



12/6/12

Laie to Waikane - September 1st-3rd, 2012

Three months ago my friends and I went "tent-less" on an incredible three day backpacking journey in the Ko'olau mountains starting from Laie town and ending in Waikane Valley. Equipped with all backpacking necessities besides a tent, the twenty-two mile trek took us through some of the most desolate and remote sections on the island of Oahu, stopping at two separate cabins along the way for shelter during the night. During daylight we navigated through nuku tradewinds, knee-deep mud, thick vegetation, and occasional white-out conditions, testing both our stamina and sense of direction. Despite the physical and mental hardships, the views were unrivaled and strengthened the bond of friendship among us all.

ISLAND TRAILS BY KALEO LANCASTER



CENTRAL OAHU, HAWAII,
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Laie to Waikane - September 1st-

Day 1 (09/01/12):

A quick carb-loaded breakfast at the Hukilau Cafe in Laie served as our last "legit" meal for the next two-and-a-half days before heading out.

Our ever so reliable friend, Keahi Ka'awa, was nice enough to shuttle us from the other side of the island with our gear to Laie that morning. He would also pick us up in Waikane Valley on day three.

With bellies full, Lei Yamasaki, Ryan Chang, Keoni Napoleon, and I jumped back into Keahi's van and headed to the Laie Ridge/Waterfall trailhead. It was 8:15am. While unloading our gear and bidding farewell to Keahi we were confronted by an unofficial security guard who politely asked what our intentions were with such large backpacks.

"Where you guys going?" the hefty Polynesian man asked.

"Up the ridge, to the summit, and all the way to Waikane," I replied.

He looked at us like we were crazy. "Waikane? Ho shit! That's far away! You guys gonna make it, or what?"

"Yeah, uncle, no worries. We got everything," assured Keoni.

"Okay, good. I just asking cause there been some people going up this road into the bottom part of the trail shooting guns. That's why I patrolling this part, make sure you guys no have any guns on you."

"Nothing on us here."

"Okay, well you guys be careful, and good luck. That's a long walk to Waikane."

"We know. Mahalo!"

We set off on the trail at 8:30am. I had been up and down the Laie trail multiple times, but with a thirty-pound backpack, the thought of "holy shit, what did I get myself into" crossed my mind more than once as we labored our way up through the hot, dry, exposed bottom portions of the wide and gradually ascending dirt trail.

Two hours in, legs burning, we hit the junction with the waterfall trail. A quick rest and we resumed our slow ascent along the well graded trail aimed for the Ko'olau summit. The weather was perfect with high, overcast clouds masking the heat of the sun, the clouds staying well above the Ko'olau mountain peaks. Once at the Laie terminus we sat down to eat lunch atop a cramped overlook to see what was in store along the route toward our next landmark: the Kawailoa helipad. We eyeballed the route until the swath disappeared into the convoluted greenery of the Ko'olau hills.

3rd, 2012

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Lunch was done, and we then began our first steps on the KST (Ko'olau Summit Trail) towards Kawailoa. The trail was in surprisingly good condition, and before we knew it, we hit the helipad around 1pm. From the edge of the leeward side of the helipad we were greeted with spectacular views, most notably the view to leeward showcasing the vast expanse of undulating ridges towards the Wahiawa plains with the Waianae Mountain Range as its backdrop. To the right we could see the obvious swath along the upper portions of the Kawailoa trail. Had we brought our tents I would have elected to spend the night there, for the helipad was a very wide, flat, and exposed area that could accommodate a multitude of campers without any fuss. But without a tent, we hiked on to find the first cabin that we would call home for our first night in the Ko'olau.

Beyond Kawailoa the trail remained graded, contouring around hill after hill eventually hitting a fence. Construction of the fence is for eradication purposes to protect native species and plants from destructive non-native species such as wild pigs from traveling up and over certain sections of the mountain. Although a nuisance to look at and avoid -- at times we had to climb over the fence to regain the trail -- the fence proved to be an excellent guide leading us in the right direction.

Time seemed to fly by after leaving Kawailoa, and we soon found ourselves at the Koloa Cabin. The cabin was a sight for sore eyes and legs, and although it would have been a prime spot to spend the night, it was still in the stages of being built, and the smell of new paint was a bit nauseating. It was now 2:15pm. We had to decide on whether or not we would stay at Koloa Cabin or push on to another cabin our friends had told us about that would make the trip even more worthwhile and memorable. For a moment we fiddled with the idea of staying at Koloa to enjoy the rest of the day relaxing. The smell of paint in the cabin turned out to be the deal breaker so we set off for the next cabin.

