

# HEAVENLY HAWAII

Kauai's revamped St. Regis Princeville shows you really *can* have it all *by* BARBARA THORNBURG

Sliding open the shutters of my hotel window, I hear the pounding surf on Hanalei Bay's broad beach below. Namolokama Mountain, veined with waterfalls and covered in velvety green lichen, rises in the distance. At the end of the range is the pyramid of Mount Makana, aka Bali Hai. Made famous in its role as the enchanted isle in the 1958 film *South Pacific*, the jagged peak still beckons, calling me like its namesake song to "come away, come away."

The most northern of the eight major Hawaiian Islands, Kauai is renowned for its incredible natural beauty, and the island's North Shore is a tropical paradise. Strolling the manicured grounds of the newly renovated St. Regis Princeville Resort, I find others equally dazzled. "This is everyone's dream of what Hawaii is supposed to look like," sighs New York honeymooner Naitik Patel, as he sips an 18-year-old single-malt scotch at the bar.

I'm not on my honeymoon, but I'm sure relishing my sojourn far from high rises, chockablock stores and noisy discos. On Kauai, locals drive slowly ("Why rush?"), mom-and-pop stores close early, and dinner is often not finished till 9. At night, there's nothing to do but lie back, sip a mai tai and gaze at the moon over Hanalei Bay.

Just because I'm away doesn't mean I don't want a place to cater to my every whim. There may be no better venue for a good pampering than the former Sheraton Princeville, which reopened in September.

Leading hospitality design firm WATG took 14 months to plan the transformation of a trio of low-slung, mid-'80s buildings that step down the steep hillside to Hanalei Bay. The redesign included the entry, lobby, bar, ballroom and all 252 guest rooms—51 of which are ocean-view suites. Added were the Young Voyager Club, a 10,000-square-foot spa and a stylish revamped restaurant featuring the cuisine of three-Michelin-star chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten.

The resort's former faux-European look of gilded-marble columns, wall tapestries and shepherd statues has been replaced by an indigenous Hawaiian-contemporary style perfectly in keeping with the ethos of the island. "Above all, this hotel is about the stunning view. We couldn't compete with it, so we framed it at every opportunity," says Rhonda Rasmussen, who guided the project as WATG's vice president and director of design.

Into the *piko*—or heart of the hotel—a sprawling lobby studded with koa-stained mahogany columns offers sweeping 180-

degree mountain-to-sea views. A Murano glass chandelier cascades from the skylight above, with more than 4,000 hand-blown and cast-glass droplets evoking the area's many waterfalls. Designed as a room within a room, it's a place to check in, meet friends or simply enjoy the view.

I'm already mellowing out, as I stroll over to the new Halele'a (House of Joy) Spa, with 12 luxurious treatment rooms. I'm told by spa manager Theron Puccinelli that a wellness consultant will be happy to design an individualized program for my body and mind, inspired by native Hawaiian healing rituals. But this requires deep thought: a Kauai taro clay wrap or taro butter hot *pohaku* (stone) massage perhaps? Or maybe a Voyage from the Seas Signature Four Hands simultaneous massage and facial?

I need to head back to my room before such a momentous decision. I'm already in the lap of luxury—a junior suite that comes with a "butler." This swell feature is the legacy of John Jacob Astor IV, who built the first St. Regis in 1904. Envisioning it, the Website says, as "a place for gentlemen and their families to feel as comfortable as they would as guests in a private home."

My butler is not a Jeeves type but perky and pretty Aynsley McVickar, who hails



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from Marin County and has a degree in fine arts and sociology, which probably comes in handy when she deals with the globe-trotting, \$450,000-a-year-plus clients that comprise the St. Regis' target market.

McVickar welcomes me with a tour of the suite. A long room with a king-size bed anchors one end, a remote-operated plasma TV hidden in the credenza/desk sits at the other. A spacious sitting area has a sectional sofa and a table and chairs. A marble-clad bath features a Kohler whirlpool and a nifty liquid-crystal privacy window—it goes opaque with a flip of the switch, though why anyone would block the waterfalls and Bali Hai view is beyond me.

Mornings kick off with French-press coffee. All I do is push the phone's "Butler" button. Within minutes, I'm served a Kona blend coffee in bed ("One lump or two?"), supplied with a newspaper and given the day's weather. Is this heaven or what?

I plop myself under a pistachio-hued umbrella at the infinity pool, then dine alfresco at Nalu Kai, although honeymooners—and there are a lot of them—seem to prefer the sea-grass bed for two facing intimate Puu Poa beach. When I am bored with too much relaxing, I take my pick of what seem like a gazillion things to do.

One day, a helicopter whisks me off to Waimea Canyon's deep chasms, which Mark Twain once dubbed the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. When my fancy turns seaward, I contemplate renting a yacht to go fishing, knowing the culinary staff will cook my catch any way I like. There's kayaking

on one of the island's navigable rivers or an ascent on Mount Makana, where ancient Hawaiians climbed to the summit, throwing burning spears into the wind. I can play Gauguin, painting the island's flora and fauna at artist Katy Randolph's charming home/studio in Haena, then top off the day with a bonfire on the beach before Mother Nature's artwork—a psychedelic Hawaiian sunset. It can all be arranged.

