



Travel



Aloha cowboys

It's not all sand, waves, and coconuts. Hawaii has a cowboy culture that is alive and well. *By Matt Villano*



Our family refers to the incident as “the mugging.” It was a sunny afternoon on the northern tip of Hawaii’s Hawaii Island (Big Island), and my toddler and I were returning to our cabin at Puakea Ranch from the tiny town of Hawi, just up the road. Our rental truck bounced over the cattle guard. I typed in a code to open the metal gate. We pulled through, leaving enough room behind the truck to allow the gate to close behind us. Then we waited. And Blue approached.

“Look at that beautiful horse!” I enthused.

“Daddy, she’s coming to say ‘hi,’” my girl replied. “Open my window.”

Like any doting father, I complied, lowering the rear passenger window so she could take a closer look. And within seconds, Blue, a beautiful white Arabian mare, stuck her nose in the backseat to smooch my kid and nibble at her seatbelt. Blue didn’t stop there. Gingerly, she moved from the back window to the front, reaching her head in the car and snuffling at a bag of goldfish snacks on the seat. Next, she fixated on the windshield wipers, mouthing each of them as if they were toothpicks. Finally, much giggling and 30 cell-phone photos later, the horse decided she’d had enough and galloped off to graze in the grass.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PIIHOLO RANCH

TAMALYN BALDWIN, THE HEAD WRANGLER OF PIIHOLO RANCH, MAKAWAO.

My daughter, now almost 4 years old, still talks about the day last summer when Blue smooched her in the truck. For her (for all of us, really) the experience was as much about the horse as it was about ranch life in general. At home, in Northern California, we live in the suburbs. At Puakea, we lived on the land. Like cowboys. Too often, mainlanders flock to the Hawaiian Islands, order up some mai tais, and never leave the beaches and resort pools. But my wife and I wanted a family vacation that revealed authentic, living, Hawaiian ranch culture. Of the state’s 750 ranches, about 20 offer some form of agri-tourism, according to the Hawaii field office of the USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service. Most of them offer ranch activities, like trail riding, and a peaceful setting, while some include ziplines and cultural tours. We crossed the ocean to explore this hidden America.

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Cattle have been foraging in Hawaii since 1793, when Captain George Vancouver presented a handful of cows to King Kamehameha I. About three decades later, these cattle had bred to become a wild, dangerous nuisance, destroying crops and sometimes killing islanders, who were



EXTERIOR OF "YOSHI'S HOUSE," ONE OF THE HISTORIC COTTAGES ON PUAKEA RANCH.

forbidden to hunt them. The King imported *vaqueros* (Mexican cowboys) from California to teach Hawaiians how to take matters into their own hands. The resulting ranch hands became known as *paniolos* (a mangling of "*español*," or Spanish), a distinctly Hawaiian subculture that mixed Mexican roping, saddle making, and leatherwork skills with traditions of attire and tools unique to the hot, humid Pacific islands.

Edgy Lee, a documentary film director, chronicles the story of *paniolos* in her 2011 film, *Paniolo O Hawaii: Cowboys of the Far West*. She says Hawaii is a place where cowboys and "Indians" are one and the same: "People overlook *paniolos*, because when they started here in Hawaii, the Islands weren't actually part of the U.S. That said, no matter how you look at it, *paniolos* were America's first cowboys."

Raising cattle on volcanoes in the mid-

dle of the Pacific Ocean is no easy task, and *paniolos* are as tough and ingenious as any Great Basin buckaroo or West Texas hand. But unlike mainland cowboys, who traditionally clump gathers and brandings into fall and spring, *paniolos* work year round. *Paniolo*

Hawaii is a place where cowboys and "Indians" are one and the same.

culture is alive and well in Hawaii, though not obvious, unless you go to a rodeo or seek out a ranch. On Maui, for instance, most of the ranch land sits on the slopes of Mount Haleakala, a region dubbed "Up-country." Here, the town of Makawao has a distinct *paniolo* flare. It's the site of Hawaii's biggest annual rodeo. On Hawaii Island, Waimea is the center of *paniolo*

activity and home to Parker Ranch, the largest and oldest ranch in the state.