Leaving the Koloa Cabin behind, we also left behind the fence and reached an incredible overlook in between a notch in the ridge at the back of Kaipapa'u Gulch. The absence of wind at the overlook took on an eerie type of silence, yet the view remained surreal and beautiful.

From the notch we hiked along an awesome windward contour trail with Kaipapa'u Gulch to our left until the trail switched to the leeward side.

Upon switching to the leeward side we were greeted with major overgrowth and a rough trail to follow. The going was slow, and time seemed to dwindle faster with every step.

The sun was now dipping below the Waianae Mountain Range, the temperature noticeably dropping, and the clouds settling lower over the Ko'olau. We approached another amazing overlook behind Ma'akua

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Gulch, well above Hau'ula town. At this point we could see nothing manmade, just a lush green landscape contrasting with an azure sliver of ocean leading to the Pacific horizon. The wind at the overlook was blasting. Because the gusts sounded like a jet engine in our ears, trying to converse with each other was an added task aside from trying to keep ourselves grounded. We took some pictures, posing in the wind trying not to fall or get blown away, then headed back onto the trail. The trail went back alee, sheltering us from the pounding winds.

Rougher and rougher the trail became, keeping us sweaty and dirty. More mud. More vegetation. It seemed endless. Time was waning, and we had to hurry and find the next cabin before nightfall. I had wrote down directions given to me by a friend and took it out of my pocket. I scanned to the parts of my handwriting that explained the landmarks to look out for. We had reached none of it yet. Either we didn't reach any of it yet, or we passed it. If we passed it, we'd be in trouble, and there was no way we were going to backtrack. It was getting late and cold. We were now in clouds. What were once white clouds now turned to a dark steel bluish-gray, an indication that night was fast approaching. The clouds enveloped the whole landscape, confusing our sense of direction, allowing us to only see a mere thirty feet or so in front of us. Following the swath ahead was the only option. The wind blew. The rain came. Colder and colder, the temperature dropped even more.

Our progress became discouraging. At one point we were actually going to find a spot on the leeward side of the trail where we could hunker down, shelter ourselves from the winds, and spend the night. There weren't many options, though, and the wind and rain seemed to be picking up. With the weather getting worse, we knew we had to find the cabin.

"I'm just gonna spend the night here," Lei said.

"Oh hell, no," I dejected.

"Fuck! It's cold as fuck," Ryan yelled.

"We gotta find the cabin," Keoni said. "I ain't spending the night in the rain."

"Where are the landmarks? I didn't see one fucking landmark on the paper I wrote on!" I was frustrated. "This is bullshit. Should have stayed in Koloa."

Keoni suggested, "We just gotta keep going. If we already passed the landmarks, maybe we'll hit Poamoho."

My watch read 5:55pm. Keoni was right. If we had passed the landmarks already, we could keep going all the way to the Poamoho

Remember, it is your choice to get outside and hike.



cabin. But how far more would that be? How much longer would it take? All that mattered was that we needed shelter.

"Okay, let's go."

Back on the trail, we hiked for another forty minutes until we finally we spotted the landmark that I had written down on paper. Exhausted and cold, my body felt a rush of energy upon reaching the landmark.

"Fuck you!" I screamed with joy. "So I guess we didn't pass it. Shit!"

We followed the remaining directions and finally got a glimpse of the cabin we had been looking for all day. The initial view of the cabin didn't seem real at first, like it appeared out of nowhere, enveloped in clouds and mist, a boxy, shadowy figure at an unassuming spot in the Ko'olau mountains. For us though, it was a "beacon of light" amongst the inclement weather. Our pace increased to an all out sprint as we got closer and closer to the cabin. At 6:45pm we were at the cabin porch.

We unloaded our gear and showered outside via a spigot in the cold, blustery conditions. The minute or so of showering was harsh to say the least, but the rinse off was needed. We commenced with dinner under candlelight and headlamps. The rain and wind outside was loud. The idea of spending the night outside would have been hell. The temperature inside the cabin was surprisingly cold, and some sips of hard liquor would up our body temperature just tad. A drink was in order before calling it a day. I had a full bottle of Jameson's scotch whiskey; half in a plastic bottle and the other half in a metal flask.

Keoni had some brandy, and Ryan had a full bottle of Jack Daniel's.