Guests with families can drop children 5 to 12 at the Young Voyagers Club. There's a giant Henri Rousseau-like mural on the wall, a desk with a microscope and a child-size wingback chair stationed by the window with a telescope to look for *nene* (Hawaiian goose) and *kiko* (spotted dolphins). Marine biologist Paul Clark instructs the kids about the island's fish, then gives them a private snorkeling tour of the reef. There are ukulele and hula lessons and beachside storytelling. Too bad I'm not a kid.

This leaves parents free time to head off to the newly renovated 1971 Makai golf course, designed by Robert Trent Jones Jr. I'm not a golfer, but I want to check out the course for my friends back home. The layout winds around lakes, native woodlands and the spectacular coast. "The only problem is the distractions," says club general manager Alex Nakajima with a grin.

I realize what he's talking about when a humpback whale suddenly breaches just offshore. A bit farther down the path, there's a mother albatross preening her fuzzy baby. Apparently, there are some 30 pairs nesting on the grounds. Signs are posted so golfers don't run over them. They seem completely unafraid as I get close enough to touch, although when dad swoops in for his turn at the nest, I get a beak-clapping scold.

I take the hint and leave, hooking up with the Princeville Ranch Adventures for a Zip 'n' Dip expedition. The course covers nine picturesque ziplines. The hardest part is weighing in. I'm relieved when they set the scale to 280 pounds. Anyone who weighs less than that (and more than 80 pounds) can proceed—but no one screams out your weight, thank God. They hook me up with gear and whisk me and a few other adventurers—much younger, I notice—to our first zipline. Someone in the group lets out an ah-i-ah-i-ahhh Tarzan call as I climb

the 26-foot-tall tower. I decide to play Jane, throwing myself off the platform for the nearly quarter-mile zip over the treetops to the other side. It's all so exhilarating. And best of all...I'm still alive.

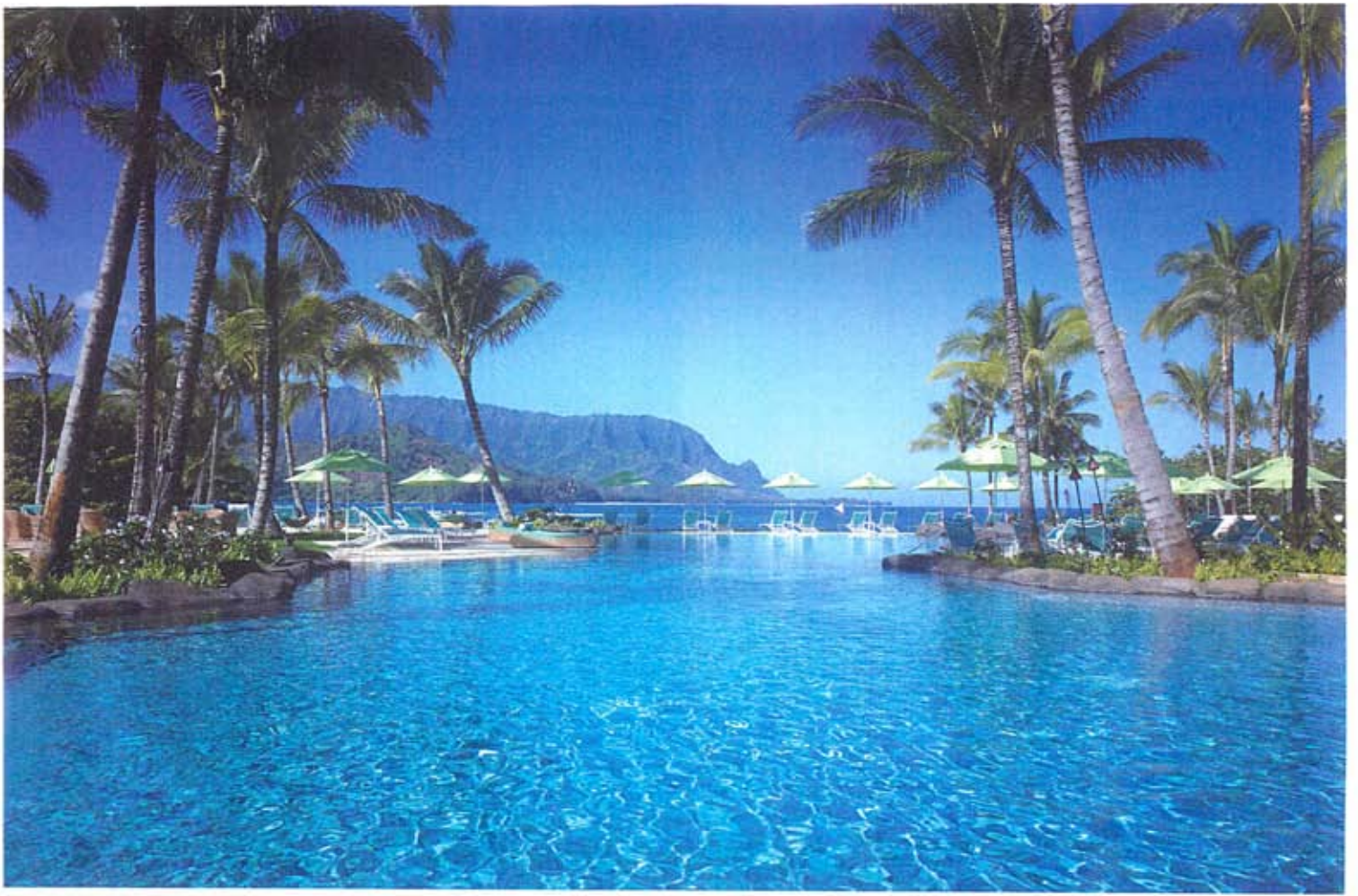
"It's all part of the experiential vacations guests are looking for," says the resort's general manager, Milton Sgarbi. "We find people coming here not merely for vacations but to create memories."

