

Hawaii: The Peak Bareboat Charter

By LAIRD DURHAM

For the intrepid only, Hawaiian cruising may be the best sail of your life.

If oceans were rated for sailors the way mountains are rated for skiers, the Virgin Islands would be rated "intermediate," the Windwards "advanced" and Hawaii "expert."

The prevailing winds in the Hawaiian Islands are the trades. Over thousands of miles of empty Pacific they blow from the Northeast at 10-5 knots, rolling up seas of three to five feet. Then in the middle of empty Pacific the Hawaiian Islands erupt from the ocean floor into dozens of mountain peaks 5,000 to 14,000 feet high, occasionally bulwarked by shoals and coral reefs. The Trades funnel through channels between the islands, doubling their velocity to 25-30 knots, and building up 10-to-15-foot seas. They swirl around headlands and gust through passes and saddles, creating holes, hurricane gulches, and sail-busting wind lines.

And that's not all. Pacific storms migrating eastward 200 miles north of the islands often generate 10-to-15-foot northerly swells that interact with the easterly Trades-driven waves. Both bounce off the islands' cliffs and bend around points. One moment you are surfing down breakers off your quarter, the next moment climbing up into them.

Hawaiian sailors say, "going east (beating into the Trades) is hard on the crew; going west is hard on the boat." In our experience, going in *any* direction is hard on the boat.

There's a striking difference between Hawaiian and Caribbean charter operations. Although many people have sailed from the mainland to go into the Hawaiian charter business, there are as yet no large fleets such as there are in the Caribbean, Florida, and the South Pacific. An acute shortage of berth space, due to Hawaiian laws and policies, is partly responsible. It is against the law, for example, to charter a boat berthed in a pleasure-boat marina, which rules out many of the best locations.

The insurance situation adds to the problem. Because boats have a tough life in the islands and parts are costly, marine insurance is expensive and has some discouraging provisions. You may not leave your boat lying at anchor unattended, for one. So when you can't find a place to tie up during your visit to Lahaina and Maui—which is most of the time—and you drop the hook offshore in the lee of the mountains as the whaling ships once did, one of you must stay aboard while the rest go ashore for dinner and nightlife.



Calm waters in an island's lee belies the adventure waiting to windward.

Insurance aside, it is wise to keep an anchor watch in Hawaii, for there are few spots in the islands that are *always* protected in the sometimes fast-changing conditions. One winter, a dozen or so boats off Lahaina were washed ashore when a Kona wind (an especially strong wind from the south) surprised them.

For all these reasons, Hawaiian charter operators have only a few boats of their own. They add to their fleet by acting as agents for individual boat owners who want to charter for extra income, some *of* whom are chartering illegally out of pleasure-boat marinas, and whose yacht insurance may not cover chartering.

We began our cruise on Oahu, sailing a full day between Waikiki Beach and Kaneohe Bay, then crossing the Kaiwi Channel to Molokai, another full-day sail. Our destination on Molokai was Haleolono, a harbor used by sand barges, which is three and a half miles from Laau Point, the westernmost tip of Molokai. Haleolono means "The House of Lono," Lono being one of the principal gods of the ancient Hawaiians. It is one of the most desolate places I've ever seen. We chose it for its excellent lobstering and because the beaches are among the loveliest and loneliest in Hawaii.

We left Oahu in a Cal 40 at 0900, about an hour after friends departed in a Morgan 28, planning to arrive at Haleolono in the mid-afternoon. The usually turbulent Kaiwi Channel was calm. The front of a Pacific storm to the north had weakened the Trades temporarily, so we motored until the Trades began to pick up again about noon. We put up the 150 genoa and zipped along on a close reach. Although some of the swells from the storm were 15 feet high, we rose and fell gently as they rolled under us. The swells followed as we rounded Laau Point and headed for Haleolono. At Haleolono they became huge breakers across the entrance channel.