There was more than enough to pass around for the next two days so we drank just enough to loosen up our muscles, feeling the buzz and warmth of the alcohol in our bodies to fall asleep with the sound of wind and rain pelting against the windows and wooden walls outside. The next day would be challenging as well. We would traverse a section of summit trail we had never been on before, but eventually reaching familiar ground at the stretch between the Poamoho summit and Poamoho cabin. It had been a long day. One we could certainly leave behind but never forget. The alcohol soon worked its magic. We fell asleep.

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On the Laie trail.

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The view from the Kawaiiloa helipad.





Day 2 (09/02/12):

I woke up to the sound of Ryan's voice.

"Holy shit, guys! Wake up! You gotta come out here and see this view!"

The liquor from the night before had done a number on me. I opened my eyes from the top bunk of the cabin looking down on Lei and Keoni, both of whom were still sleeping. My watch read 7:00am. I laid back down, tongue dry as ever.

"Damn, Ryan. You snore loud," Lei complained.

"So does Keoni," I replied. "I slept good, though. Now, I just have to shake off this mini-hangover."

"Come outside," Ryan insisted.

Keoni was first to join Ryan on the porch and confirmed Ryan's excitement.

"Oh damn! Yeah, that's nice."

Looking toward the west was a low rainbow hovering just above the numerous ridges sprawling out to the Wahiawa plain. Framing the

rainbow and ridges were wispy, ethereal clouds with light bands of showers falling to the landscape below. Far behind was the Waianae Mountains, colorfully lit by the rising of the morning sun. The weather was better than the night before; the winds had died and the rain was light and sporadic. We were alone, too. No one around. No one knowing of our location.

"Well, I'm gonna eat breakfast. Anyone want some coffee?"

I couldn't pass up Keoni's offer. "I'll have some."

During breakfast the rain returned. The seven cups of coffee had kicked in, and I was ready to start the next leg of our trek to Poamoho.

"How about we wait 'til the rain eases up," I suggested.

Everyone agreed. For the next two hours we relaxed and chatted about the latter day's good and bad moments, hoping the bad moments would not repeat once we headed out. At 10:15am, the rain had stopped, and we packed our stuff and headed out to the KST.

The weather was cool and windy, still cloudy and socked in, and the trail muddy as ever, if not worse. We hit another fence and followed it to a point that would be the highest elevation of our trip. The wind here was incredibly strong, the clouds shooting up and over the ridge at an blazing speed. Leaving the spot of our peak elevation we then reached an unbelievable lookout over Punalu'u Valley. The wind was still in full force. We posed for some photos with Punalu'u Valley in the background all while trying to look cool and composed with the strong gusts of wind at our backs.

Still following the fence we reached the top a waterfall in narrow pocket harboring a stream, the whole area somewhat resembling a meadow.

The small amount of water in the stream dropped off in a cascade into Punalu'u.

The fence kept going and lead the way, eventually skirting the very edge of the Ko'olau summit ridge. Clinging to the fence was the norm along these sections because of the strong winds. Much of the hike from the cabin was spent in clouds, but as we started skirting the summit ridge, the clouds began to lift, giving us astounding views of Kahana Valley and the Ko'olau summit ridge.

At a certain point we decided to climb the fence and leave it behind.

Doing this brought us to a massive flat meadow of which we had to cross. The sun shone bright along this section, making for perfect lighting to snap photos and record video.

Two hours had lapsed. It was time for lunch. We eventually rejoined the fence and ate lunch on a strip of ridge that was flat and grassy. The

lunch spot offered a view ahead to gauge how much further we had to Poamoho.

"Looks about another two hours to the cabin," Keoni said.

"Minor," I replied.

After lunch we pushed forward, the trail doing its usual contour around ridges and occasionally following the ridge crest. The clouds lifted, offering views in all directions. At 2:00pm we reached the terminus of Poamoho. Not much time was spent at the lookout. We wanted to reach the cabin, which was only about fifteen minutes away. Our early arrival time at the cabin would give us ample time to enjoy the rest of the day relaxing and getting ready for day three.

Now on familiar ground, we reached the Poamoho cabin in no time.

Unlike the previous cabin, Poamoho cabin was littered with rat shit and smelled of something awful. Evidence of past hikers was obvious: batteries, empty water bottles, trash in a box at the corner of the cabin.

"The last cabin was a hotel compared to this," I said.

But it was somewhere to sleep. No complaints there.

As the clock hit 4:30pm, we took out the remaining amounts of alcohol.