We chose Puakea Ranch because it offered overnight accommodations—a rarity these days, due to the Great Recession. My wife and I wanted our kids to experience a real working ranch with cattle and a bunkhouse. But since the Islands' tourist economy began to bottom out in 2005, people seeking guest ranches all but disappeared, and a number of ranches eliminated all non-essential products as a way to cut costs. Today, Puakea is the only Hawaiian ranch (we could find) that offers overnight accommodations.

All four of the structures on the property date back to the 1940s or earlier, vestiges of the place's former life as a pig ranch and, before that, as a sugar plantation part of the communal Kohala Field system. When Jay and Christie Cash purchased the property in 2006, they spent

PHOTO BY GISELLE THOMPSON

three years gutting the structures and retrofitting them with modern kitchens and luxurious bathhouses, turning what was once a ramshackle farm into a high-end, farm-flavored retreat.

“We wanted to fix it up without changing the character or ignoring history,” says Christie. “We wanted it to be a place people could come to experience traditional ranch life, with a twist.”

The Makawao rodeo incorporates pa’u: an elaborate, ceremonial horseback display by women dressed in garlands.

My family stayed in the oldest home at the ranch, a long bungalow built at the turn of the 19th century. In the 1940s, *paniolo*s converted the building into a bunkhouse. Every morning we fetched eggs from the chicken coop. Every night we sauntered into the garden to snip herbs for pasta and other dishes. On walks around the property, our children waded into the switchgrass, waving in the whipping wind, and played spot-the-wayward-cows-and-goats.

One day, after the mugging, Jana Bogs, the ranch’s head wrangler, led me on a two-hour trail ride past remnants of stone buildings that used to process sugar cane and stands of eucalyptus trees. Poetically, I rode Blue. All told, we stayed at Puakea for 11 days.

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At other ranches around the 50th state, working ranch vacations have become harder to come by—short trail rides or ATV tours that barely get visitors away from their respective resorts are more common. The Parker Ranch in Waimea, Hawaii Island offers legitimate trail rides through old stone corrals, where up to 5,000 Hereford cattle were once rounded up after being brought down from the slopes of the Mauna Kea volcano. The Ponooho Ranch, also in Waimea, serves up lunch under the shade of a



THE INFAMOUS WHITE ARABIAN MARE, BLUE, PUAKEA RANCH.

PHOTO BY GISELLE THOMPSON

native acacia tree and mesmerizing views of the Pacific. And on Oahu, day-trippers flock to Kualoa Ranch for horseback rides into Hollywood history; wranglers lead two-hour rides deep into the Ka'a'awa Valley, where *Jurassic Park* (1993), *50 First Dates* (2004), and the TV series *Lost* (2004–2010) were filmed.

Kualoa Ranch CEO John Morgan told me about rides that also bring guests to a number of WWII bunkers, an 800-year-old Hawaiian fishpond, and fantastic views of the famed Mokoli'i Island.

"There are a bunch of different ways to see the ranch horseback," says Morgan, whose great-great-great grandfather bought the first part of the property in the 1850s. "We try to give people as much as we possibly can in the short time they're here."

On a different solo trip to Hawaii, I visited Pi'iholo Ranch in Makawao, Maui, and rode a three-hour trail ride that mean-



HERDING CATTLE ON THE 8,000-ACRE PI'IHOLO RANCH.

dered over a creek, down a valley, through a meadow, and up a forested volcanic butte. From the top, the unobstructed view of the slopes of Mount Haleakala had me shaking my head in awe. The fact that these islands even exist—jutting out of the ocean, thousands of miles from the mainland and that islanders have long

thrived here—truly boggles the mind.

