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TRAVEL

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HOTELS

This time around, it's a Hawaiian crown

The renovated St. Regis Princeville Resort in Kauai has dropped its European touches and gained a native look.

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REPORTING FROM PRINCEVILLE,
KAUAI

Here on the North Shore, a land so beautiful that any building seems an intrusion, a glitzy palace of a hotel that opened in 1985 as the Sheraton Princeville has shed its European pretensions and emerged haute Hawaiian.

The St. Regis Princeville Resort reopened on Sept. 26 after more than a year and \$100 million in much-needed renovations.

Its old, Eurocentric décor was meant to recognize the Hawaiian monarchy's ties to Europe: Princeville is named for Prince Albert Edward, son of Hawaiian King Kamehameha IV and Queen Emma, who enjoyed visiting Kauai's North Shore. The queen, who had English blood, was a friend of Britain's Queen Victoria, and Emma named her son — Victoria's godson — for Victoria's prince consort, Albert.

The new look was designed to pay homage to Hawaii and its culture. Gone is the statuary that seemed badly out of place.

Gone, too, is the French-style wrought-iron detailing that distracted from one of the great views — across Hanalei Bay to the tip of Makana, the mountain immortalized as Bali Hai in the 1958 film "South Pacific."

Having visited this hotel several times, I was eager to see the changes. I checked in Oct. 1 for two nights in a garden/mountain view room with two queen beds, the least expensive option. On the whole, I liked what I saw.

An entry with limestone flooring laid in a Hawaiian *lauhala* weaving pattern has been carved out of the cavernous lobby. The 10,000-square-foot Halelea Spa, the hotel's first on-site spa, occupies a lobby area to the left of what were a reception area and offices. Guests check in at three free-standing desks tucked to the right of the entrance.

Eight African mahogany columns in the center of the lobby now define a more intimate circular seating area. A Murano glass waterfall chandelier with 4,000 crystals hangs above a new lotus blossom fountain.

The stunning cream and sienna painting behind the reception area, inspired by 1930s Hawaiian woodblock prints, depicts a legend concerning Pele, the Hawaiian fire goddess.

Koa and other Hawaiian woods warm public spaces. The lobby floor, formerly black marble, is now a rich coconut palm wood. Generic lobby furnishings in a neutral palette are punched up with bright hues borrowed from island flora, notably a rich pink-orange shade called guava, also found in guest room accents.

In the St. Regis Bar, formerly the Living Room, a painted mural depicts the ancient Hawaiian ceremony of *oahi* or fire branding, in which men tossed lighted spears from a cliff in sort of an early-day fireworks display. The bar is a popular spot for sunset-watching, and the most desirable seats are those on the bar terrace, which until now had no seating.

The lobby overlooks the Makana Terrace restaurant one flight below. Two European statues once perched on the landing; now a pair of huge bronze burn bowls, inspired by old Hawaiian stone lamps, stand in. The restaurant has a surf-inspired mural in vivid blues and a whimsical wooden sculpture of sharks atop slim poles, an artist's interpretation of the shark deities the ancient Hawaiians worshiped.

This is an upside-down hotel, three buildings terraced on a cliff overlooking the bay. The lobby is on the ninth floor, with guest rooms above and below. To reach the pool, guests must take two elevators. It's a bit of a hike.

Checking in, I was greeted with an orchid lei and escorted to reception, where the wait was lengthy. Long waits were commonplace for meals and drinks, although understandable since this was the reopening.

At dinner in the Makana Terrace (entrees, \$26 to \$42), I had no waiter, then two waiters tripping over each other. But my *onaga* — red snapper with a curry coconut sauce — was worth the wait. The outdoor dining area, a bit of heaven on a perfect night, is too small. Guests were waiting for tables, while the indoor area, which isn't as appealing, was largely empty.

