

A daring adventure along Na Pali coast

By Toni Withington

LIHUE, Kauai — The majestic cliffs of the Na Pali coast must beckon hundreds each year to view from a helicopter one of Hawaii's last rugged frontiers, yet uncrossed by road or trail.

This week three of us became the first to see the entire coast underwater.

As far as we know, Dr. Robert Clutter, Robert Harvey—both oceanographers at the University of Hawaii—and I are the first to swim the coast's edge from road's end at Haena to road's end at Barking Sands.

We spent 4½ days on the more than 15-mile trip that took us on side trips up hidden valleys, through cliff-side caves and over unseen reefs.

More exciting to all of us than the thrill of being the first to conquer something, was the sheer pleasure of seeing an ocean floor that in many places no one has ever seen and chasing fish that have never before seen a human figure.

Our first ideas for the trip came from Mrs. Audrey Sutherland, a North Shore woman who annually swims the northeast coast of Molokai, floating her provisions behind her.

Our choice was the Na Pali Coast.

The waters of the coast behave the best this time of the year. The weather we met was beautiful. But during the winter the black cliffs are battered by some of the worst surf in the Islands.

First view of coast

Our first view of the coast with swimming on our minds came July 26 when a friend flew us slowly along the water's edge. With charts and binoculars in hand we marked the valleys "wet" or "dry" depending on whether they had a flowing stream.

For our homework we had checked all the available submarine topographic, land, tide and current charts. We carried a copy of each in our waterproof packs and found some discrepancies in the information they offered.

We also found descriptions and directions given by friends and acquaintances to be legend and mystery more often than truth.

"There are plenty of sharks in these waters. No one swims here, only curious barracuda," said one experienced coast-dweller.

But we saw no sharks.

On Thursday morning we launched our two inner tube rafts from the beach at Haena. Nets on the bottom of the tubes and straps on the top kept our waterproof packs and tightly wrapped equipment floating throughout the trip.

Emergency equipment, water containers and underwater camera were strapped to the top. In addition we each carried an aluminum Hawaiian sling spear for fishing and defending ourselves.

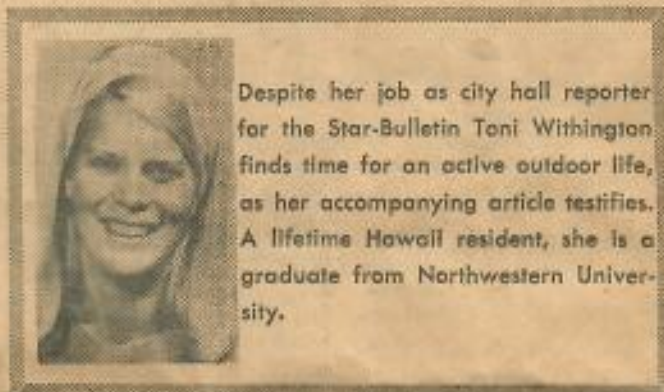
Most of our food was dehydrated and all of our meals were supplemented with food we speared, picked or climbed for.

Each of us carried only a bathing suit, t-shirt, jeans, sweatshirt and shoes.

The water off Haena was beautifully clear and alive with fish. The cliffs hung majestically above and ahead of us. The surface was a little choppy.

Large uhu squirms away

Bob Harvey almost caught a large uhu during the first hour, but was not too disappointed when it squirmed away.



Despite her job as city hall reporter for the Star-Bulletin Toni Withington finds time for an active outdoor life, as her accompanying article testifies. A lifetime Hawaii resident, she is a graduate from Northwestern University.

"There will be plenty more," he said. But that day, unfortunately, there wasn't.

The rocky fish-dotted bottom turned to paisley-patterned sand as we pushed our rafts further down the coast.

Waterfalls plunged off the cliffs in many places, and light sheets of water pouring over the edges of some turned to mist before reaching the water below.

We peeked into many of the caves that dot the coast, but with any surf at all they are difficult to enter.