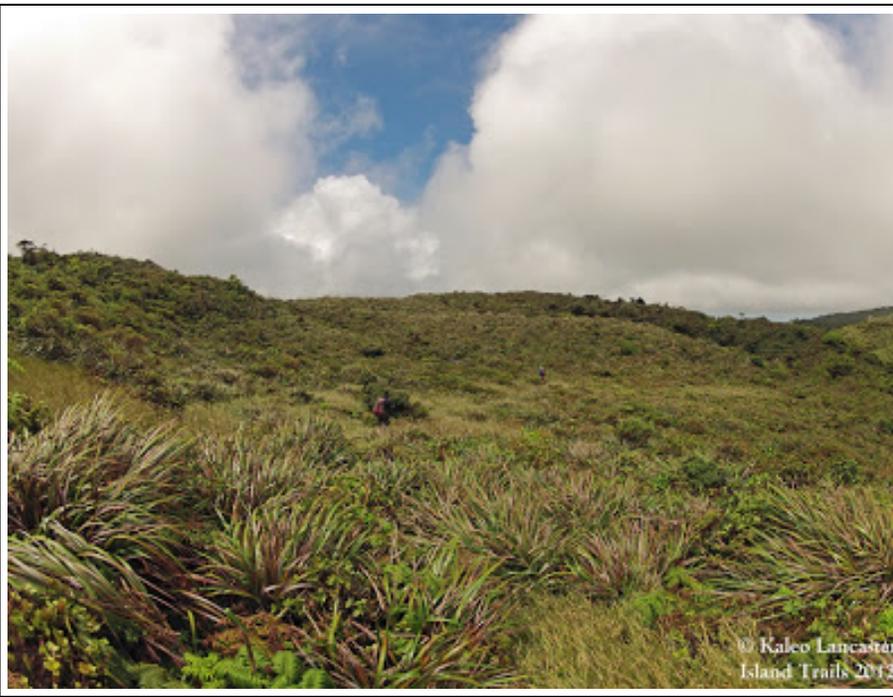
Drinking at an early start would ensure an early slumber to be fully rested for our last leg of our trip: Poamoho cabin to Waikane Valley.

Dinner commenced. The alcohol now all gone; the buzz in full effect.

The dark settled once again, and the clouds completely blanketed the area around us. It was 8pm. I fell asleep.



Mud.



Large meadow about an hour-and-a-half from Poamoho.





Leeward view just before the Poamoho cabin.



Poamoho Cabin.

Day 3 (09/03/12):

The morning greeted us with cool temperatures and rainy weather.

Throughout the night we could hear the wind and rain outside, and the sound of rats scampering inside the cabin walls. I had achieved better sleep at the previous cabin.

With breakfast made and a cup of coffee in hand, we discussed our desired departure to at least get to Waikane by 3pm. I had done the stretch from Poamoho to the junction with the Schofield-Waikane trail, and it had taken a little over two hours. I had never hiked beyond Schofield-Waikane, but from what I heard from others, it would take around half-an-hour to reach the Waikane trail junction, and then an easy five miles out to civilization.

We agreed on an earlier start than the day before, so we set off in the rain just after 8am. Leaving the Poamoho cabin, we were totally enveloped in clouds. The trail then switched to the infamous windward contour that is raved about time and time again. It truly is the most beautiful section of trail on the island. The ground was wet and soft, the dew from the vegetation soaking every inch of our bodies along the way. The wind picked up, chilling us to the bone as it brushed over our wet skin.

The clouds began to lift around 9am, and from then on, we were treated with the best views all the way to Waikane. The view of Kahana Valley from that section of KST never gets old. From our vantage point we could see the entire valley of Kahana out to the blue Pacific Ocean. To the east we could see the coastline spreading all the way to Mokapu Point in Kaneohe. Although sunny, the breeze kept us constantly cool. We made slow progress along the KST, rounding corner after corner, capturing as much images on camera as we could. At about noon we reached the junction of the Schofield-Waikane trail and devoured a quick snack.

Onward we hiked to the junction with the Waikane trail. The KST continued on, turning right and switchbacking its way gradually up to Pu'u Ka'aumakua. We turned left and headed down the Waikane trail. As we descended Waikane, the views were even more impressive. The Ko'olau mountain range was in full view, and it was mind-boggling to see how far we had traveled.

Further down we descended until we hit the dirt road in Waikane Valley. We passed a vibrant stream, and opted to cool off by splashing water against our heads and faces. All that was left now was the long dirt road back out to Kamehameha Highway.

It was just after 1pm. We passed homes deep in the valley, with a few residents enjoying the day near the stream with their grandchildren. We exchanged smiles and a wave.