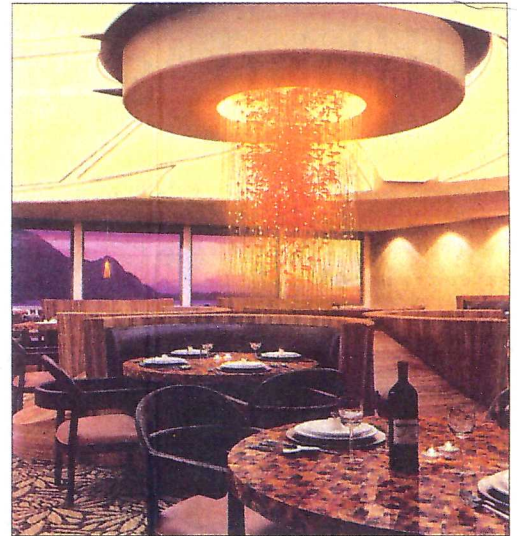
The rooms have some of the same indoor/outdoor issues. Guest rooms once had balconies, but those were enclosed some time ago to enlarge rooms. Only 50 of the 252 rooms and suites have ground-floor terraces, and only two suites have balconies, and that's a shame. Painting room ceilings sky-blue to bring the outside in isn't the same.

Standard rooms are 547 square feet, with a sitting area with sofa, desk and chair. But this is Hawaii, and seeing the view through a window doesn't seem right. (My screen was really dirty too.) One night I ditched the air conditioning and opened my window. Big mistake. Some machinery below emitted bursts of noise all night, and at 6 in the morning, the crowing of one of Kauai's ubiquitous roosters awakened me.

The room has plenty of features: the privacy switch in the bathroom that, through the magic of liquid crystal, "closes" the view window above the tub, a mini-bar, a widescreen TV, DVD player, iPod dock and Wi-Fi connection (\$14.95 a day in-room, free in the lobby).

Guest room décor isn't terribly Hawaiian. White duvets have replaced bamboo-patterned quilted bedspreads. Rooms do not have coffee makers, but the little Napali Café in the lobby shopping arcade opens early for take-out coffee and pastries.

Guest room baths are large, with double vanities, deep step-up, step-down tubs with showers and all imaginable amenities, including a lighted makeup mirror and a digital scale. There were piles of fluffy towels and even a loofah. All that was missing one morning was hot water.



St. Regis Princeville

FINE DINING: Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Kauai Grill at the St. Regis Princeville Resort features expansive bay views, a nautilus-shaped, fabric-draped ceiling and a ruby glass hibiscus chandelier. Entrees are \$26 to \$42.

The pool area has had its own makeover, losing the swim-up bar and the little bridge that used to span the water. Guests now lounge on turquoise chaises or beneath lime-green umbrellas, and kiddies frolic in their own pool. And, of course, there's the lovely beach.

At the poolside Nalu Kai Grill, pizza costs \$18, beef sliders \$21. No burgers or hot dogs here. One of the best options for dinner: the St. Regis Bar menu, where a cheeseburger — with sunset view — costs \$12. (Add a bar drink and the tab doubles, at least.)

The resort's high-end signature restaurant, chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Kauai Grill, has recently opened. It has great bay views, a nautilus-shaped, fabric-draped ceiling and a ruby glass hibiscus chandelier.

On my last morning, I booked a lomi lomi ("loving hands") massage (one hour, \$165) at the spa, a lovely, serene space with lots of wood. (I loved the relaxation room, where water splashed softly over a wall of lighted metallic screen.) Although there were lots of products, many taro-based, no one pushed them.

My masseuse, Enola, a former Angelino, showed me to a darkened room where candles flickered, and she presented a tray of aromatic oils, from which I chose sweet ginger lime. As I lay face down, she placed her hands on my back and sang a Hawaiian chant. Slack key guitar music played softly. It was divine.

Too soon, Enola was wrapping my feet in steamy towels and singing again, this time, alas, a goodbye chant.

If you go

ST. REGIS PRINCEVILLE RESORT

5520 Ka Haku Road
Princeville, Hawaii
www.stregisprinceville.com
(808) 826-9644
Doubles begin at \$360.