The first day we stopped at a pair of giant lava tubes, one wet, the other dry. Fresh water rained from the one with a sandy bottom, and sea birds scolded us as we picked over a quart of opihi from the wave-battered walls of the other.

Going out through the surf again we met our first near tragedy. Tossed and smashed and rolled over and over by the waves, the packs and the three of us came out all right but Bob Clutter lost his face mask. While I held the two rafts in the increasingly choppy water, the two Bobs looked in the turbulent surf and finally found the stray mask.

As we pushed on, the sandy bottom became boring, but keeping my head above the surface to admire the cliffs meant a bouncing, rocking, jarring battle of the waves. Finally we rounded the last point for the day and landed at 3:30 on the beautiful beach of Hanakapiai Valley.

We set up our first camp above the beach next to the noisy stream that flows through the valley, then followed the stream to the heart of the valley.

Grassy terraces showed signs of the places where thousands of Hawaiians once lived. A large stone fireplace stood lonely against a bamboo thicket near where the trail to Kalalau Valley passes through Hanakapiai. We picked mountain apples and a jackfruit to eat that night with our opihi chowder.

Beauty outweighs dangers for 3

Signs of boar, goats

Ginger bloomed profusely nearer the stream, and the men saw signs of wild boar and goats.

The lack of mosquitoes was delightful. Only light showers interrupted the clear night.

Friday we spent most of the day in the water. The seas had continued building up from the previous day and the brisk winds blew off the tops, forming a constant spray.

We passed a half a dozen waterfalls that morning and an uncounted number of caves. Boulders began to appear on the sandy bottom. Large fish gathered around the cliff walls.

As we drifted toward two giant caves Harvey chased a large turtle and Clutter played with a school of squid.

Between the cliffs we spotted hundreds of lobsters and schools of large delicious fish. It was here that we caught our next dinner.

Although I have lived around the sea, boats and engaged in skin-diving all my life and never once been seasick, the peaking water and strong eddies of the caves did it to me. My stomach churned.

We stopped for lunch on the next rocky ledge 10 feet above the water. Hiking down the ledge we found a place where the cliff was less steep.

The men climbed the cliff for a peek at the hanging end of Hanakoa Valley while I sat below trying to hold my stomach together.

That afternoon we swam another three miles to Kalalau Valley. Caves beckoned to us but we doggedly decided to reach the valley before sundown.

Through one cave we could see a waterfall emptying into the ocean. Sunlight was streaming through the rear entrance of the cave, lighting only the bubbling white water in the darkness of the cave.

Shortly afterwards Clutter yelled "barracuda!" and Bob and I turned to see a school of shiny akule being chased by a monster. Clutter later described it as five feet long. Bob insists it was "as big as a man—at least six feet."

Luckily it was more interested in the akule than in us.

Clutter, an expert marine biologist, specializes in the timier of the sea animals. Several times he scared us to death by frantically pointing his finger.

While Bob and I looked off into the blue nothingness for a shark or some other danger, Clutter was only pointing out a tiny creature just a half inch from his finger.

Tired and near seasick again we landed on the first windswept beach of Kalalau only to discover that we had another mile to swim to the waterfall and famous camp site.

