kaua'i, where they live. The Robinsons, an old Kaua'i family that inspired the book and film *The Descendants*, are outdoorsmen and are fluent in Native Hawaiian. Keith, who worked for years in ranching and fishing, is often found in red-dirt-covered jeans, driving a beat-up pickup or doing heavy labor to save endangered plants. Bruce, whose wife is Ni'ihauan, holds top management positions in the family businesses – while also leading hunting tours and efforts to safeguard Ni'ihau's monk seals.

### Population & Lifestyle

Ni'ihau's population is predominantly Native Hawaiian. Over the years the population has dropped from 600 in the early 1980s, to 230 in the 1990 census, to 160 a decade later. Today Ni'ihau's population is a mere 130, and it is the only island where the primary language is still Hawaiian. Business is conducted in Hawaiian, as are Sunday church services. In its two-room schoolhouse, three teachers hold classes from kindergarten through 12th grade for the island's 40 students. Although courses are taught solely in Hawaiian up to the fourth grade, students learn English as a second language and most are bilingual.

Residents are known for being humble, generous and mellow, and most live in Pu'uawai (meaning 'heart' in Hawaiian), a settlement on the dry western coast. Their lifestyle is extremely rustic, with no sense of hurry. The island has no paved roads, no airport, no phones and no running water. Rainfall is collected in catchments and toilets are in outhouses. While there is no islandwide electricity, homes have generators and TV. Alcohol and firearms are banned, and a code of ethics advocates monogamy.

Despite the isolation, residents are not unacquainted with the outside world. Ni'ihau residents are free to go to Kaua'i or even Las Vegas to shop, drink a few beers or just hang out. While they are free to visit other islands, however, there are restrictions on Ni'ihauans bringing friends from other islands back home with them. If Ni'ihauans marry people from other islands, or if the Robinsons view particular residents as undesirable, they are rarely allowed to return.

While the Robinsons consider themselves protectors of Ni'ihau's isolation and its people, and most Ni'ihauans seem content with their lifestyle, outsiders have been critical. Some Native Hawaiians living on other islands see the Robinsons as colonialists and believe inhabitants should be granted their own land and self-determination.

## Geography & Environment

Ni'ihau is the smallest of the inhabited Hawaiian Islands: 18 miles long and 6 miles at the widest point, with a total land area of about 72 sq miles, including 45 miles of coast. The island is slightly over 17 miles southwest of Kaua'i. The climate is warm, windy and semiarid, with a relatively extreme temperature range, from 42°F to 110°F in the shade. Ni'ihau rainfall averages a scant 12in annually because the island is in Kaua'i's rain shadow. Its highest peak, Paniau, is only 1250ft tall and cannot generate the trade wind-based precipitation that is prevalent throughout the majority of the Hawaiian Island chain, notably on Kaua'i.

Ni'ihau's 865-acre Halali'i Lake is the largest in Hawaii, but even during the rainy winter season it's only a few feet deep. In summer it sometimes dries up to a mud pond.

Almost 50 endangered monk seals live on Ni'ihau, and about half of all Hawaii's endangered 'alae ke'oke'o (coots) breed here. Introduced creatures proliferate: there are an estimated 6000 feral pigs, plus wild sheep, goats and turkeys. Ni'ihau waters have suffered depletion by outside sport and commercial fishers who sail in to fish and pick 'opihī (an edible limpet) from the island's shorebreaks.

## Economy & Politics

The island economy has long depended on Ni'ihau Ranch, the sheep and cattle business owned by the Robinsons. But it was always a marginal operation on windy Ni'ihau, with droughts devastating herds. In 1999 Ni'ihau Ranch closed, putting most of the island's inhabitants on federal welfare.

Historically the Robinsons diverted funds from their (now defunct) sugar company on Kaua'i to provide Ni'ihauans with proper shelter, food staples, medical care and higher education.

Since then, the Robinsons have focused on two income and employment sources: the military and tourism. Since 1999 military special operations forces have been leasing sites on the uninhabited southern end of the island to stage periodic training maneuvers. The operations are small scale, typically with teams of a dozen soldiers practicing mock rescue operations. The Robinsons have also pushed for Ni'ihau's participation in major Navy missile testing, which they consider less invasive and damaging (both to the physical land and to the preservation of Ni'ihau's culture and privacy) than popular tourism and overgrazing by sheep.

However, based on the minimal income actually derived from said military testing, the only other realistic option is tourism, which is why the Robinsons started offering helicopter and hunting safari tours. Neither is a booming moneymaker, probably due to the steep tour prices and the low-key Robinsons' ambivalence about opening the island to tourists. They publicize the tours mainly by word-of-mouth, with only minimal advertising.

Politically, Ni'ihau falls under the jurisdiction of Kaua'i County.

## Visiting Ni'ihau

Although outsiders are not allowed to visit Ni'ihau on their own, the Robinsons offer helicopter flights and hunting excursions, and dive outfits on Kaua'i offer scuba diving tours to the waters around Ni'ihau (a typical three-tank day trip costs around \$350).

**Ni'ihau Helicopters** (☎ 877-441-3500; [www.niihau.us](http://www.niihau.us); per person \$385, minimum of five guests required) The pilot flies over much of Ni'ihau (but avoids the population center of Pu'uwai) and lands beachside to snorkel. Tours must be arranged well in advance.

**Ni'ihau Safaris** (☎ 877-441-3500; [www.niihau.us](http://www.niihau.us); per hunter/observer \$1750/500) Provides everything you'll need (rifle, license, transportation, guide, preparation and shipping of trophies) to hunt Polynesian boar and feral sheep, as well as wild eland, Barbary sheep and wild oryx. Organizers promote this as 'useful harvesting of game' (due to overpopulation and overgrazing) and obey norms of free-chase hunting.