That day, my group was lucky enough to go out with Tamalyn Baldwin, head wrangler and wife of Chris Baldwin, one of owner Peter Baldwin's sons. In addition to being an accomplished roper, Tamalyn has also trained herself to be a knowledgeable naturalist. Along the way, she

PHOTOS COURTESY PI'IHOLO RANCH

expertly identified flora (stands of strawberry guava trees) and fauna (a herd of axis deer) and regaled us with tales of life on an 8,000-acre ranch.

"Many people come to Hawaii and never see any of this," said Tamalyn, gesturing toward the Pacific Ocean sparkling in the distance. "Even if people know what to expect, even if they've ridden horses in island environments before they saddle up with us, they come here, they see the mountain and feel the trade winds and almost can't believe it's real."

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Any cowboy-themed trip to Hawaii must include a ticket to the Makawao Rodeo on Maui. Held annually on July 4, this rodeo has been going strong for more than 50 years and is Hawaii's largest *paniolo* competition. Weekend happenings include a parade and traditional events, like calf roping, bareback bronco riding, and barrel racing. The Makawao rodeo also incorporates of *pa'u*: an elaborate, ceremonial horseback display by women dressed in garlands, set to traditional Hawaiian music, of course.



PI'IHOLO RANCH HORSES TAKING A BREAK IN THE SHADE.

Buy some *manapua* (meat-filled roll), and enjoy the show.

“Hawaiians take our rodeos very seriously,” says Keoki Wood, livestock operations manager at Parker Ranch. “Each one is like a big party—a chance for visitors to get a taste of *paniolo* culture and for us [ranch hands] to catch up with friends.” Parker Ranch runs its own rodeo every summer, and February 2013 marks the 13th-annual Waimea Round-Up Rodeo, a weekend-long event that brings together cattle and horsemen from most of the Upcountry ranches on the island. And on Oahu, at

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Kualoa Ranch, the Hawaii Women’s Rodeo Association puts on an all-girls event every October.

In between the big rodeos, *paniolos* engage in informal ropings throughout the year, many of which are open to the public. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons are roping days at Pi’iholo, Maui, and Tamalyn Baldwin welcomes one and all to watch. Maui, Oahu, and Hawaii Island also have active polo leagues, which count *paniolos* as active competitors. Throwing a rope and swinging a polo mallet are similar motions, and the horsemanship on display is as impressive as anything you’ll see in the rodeo arena.

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While cows and horses drive most of the cowboy-oriented tourism activity in Hawaii, in recent years ranches have diversified into other areas, too. This strategy was born of necessity; with hay costing upward of \$20 per small bale, ranch managers say they have had to launch new

Plan It: Cowboy Hawaii

RANCHES

▶ Most ranches in Hawaii don’t offer accommodations. **Puakea Ranch** is the exception. Puakea Ranch, Hawi, Hawaii Island (Big Island), 808-315-0805, puakearanch.com

▶ These hotels offer lodging within a 30-minute drive of the most popular ranches:

Inn at Mam’s Fish House near Pi’iholo Ranch, Maui
808-579-9764,
mamasfishhouse.com

The Fairmont Orchid near Parker Ranch, Hawaii
808-885-2000,
fairmont.com/orchid-hawaii

Paradise Bay Resort near Kualoa Ranch, Oahu
808-735-5071,
paradisebayresorthawaii.com

RODEOS

▶ The **Makawao rodeo** has been going strong for more than 50 years. Makawao, Maui. July 4.

▶ February 2013 marks the thirteenth-annual **Waimea Round-Up Rodeo**. Waimea, Hawaii Island. Late February.