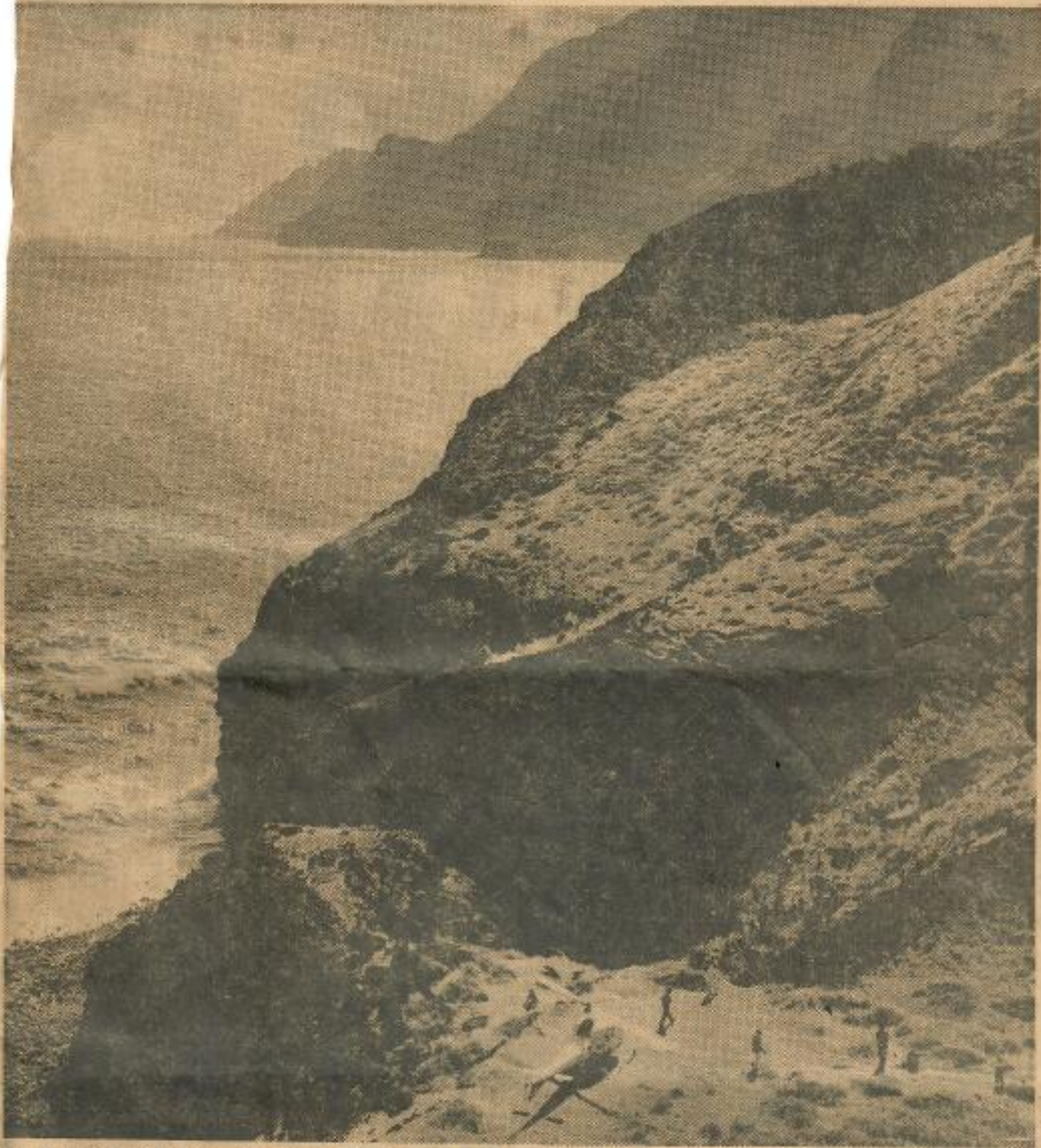
The legendary hermit of Kalalau is no longer a hermit. With a clear trail leading in and helicopters flying over daily the valley is more like Honolulu Airport.