Of all the new features at the St. Regis, the most prominent is the transformation of the Kauai Grill. I've always loved the islands for their natural beauty rather than their haute cuisine; now it seems they have both. Über-chef and restaurateur Vongerichten has brought his world-class cuisine to Kauai, with yet another signature restaurant. He has opened a constellation of high-end eateries from Hong Kong to Las Vegas, including New York's Jo Jo and the Mercer Kitchen, to name a couple.

The restaurant, with its elegant, grill-like ambience—soft leather booths, shell-topped tables and dramatic, chambered nautilus-inspired ceiling—serves J.G.V.'s signature dishes: intensely flavorful and textured food, combining robust tastes. A Hawaiian-ginger margarita explodes in my mouth with a peppery, pungent essence that reinvents the classic drink. The grilled black-pepper octopus combines with sweet local Kula onions in a lime, tarragon-mint puree that is both spicy and cool at the same time. Desserts are as exotic as the landscape. A delicate *lilikoi* (passion fruit) soufflé is married with a tart lemon sorbet. A yuzu Pavlova is studded with white chocolate and drizzled with a Thai-basil syrup. "I am constantly trying to bring new tastes to my clientele so that in some way I can help to transport them, the way I love so much to be transported," writes Vongerichten in his 2007 cookbook *Asian Flavors of Jean-Georges*. Yup, I'm transported.

Along with a five-star experience comes a five-star price tag, naturally. The cheapest room is \$360 a night, and the Royal Suite is \$6,250. Dinner for two can easily run \$250, but non-moguls need not despair. There's good value in the \$58, five-course tasting menu, and wines are also offered by the glass (\$8–\$22). As my server points out, "It's really a glass and a half." The 11-page

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Not even the occasional cloud-filled skies can take away from the splendor of a Hawaiian panorama. Opposite, from top: Whether it's a lazy drift in the oceanfront infinity pool or your own seaside wedding, the Pacific beckons. Following spread: Elegance is everywhere at the St. Regis Princeville, from the lobby's grand mahogany columns and sweeping views to Vongerichten's Kauai Grill to the tranquility that awaits lovebirds in the couples massage room.





wine list features an expansive global selection, with prices ranging from a reasonable \$26 for an Argentine cabernet sauvignon to a loftier Napa Valley Harlan Estate Meritage 2004 for \$972.

At checkout, in view of a giant bouquet of *Heliconia* and yellow orchids, the scent of fragrant white hibiscus filling the air, I'm reminded as I sign my credit-card voucher that paradise is not cheap. Then again, I ask myself, who can put a price on memories that last a lifetime? ♡



## HITCHED IN PARADISE

From the unconventional—fancy getting married underwater?—to the traditional, the St. Regis Princeville can plan any kind of wedding, according to coordinator Jennifer Vanderlaan. Check out one idea for unforgettable nuptials...

**Mise-en-scène:** "Bride arrives in a Hawaiian sailing canoe heralded by three blows of a conch, then they're married by a kahuna."

**Where:** "Kamani Cove, looking out on Mount Makana." **When:** "October—before the rainy season, after hotter summer months." **Time:**

"Hour and a half before sunset—so you'll have photos of the sun sinking into the sea." **Dress:**

"Traditional wedding gown sans shoes—bare feet in the warm sand feels so good." **Flowers:**

"Fragrant maile lei for the groom, triple-strand white pikake lei for the bride." **Surprise:**

"Bride performs a Hawaiian wedding hula for groom—and blows his mind" (lessons from award-winning dancer Mi Nei). **Cuisine:**

"Six-course dinner in a torch-lit tent by the sea." **Entertainment:**

"Solo guitarist plays classical Hawaiian songs." **Music:** "Hawaiian Wedding Song—what else?" **Cost:** "\$9,250" (includes

photographer, license, tax and gratuity). **Suite:**

"Five nights in a Prince Junior Suite—\$3,800" (includes couples massage, champagne and breakfast for two). *For specifics, call her at 808-*

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