▶ Cheer on the cowgirls at the **Hawaii Women’s Rodeo Association All-Girls Rodeo**. Kualoa Ranch, Oahu. Early October.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

▶ **Hawaii Tourism Authority** can put you in touch with more ranches to visit—and more lodging near those ranches. gohawaii.com

▶ The **Paniolo Heritage Center** at Pukalani Stables in Kamuela, Hawaii Island, displays in-depth *paniolo* history. paniolopreservatoin.org

lines of business in order to stay afloat. Parker Ranch, for instance, on Hawaii Island, offers guided hunting (turkey, feral pigs, and wild goats), and Kualoa Ranch on Oahu offers guided ATV and 4x4 tours through remote, scenic valleys and boat trips. Princeville Ranch, on Kauai near Hanalei, offers hiking to five-tier Kailiwi Falls, and Pi'iholo, on Maui, built an extensive zipline course that features more than a dozen zips, including one that measures more than half-a-mile-long.

"Not everybody who comes to ride horses wants to do the zipline, and not everybody who wants to zip cares about horses," said Jeff Baldwin, the Baldwin brother who runs the Pi'iholo Zipline. "We're all part of the same family, but we've tried to keep things separate so guests have an entirely different feeling at both."

This approach—diversifying traditional ranch options to include a bevy of activities—is the likely future of cowboy vacations in Hawaii. And in the end, we visitors win. Yes, we all love the beach, but galloping on a Quarter Horse across the slopes of Mount Haleakala is pretty fun, too, or riding through herds of cattle in the steamy tropics.

I'll never forget the image of Blue leaning in the truck window to give my daughter a smooch. That's the kind of mugging I can live with. 🍷



PI'IHOLO RANCH RIDERS

5 Florida hideaways

Before the timeshares, Florida was cattle country, and snowbirds can enjoy all things cowboy in the Sunshine State.



1. KISSIMMEE, FLA.

Stay: Bed down at Creek Ranch, a working cattle ranch in nearby Haines City. 800-225-4255, creekranch.net **Eat:** Enjoy wholesome ranch fare at Cowboy BBQ. 407-343-4227 **Play:** Florida's cowboy heritage comes alive at Lake Kissimmee State Park, with living history demonstrations of early Florida "crackers." 863-696-1112, floridastateparks.org/lakekissimmee

2. DAVIE, FLA.

Stay: Gigi's Resort in nearby Ft. Lauderdale is a one-minute walk from the beach. 954-463-4827, gigisresort.com **Eat:** Try the excellent pulled pork at the Georgia Pig Barbecue and Restaurant. 954-587-4420 **Play:** Cowboys and cowgirls have been competing at the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds since the early 1940s. 954-680-8005, davieprorodeo.com

3. POLK COUNTY, FLA.

Stay: The Palmer House Bed and Breakfast has a country feel. 888-772-3348, palmerhouse.com **Eat:** The alligator and frog legs at Cherry Pocket Steak and Seafood Shak are actually delicious. 863-439-2031, cherrypocket.com **Play:** Kick up your boots at the Westgate River Ranch, which hosts a Saturday night rodeo and barn dance. 863-692-1321, wgriverranch.com

4. OCALA, FLA.

Stay: The Homestead room at The Heritage Country Inn displays the pioneer style of frontier Florida. 352-489-0023, heritagecountryinn.com **Eat:** Ipanema serves up gaucho (Argentinean cowboy)-style meats. 352-622-1741, ipanemaocala.com **Play:** See the forested beauty of Ocala horseback, with Cactus Jack's Trail Rides. 352-266-9326, cactusjackstrailrides.com

5. HOMESTEAD, FLA.

Stay: The cottages at Angel's Haven Ranch look over 3,000 acres of farmland. 305-794-0784, angelshavenranch.com **Eat:** El Toro Taco draws in Mexican-food lovers from all over Southern Florida. 305-245-8182 **Play:** Don't miss the Homestead Rodeo, January 25–27. 305-247-3515, homesteadrodeo.com

PHOTOS COURTESY PITHOLO RANCH (HAWAII); VISIT FLORIDA (4, 5); WESTGATE RIVER RANCH (3)