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LETTER FROM LANAI (Hawaii)

*"The appreciation of landscape is more personal and longer lasting when it is mixed
with the memory of human incidents"*

- Yi-Fu Tuan, Chinese Geographer

(The island of Lanai, Hawaiian islands) -

We're on the Expedition Boat taking us from Lahaina, the old whaling village on Maui, across to the "secret" Hawaiian island, Lanai. The Captain and his mate made a charming little announcement that it was "not women and children first" on their boat. We were also given rather specific directions related to the malady that could befall those who had recently enjoyed lunch. The ride would be bumpy because of the currents in these waters.

Actually, these currents are the reason that we have been dining so well during the past week. Several major currents converge off these islands, producing unusually clean water and an extraordinary variety of fish.

As our boat picked up steam after clearing the harbor, we could see Lanai, stretched out in a full lounging position, directly ahead of us but about twenty-five minutes away.

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We pulled into the cove and joined the twenty or so hotel workers and guests headed for the waiting vans.

This 140 square mile island, with its 2,500 or so residents, was known as the Pineapple island. Harvesting the largest plantation in the world was what the workers of the Dole subsidiary, Castle and Cook, did with a few machines, and lots of machetes and straw hats. In 1993, the harvesting stopped. Pineapples were now being grown in the Philippines and Thailand where labor is less expensive.

This is paradise found, not lost. Two deluxe hotels were constructed with soaring views and world-class golf courses. Lanai would become the most upscale "company town" on earth. The workers would remain and they would be retrained to toil in the tourism sector, making every guest feel welcome. This was the dream of the developer David Murdock. He bought controlling interest in Dole and soon began to move the pineapple plantations to Asia. Lanai, he envisioned, would be the most upscale and the most private and well preserved of the Hawaiian islands. It is already clear that he has succeeded on all counts. And yet, driving along the coast on the two lane blacktop that connects Lanai town and the small docking area, you can see the condo development beginning, with prices beginning in the \$385,000 range. We stopped to walk around the builders models. They are worth the money.

The deal here is that every resident knows that every strange face he sees is that of a guest at one of the resorts. And the welfare of the residents is absolutely tied to the success of every guest's experience on the island.

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To a large degree it has all been successful. There is a small hotel in Lanai city, a tin-roofed metropolis laid out by James Dole when he purchased the island in 1924 for \$1.1 million. But the new resorts, Manele Bay, and the Lodge at Koele, are the twin anchors of the island's economy.

We start at Manele Bay, shimmering in a morning sun, with views that begin on a terrace surrounding a stunning pool, to a soft sand beach. The grounds are covered with Chinese, Japanese and Hawaiian gardens. Beyond the terrace, out along the shelf of protected beachfront with no commerce in sight beyond the resort is an area of water where dolphins, at their whim, may come to swim with humans. It is interaction in its most natural state.

There are 250 villas and Jack Nicklaus did his best with what nature gave him, designing a memorable course.

The richest man in the world, Bill Gates, got married here last year. He took over the island, instructing management to send previously booked couples anywhere in the world they wanted to go. He picked up all of the airline tickets. Some guests did not accept the offer and got to sit in the shade of the Ililani Terrace restaurant dining on fried venison over sweet potato puree while Gates did his nuptials in the pool area just below.

Lanai city, home to over 95% of the island's residents, is a few streets laid out in company town order. This is the Hawaii of the 1920's, green and yellow bungalows, two small grocery stores and a small police station that has just installed an outdoor cage to hold prisoners after they have emerged from the holding cell. It seems that one or two of the previous residents were outraged that their neighbors were holding them overnight..

Now understand that the Pineapple crop is gone. Yet, this is still a company town and the company owns 75% of the housing. But it's a benevolent kind of ownership. Doctors in a number of specialties take out ads in the Lanai Times to announce the dates of their next scheduled visit.

Chickens do cross the road here. They also rest comfortably in front yards. The first new store to open since the 1950's is Pele's Garden, a small health food emporium.

There are small churches scattered around the village, primarily in the residential area, where the Buddhists aren't very far from the Mormons, and a host of other denominations occupy small buildings, often accommodating just a few families.

There are some things missing here, in this World War II movie lot of a town. If you want to move to paradise, you might consider opening a shoe emporium or a furniture store. There is no ice cream shop. The compact Blue Ginger Cafe is the top dining option.

Last week, the island got its first ATM machine, an event that brought out the PR people from the resorts and front-page coverage in the Lanai Times.

There is one doctor who lives on the island. When he's off on vacation, a replacement from Honolulu has to fill in.

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Guests on Lanai can rent four-wheel drive vehicles and set off for beaches that will be largely deserted. And that is one of the things that is so special about this place. There are deep canyons here, and small forests of covered with Norfolk pines. The visitor can look for shreds of history, perhaps the ancient temple remains or petroglyphs carved on huge rocks.

Just a few moments outside the "city limits" we come to the rolling lawns and The Lodge at Koele, a 102 room retreat built in the manor house plantation style on a site that was once the center of the island's ranching operations.

The facilities include riding stables, bowling lawns, croquet, tennis, an outdoor pool, and acres and acres of absolutely incredible English gardens that roll off the back terrace, undulating up into the arms of the nearby mountains. And just off the terrace to the right is the Greg Norman Golf Course, challenging and so exquisite that I could see non-golfers seated on benches simply staring at the rolling greens and superb fairways with water, mountains, and rows of pine trees forming a dramatic backdrop.

Angela and I walked the grounds, pausing to watch workers tend orchids in a small greenhouse on the lawn.

The Lodge has consistently been rated one of the top three resorts in North America. Room rates begin at \$295 a night and average \$350. Give me one choice for a week-long vacation and this is where I want to be. Sitting on the long verandah, writing longhand, with a glass of iced pineapple juice and an early tee time the following morning. In the evening, dining in the Lodge's Five-star restaurant, I will try to choose between the fresh venison or a selection of fish caught earlier that morning,

When Oprah comes here she brings her hairdresser and her trainer. By all accounts she is what we think she is, lovely, gracious, and very kind to those whom she holds close. And in some ways, the same can be said of this island.

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Lanai is a dream destination that is open to all. It is only private in the sense that it conveys the absence of commercialism. It is private in the way that it welcomes you. It is inclusive rather than exclusive because those who come to stay for a few days will feel that they are witnessing a part of the past in some private way. It is the scale of Lanai that is unique. A guest at either of the resort's luxury resorts cannot leave without a sense of belonging. And as you drive down to meet the boat back to Maui, or wait for the plane that will fly you back to the land of fast food and high-rise condos, you look back fondly and realize that this place will always be a part of you and that you will never forget your time here.

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