There was no sign of the Morgan at the Haleolono breakwater and we couldn't raise them on the VHF, which was missing its antenna. By now it was 1530. The nearest alternate harbor was at Kaunakakai, a good three hours away, dead into a 20-knot wind. Three- and-a-half hours would put us there just about dusk. We decided to go for it, on the engine. The wind and chop continued to build, so the going was slow. I knew that if it were dark when we got to Kaunakakai we would have put up a reefed main and tack all night down the channel to Lahaina on Maui--which the crew let me know they considered a miserable way to spend a vacation.

It was just at dusk when we reached the Kaunakakai entrance buoy and lined up the range markers on shore. The range leads into a pier, which reaches out from shore through a shoal. The pier is dredged on either side. It was not clear from our charts where we could tie up or anchor. The West side of the pier is used by barges which supply the island. The barges arrive night and day; signs warn off unauthorized boats. We'd been told by a yachtsman at Kaneohe Bay that we could moor fore and aft on the East side of the pier, but neither the charts nor the *Cruising Guide* gave us a hint what to do about the line of buoys paralleling the east side. Several fishing boats were moored from the buoys to the pier.

It had now become dark. In the glow of the outdoor lights in the barge loading yard we could make out stakes marking the shoal on the east side. The shoal was much too close for us to use our anchor for a fore and aft mooring, especially with the wind howling squarely at the pier. So we tied up alongside the pier: It would be easier to deal with a returning fishing boat than with my potentially mutinous crew. The next morning we learned that the mooring buoys are owned by the county and are there for visiting boats.

After registering with the harbormaster, we walked into town, rented a car, and explored Molokai while waiting for the Morgan. She arrived in the afternoon as we were thinking of phoning the Coast Guard.

After Kaunakakai we made only one more harbor--Manele Bay on the southern coast of Lanai, an extinct volcano owned entirely by the Dole company and carpeted wall-to-wall in pineapple fields within its crater. It is sparsely inhabited and, except for Lanai City, it is primitive. But never have we met more beautiful and interesting people than those who live there. We spent three days in Manele Bay, but it wasn't enough.

Now that I've experienced it, I have some recommendations about bareboating in Hawaii. The first is: Do it. It is worth the effort.

The second is: Allow plenty of time, a month if you can. Then you will be able to choose the conditions you want for the long passages, while feeling relaxed about lost time due to making repairs and re-provisioning. You will have time to see the beautiful, out-of-the-way places that you can reach only by water. And you can get to know the people.

For the trip back to Kaneohe Bay we switched to the Morgan 28. There is no alternative to making Kaneohe Bay from Lanai before dark except to head out to sea for the night, so we left Manele Bay at 0300 for the 75-nautical-mile sail.

The marine weather forecast was for winds in the channels of 30 knots, and seas of 18 feet. We motored until dawn, when we were out of the lee of Lanai and into the forecast winds and seas. We put up the Morgan's 110 foresail and a double-reefed main. She was balanced, and handled easily in the quartering winds. Even so, an hour at a time at the tiller keeping a heading in those seas was plenty.

It took us a couple of hours to become confident in the boat and our ability to handle her. Then we relaxed enough to enjoy the incredible beauty. We sailed amid sparkling crystal blue waves, flecked with white foam. At times, from the bottom of some of the deepest troughs, we were unable to see land. At other times we were awed by the towering dark green cliffs on windward shores which "milk" the trades of rain, and send huge cumulus clouds tumbling into the sky.

We sailed in shorts and tees. Every 20 minutes or so, when we'd start to feel uncomfortably hot, a wave would slap us amidships and soak us to the skin. When we reached Kaneohe Bay our clothes were so crusted with salt from the wetting and drying they literally could stand up by themselves.

We made the trip in a little over 11 hours, averaging about ten percent above theoretical hull speed. The Cal 40 beat us by an hour or so. As we turned down the channel into Kaneohe Bay, we sailed into a torrential rain which lasted just long enough to wash the salt out of our faces and hair, then the sun came out again. By the time we docked we were dry, and the Trades were cooling us in the shade of palm trees. We broke out the rum for a toast to bareboating in Hawaii, and to the greatest sail of our lives!