"Howzit," I acknowledged.

"Aloha. Where you guys came from?"

"Laie," I replied.

"Ho, aunty! You heard that? They came from Laie! How long took you guys?"

"Three days," Keoni said.

"Oh, wow! Congrats you guys," one of the women said.

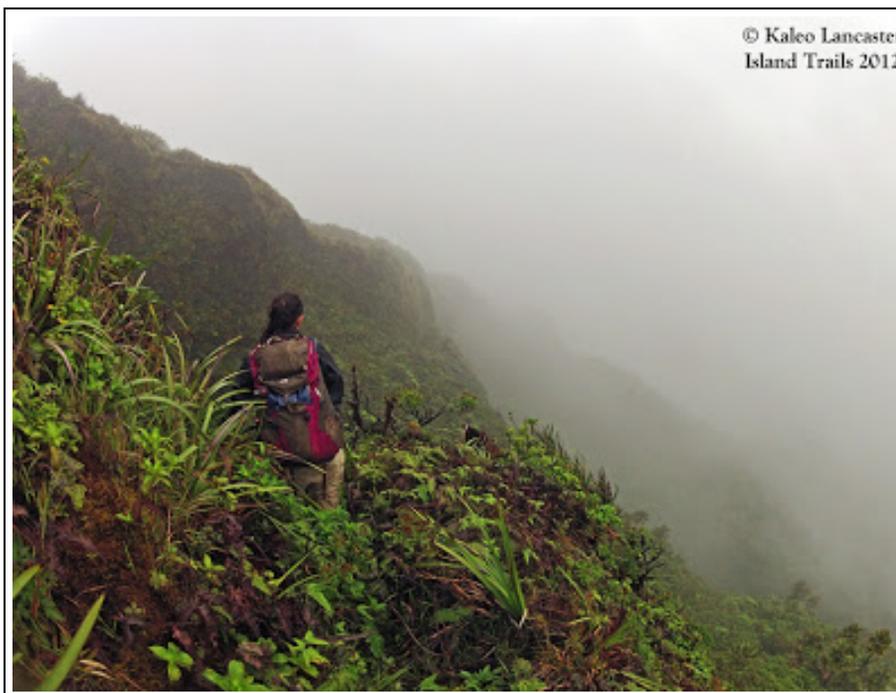
"Thanks. Bye."

After about an hour-and-a-half on the road, we finally heard cars in the distance.

"You hear that," I asked. "Sounds like Kam Highway. We're almost done."

Within a few minutes we could see Kamehameha Highway. To the right of the road we were on abutting the highway was a large grassy area.

We took off our bags, sat down on the ground, and let out a sigh of relief as our three day hike officially came to an end. We phoned Keahi that we were done. Within half-an-hour, Keahi showed up with his van, large cooler inside with water, sodas, juices, and beers. He even had manapua, pork hash, musibi's, and a full bottle of Jack Daniel's. We scarfed down all we could, and drank until we could drink no more, conversing about the three awesome days we spent in the Ko'olau mountains.



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Leeward section of trail past the Poamoho cabin, in clouds.



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The view opens up.



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Kahana Valley.



Rounding a corner.



Leeward view.



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Descending the Waikane trail.





Waikane Valley.

The three days in the Ko'olau came and went. What could have been done in two days, we spread out in three. And I'm glad we did. Three days was just enough to experience what very few have experienced first-hand, and to do it tent-less made it that much more exciting and unique. I'll always remember the challenging first day, and the laughs we shared in the cabin reminiscing about the day we so gladly could leave behind. I'll never forget the second day, pushing through intense winds in knee deep mud at our highest point of elevation, eventually reaching familiar ground at Poamoho. And I'll forever cherish our final day, where the weather seemed to change in our favor along the most beautiful stretch of trail on Oahu, a perfect ending to our long trek. And lastly, I couldn't have asked for a better group to do it with. We finished it together, and without the company of Lei, Keoni, and Ryan, it wouldn't have been the same.

The stretch between Laie and Waikane remains to be the most remote section of the Ko'olau summit that I have hiked. It is full of wonder and awe, but it also expends much of your energy. The mud, wind, rain, and indistinct trails make it very challenging, and depending on how far you want to go, the mileage will take its toll physically and mentally.

However, you have to learn to roll with hardship, and enjoy it. It's the only way to cope, and the only way to move further. The mist will roll in, the wind will get stronger, the temperature will drop, and the sun will come and go. It's a perfect analogy to life itself: there will be pain and serenity -- find the advantage of both to push on through.

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