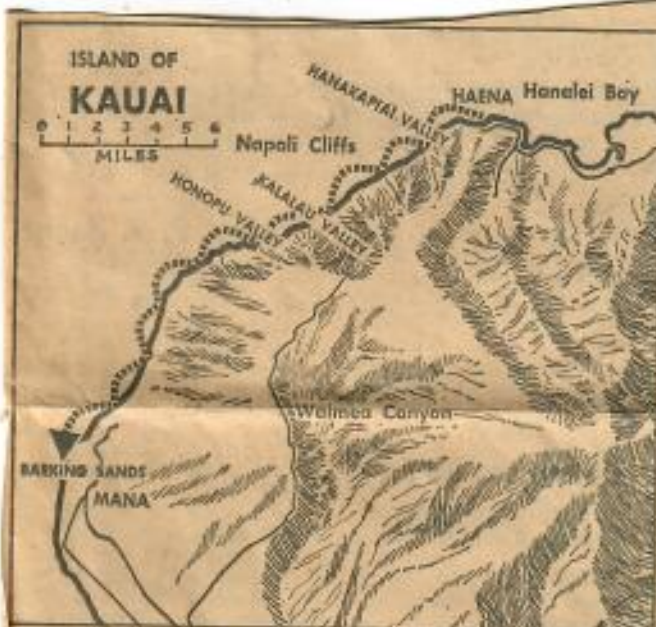
RESTING — Star-Bulletin reporter Toni Withington and Robert Clutter, University of Hawaii oceanography professor, take time out to enjoy the scenery, near a cave between Hanakapiai and Kalalau valleys on the northwest shore of Na Pali Coast.



A BEACH SCENE—White sand beaches like these are numerous along the Na Pali coastline. Kalalau Valley can be seen on far left of this photograph.—Photo by John Titchen



NA PALI COAST—You can either swim, take a boat ride, or hike over some difficult terrain, to reach Kauai's rugged Na Pali coastline. A much easier way now is by helicopter. A grassy spot on a high cliff at the edge of Nulolo Aina Valley serves as an ideal helicopter landing pad. You can drive out to Barking Sands and then take a helicopter flight to the valley.—Photo by John Titchen



SWIMMERS' ROUTE—They started at Haena, ended at Barking Sands on Kauai's western coast.

Camping near the waterfall were a radio announcer, a soil analyst and a college student. In a large sea cave living along with the real "hermit," Dr. Bernard Wheatley, was a European hippie and several vacationing college students. Two Marines, a honeymooning couple and a pair of hunters joined the valley population for the night.

A community feast heralded our arrival.

The next morning Wheatley invited us to visit his cave. Attractive rocks and flowers line the walls of the cave along with camping equipment. The sand around his table and bed is carefully raked and separated by pathways.

We welcomed the calm seas but made slow progress without the winds and waves pushing us. Also slowing us down somewhat were the jeans we wore to protect us from the scorching sun.

The back of my ears and neck bristled with blisters from the sun, and all three of us found it difficult to sit for long on the backs of our sunburned legs.

Just before noon we reached our next camping grounds at Nualolo Kai, near the center of the reef. The two Bobs spent the afternoon fishing on the reef and came in with a healthy catch.

Taste of 'owl water'

For the first time in the trip we were pressed for water. A greenish waterhole in which we found a Hawaiian owl sitting, was our only source on the dry inlet.

Even though I boiled it for 20 minutes and disguised it with coffee and kool aid, the "owl water," as Clutter called it, never really did taste right.

Early the next day we walked out over the reef and plunged into mirror calm water, even clearer than the day before.

About a mile from Nualolo Kai the reef was interrupted by another channel leading to the Na Pali State Park at Miloli. It was about noon and we were beginning to think our trip would take a day longer than we had planned.

Just then I spotted a turtle and Bob gave chase to what we were sure would be our next dinner. Bob grabbed him as he streaked in then out of a hole and struggled with him all the way to shore.

Fresh water replaced our "owl water" at the State park. We toured the shelters under construction and the cooking facilities at the park designed for boating campers, but decided to push on toward Barking Sands.

Most of the coral disappeared as we left the reef behind and the boulders reappeared on the bottom. The cliff became drier, and the waterfalls disappeared.

Fish continued in great profusion, and I counted and chased more than two dozen turtles before giving up.

That afternoon we covered our greatest distance—about six miles. The water was crystal clear and so calm that the light filtering through the water made dancing geometric patterns on the rocks below.

'Keys to survive alone'

"Keeping your eye for the aesthetics and order are keys to surviving alone," said Wheatley, who is far from alone in his wide low cave.

