

NI'HAU

Relatively small in population when Captain Cook anchored off it January 29, 1778, there are fewer than 300 inhabitants on Ni'ihau today.

Ni'ihau, long dubbed by passing tour boats as the 'Forbidden Island,' is privately owned by the Robinson family (and part of the US). Its 'forbidden' mystique – caused by lack of access to the public – also has a fascinating backstory. Only Robinson family members and Native Hawaiian residents and their guests are allowed there, coupled with a few government employees.

The fact that the Robinson family has been able to keep Ni'ihau relatively isolated has helped allow a culture all its own to be preserved: Hawaiian is the primary spoken language, adding to its time-capsule quality, as is a religious temperance introduced by the Robinsons that's been in place now for roughly 146 years.

History

The culture of Ni'ihau and its people are inexorably linked to the Robinsons. Since their purchase of the majority of the island from King Kamehameha V in 1863, a purchase he is said to have approved of in part because of the anti-drinking practices of the Robinson family, the isolated Ni'ihau has remained the only majority Native-Hawaiian-speaking island in existence.

Deciding there was too much drinking in Scotland (and haggis and bagpipes, according to Keith Robinson, great-great-grandson of co-purchaser Eliza Sinclair), the family left between 1830 and 1850, heading to New Zealand, Tahiti and Vancouver in search of a homeland in keeping with their moral ideals. After first negotiating with King Kamehameha IV, they finally bought Ni'ihau from King Kamehameha V in 1864, for \$10,000 in gold. The purchase began a new era of ranching on Ni'ihau: Sinclair brought the island's first sheep from New Zealand.

Keith and his brother Bruce Robinson are highly protective of Ni'ihau's isolation and its people. The family owns a significant amount of Kaua'i land and a sugar company (see p196).

Keith and Bruce Robinson are unpretentious outdoorsmen. Both are fluent in Native Hawaiian, just like any Ni'ihau resident. Bruce Robinson is married to a Ni'ihauan woman.

Thanks to its isolation since the purchase and quarantine during a 1950s outbreak of polio, the island has been able to avoid many diseases, including AIDS. To this day, residents' medical care needs are met either by the Robinsons' insurance or the US Department of Social Services.

Population & Lifestyle

Ni'ihau's population is mostly Native Hawaiian. The island's population has dropped from 600 in the 1980s to 160 in 2007 (the latest available data). Most residents live in Pu'uwai ('heart'), a settlement on the dry western coast. It's a simple life; water is collected in catchments, and the toilets are in outhouses. Residents hardly live 'without,' however. Though all residents are 'off the grid,' most have found ingenious ways to harness power, and several utilize hydro or wind sourcing, often backed up by gasoline generators. Cell phone signals reach some of the island, which also relies on a radio communication system.

Ni'ihau has a schoolhouse where teachers host classes from kindergarten to 12th grade. Courses are taught in Hawaiian until fourth grade. Students learn English as a second language.

Ni'ihau business and Sunday church services are conducted in Hawaiian. Throughout the islands, the Hawaiian language spoken by Ni'ihauans is known as the purest remaining, differing at times from the evolving language to come out of University of Hawaii-Hilo's College of Hawaiian Language, which has birthed words to define modern terms. Some have critiqued new UH-Hilo terms as sounding too similar to western languages. An example is the word *kamepiula* for computer; in an attempt to stay truer to non-westernized Hawaiian language, critics opt for using the two older Hawaiian words *lolo uila*, literally 'electrical mind.'

Geography & Environment

A mere 17 miles from Kaua'i, 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 almost 70 sq miles and

45 miles of coast. 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 trade wind-based precipitation.

Unique to the island are its shells: warm-hued and delicate sea jewels from the island are strung into exquisite and coveted leis costing from \$125 to \$25,000. In late 2004, Governor Linda Lingle signed a bill mandating that only items made of 100% Ni'ihau shells and crafted entirely in Hawaii can carry the Ni'ihau label. Residents of Ni'ihau make exquisite leis for sale at the **Ni'ihau Helicopters** office (below), which they use for bartering trips to and from Kaua'i.

Almost 50 endangered monk seals live on Ni'ihau, monitored by Bruce Robinson. Unfortunately, the draw of the pristine has threatened Ni'ihau. Its waters have suffered depletion by sport and commercial fishers who sail in to fish and pick *'opihi* (edible limpet) from the island's shorebreaks. The outside world also has threatened Ni'ihau fisherman and residents, who couldn't eat fish between January and March of 2009, after a dead baby humpback whale and thousands of fish were found washed up on a Ni'ihau shore. Though officials conducted necropsies, and despite speculation that the state's poisoning of neighboring Lehua island days earlier (to kill rabbits and rats that were eating endangered plants) was the reason, no cause has been determined.

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.

The family has been able to keep the island relatively undeveloped by allowing some temporary US government projects. Keith Robinson joked of the preference in allowing military projects on-island over development: 'The military comes and goes. After a military project is over, it usually gets rusted down to nothing.'

Allowing some tourist access is one of the prices to pay for owning a private island. Much of the tourist access the Robinsons allow is to help pay for services for Ni'ihauans, such as a recently purchased helicopter used for MEDEVAC services.

While it's difficult to find a comparative relationship to explain the dynamic between the Robinsons and Ni'ihauans, the Robinsons view themselves as protectors. And though that's the kind of paternalism that can rub outside Native Hawaiian groups the wrong way, for the most part Ni'ihauans don't seem to mind.

In fact, the common thread between the Robinsons and Ni'ihauans seems a steadfast allegiance from both sides. That carries over even on Kaua'i, as Ni'ihauans who've emigrated seem to stay in Robinson territory, on Kaua'i's Westside. Many who move to Kaua'i work for the Robinsons and live on their property, often in the Makaweli area. Kaua'i's only church conducted in Hawaiian also is on Kaua'i's Westside in Waimea, attended mostly by Ni'ihauans.

For the Ni'ihauans who don't make it to Kaua'i, samplings of Kaua'i are brought to them via barge roughly twice a month. Soda and poi (fermented taro paste) are among items brought over.

Politically, Ni'ihau falls under the jurisdiction of Kaua'i County. In 2004, George W Bush got 39 of 40 votes cast by Ni'ihauans. In 2008, Ni'ihau's precinct was one of only three of Hawaii's 538 precincts to vote for John McCain over President Barack Obama. McCain received 35 votes and Obama received four votes, despite Hawaii being Obama's strongest state in the nation.

Visiting Ni'ihau

Although outsiders are not allowed to visit Ni'ihau on their own, the Robinsons offer **helicopter tours** (Ni'ihau Helicopters; ☎ 877-441-3500; www.niihau.us; 12550A Kaumuali'i Hwy, Makaweli; half-day per person \$365; ☎ office 8am-2pm Mon-Fri), which take off from Burns Field in Port Allen (p188). A half-day excursion includes lunch, snorkeling and swimming off the island's shores; bookings must be made well in advance. The Robinsons also offer **hunting safaris** as part of the island's conservation and wildlife management program (see the above website for more information).

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