Wheatley told us he knew of no one else who has swam the coast, although he remembers a woman who swam from Haena to Kalalau and back again.

Before we left Kalalau we explored the valley floor and viewed the cliffs before us from a high grassy bluff. We picked taro tops and roots and guavas to take with us that afternoon to Honapu Valley.

That ocean inlet that guards the elevated end of Honapu—the Valley of the Lost Tribe—is just around a rocky point from the camping grounds of Kalalau. It was a short but very choppy and tiring swim to the far end of the inlet that is separated into two areas by a towering archway.

From the ocean the archway frames a waterfall pouring from the higher valley. We cooked our dinner under the archway but, because of the dampness and the insects, decided to sleep in the center of the desert-like beach. Sand crabs rather than insects climbed over us all night.

The ocean had become calm overnight, but riding the surface as we left Honapu were thousands of tiny stinging jellyfish. Clutter was delighted at the discovery, but Bob and I learned to dodge them and finally to ignore their stings.

During the day the ocean bottom became more interesting as the shoreline turned drier and more hostile.

The sand and boulders turned to sand and brown ridges. The ridges turned into shelves and the shelves became more and more populated with bright colored flat coral. Gradually coral heads and large fish appeared everywhere.

Miles of abstract colors

The bright yellows, blues, greens and oranges formed miles of abstracts that could outshine any Pollack painting or psychedelic trip.

The fish followed us at about 30 feet below. Once when Bob tried to dive down and spear one, they scattered. A rocky beach, hanging valleys, caves and waterfalls interrupted the coastline of mostly sheer bare cliffs.

We neared the point that guards the only reef on the coast, and this time it was Bob who shouted "barracuda!"

The shiny critter about three feet long poked around until he settled his curiosity on me.

He inched toward my fins. I felt Clutter pull me back and fly past my shoulder with his spear fully cocked. The barracuda disappeared.

As we neared the reef Bob Harvey chased two turtles, one that made him look small in comparison.

Niihau on the horizon

We spotted Lehua Rock and Niihau on the horizon before we caught our first glimpse of Barking Sands. At first Barking Sands looked close, but we knew it was still about two miles away.

We ate lunch on the dry, narrow, rocky shoreline under the red-and-black cliffs and waved to a Navy helicopter that passed us twice.

I was amazed at how long I could keep kicking without stopping. With interesting things to see I often forgot that I was kicking at all and just kept up a natural rhythm.

Pushing a raft was more fun than swimming alone, which one of us had to do at all times. The tube deflected tiny stinging things in the water, and I was less likely to tire myself chasing fish and turtles if I had the responsibility of a raft.

While Clutter is a marine biologist, Bob Harvey is more interested in the currents, waves and physics of the ocean. My knowledge of ocean life was trebled during the trip.

Coming down the home stretch the excitement of the whole trip caught up to me.

Tired, sunburned but happy

I was sunburned and tired. My feet were cut up from stream rocks and coral. My fingers were burned from many driftwood fires, and my neck and arms stung from many bites.

But the light dancing on the bottom was hypnotic. The fish were more beautiful and plentiful than I had seen anywhere on Oahu.

Then Clutter yelled "barracuda" again. This time the barracuda were smaller, but they seemed to be everywhere. Clutter, who chased after them as they appeared in front of us, said he counted 20.

Their beauty overwhelmed my fear of them. So sleek and shiny, they look like they are ready for a drag race anytime.

Finally the sound of waves crashing on a beach caught our ears, and the final worry went through our minds. We had planned to land on the edge of the beach used as a park. But also sharing the point is the heavily guarded Navy missile base.

Looking as we did like saboteurs, if we chose the wrong beach we were afraid some frightened guard would use us for target practice.

We were lucky; we landed on civilian ground. Triumphant we planted our spears in the sand and claimed the beach in the name of adventure.

When we hitchhiked back to Lihue to cook our turtle meat on a real stove.