

Driving to Ahualoa

The Old Mamalahoa Highway is an excellent place to get lost

By ALAN McNARIE
Tribune-Herald correspondent

On the Island of Hawaii, a road or street generally shares its name with no other street or road in the county — one prominent exception: “Old Mamalahoa Highway.”

Like a meandering river that changes course, leaving oxbows and old channels in its wake, Highway 19 seems to have left dozens of curvy cast-off bits of itself strewn along either side of its present course. Some of those byways are mere nameless, vegetation-choked ghosts of roads; others have crumbled into trails used only by the occasional rancher or hunter.

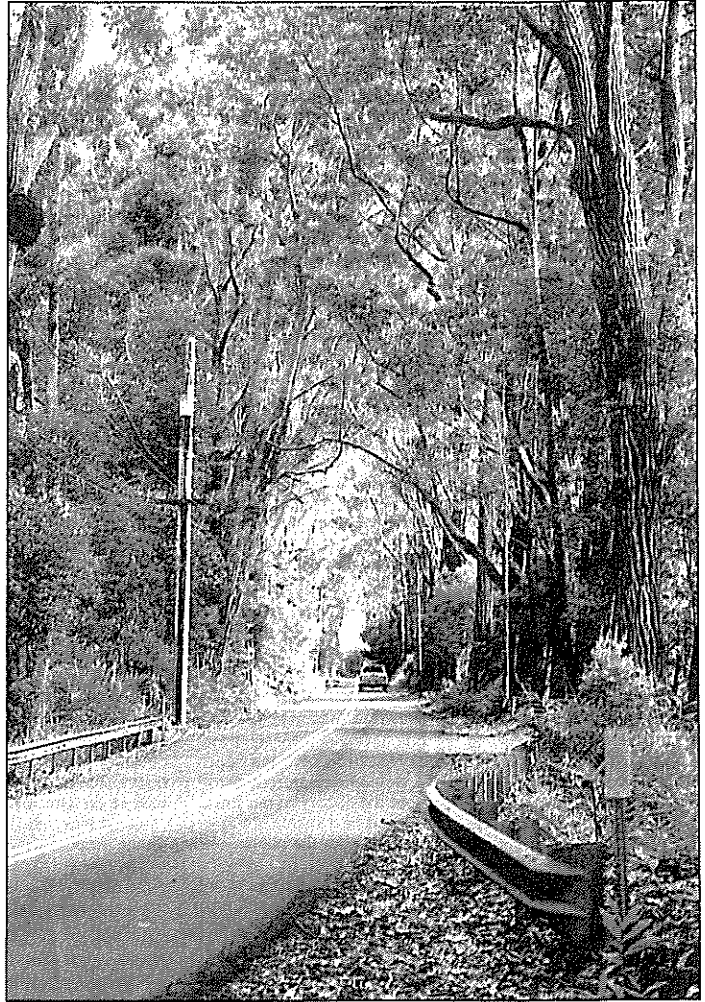
But a road is hard to kill. Even if it is replaced by a broader, straighter traffic channel, these curvy old byways often remain vital to a few farmers or ranchers or homeowners. Such roads-to-almost-nowhere may be remembered with chagrin by old-timers who recall two- or three-day journeys to reach Kona from Hilo. But ironically, those same roads are often prized for their scenic beauty. If the need to be in Waimea or Kona by a certain hour isn't urgent, these bits of lost highway offer some of the best drives on the island.

Among the longest continuous remaining sections of the old highway is the one that starts opposite Tex

Drive In above Honokaa, and then winds mauka for about 12½ miles through the rural uplands of Ahualoa, before descending again to the highway again at Mud Lane, just outside Waimea.

This section wasn't always continuous; its separate pieces were local-traffic-only until a bridge restoration project was started in 2001 to put the regional route back in business. Even today, this particular section of Old Mamalahoa Highway has a split personality. The first half, on the Honokaa side, is steep, winding, forested and shady, dominated by windbreaks of majestic eucalyptus — not the scrawny young trees of the plantations, but huge old trees, planted at least a couple of generations ago. The second half of the route crosses the wide-open rangelands of Mauna Kea.

The reuniting of the road may have been slowed somewhat by the fact that it was considered a “State Historic Highway,” so bridges along it can't just be rebuilt; they have to be restored in the same style as their 1920s-vintage predecessors. The best example is the 'Inoio Gulch Bridge, whose low concrete guardrails (which would be a car-smashing menace on a faster highway) are identical to those of dozens of other bridges on other snippets of road that nestle in deeper gulches in North Hilo and



ALAN McNARIE/Tribune-Herald

See AHUALOA Next Page Old eucalyptus trees overarch Old Mamalahoa Highway in Ahualoa.

pecializes in signature hand-
l cigars from the Domini-
public. As I'm not a cigar
r, I can't comment. For those
who are, the store carries the
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in the world, including A.
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n, Diamond Crown, Cuesta
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n indoor patio and seating for
nassive walk-in humididor and
vice bar, which specializes
ing exotic tropical cocktails.
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alked into a smoke shop, a
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rner of his mouth and ashes
to his not-so-clean shirt,
: “Yeah, waddaya need? We
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only two bits each.”

PAYING TRIBUTE

that time of year again
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r Convention at the Imperial
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ute artists from around the
y will gather to share tips and
ation on their trade.

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considered the premier gath-
for celebrity impersonators
atures meetings with various
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ake-up professionals and
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un and the price is right.

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Hamakua — except this bridge doesn't have a thick coating of moss, and the late inscribed in the concrete isn't 1920-something, but 2001.

Ironically, most of the bridges in this section of road don't look like Inoio Gulch Bridge at all. Their guardrails consisted of narrow concrete posts with wooden rails—and in most cases, the rails have long since rotted away, and the concrete pylons that held them sometimes tilt crazily, like the standing stones of some prehistoric monument.

Inoio Gulch itself is a mere dent in the earth, compared to its monstrous cousins on the Hamakua side. That, in a way, is typical of this road. The views, especially in the rolling ranch country, are sometimes sweeping, but they aren't as in-your-face spectacular as those along some other isle highways. This is a country of more subtle beauty — a quiet, bucolic charm.

Although Ahualoa appears as a dot on road maps, as if it's a town, it's almost totally rural; the only non-agricultural commercial establishment on the entire byway is a B&B called, accurately, The Log Cabin, which rents its five rooms for \$59 to \$69 plus tax. Though most of the paving is fairly recent, the road itself is pretty much the same width as when traffic consisted of farm wagons and Model Ts — and much of the countryside through which it winds is little changed from those days, as well.

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the glory of this place — and it makes writing a travel article about it a little dangerous, because simply seeking out such a place could endanger it. Those who read this article are urged to remember that this road isn't really here for them; its chief purpose is to serve residents along it, who are here because they value a quiet rural lifestyle. If the rest of us choose to venture up there, we need to honor those qualities. It's not only dangerous to speed on this narrow strip of pavement, for example; it's boorish.

An even more perfect example of boorishness is what's happened to the lava tubes along the rangeland portion of the road. Several guidebooks have reported them. They yawn invitingly along the roadside; some hold the remnants of ancient stone walls. The very presence of those walls would have warned akamai visitors that these caves may have had sacred uses and are best left alone. But the caves have been badly vandalized; some have been choked with trash,



ALAN McNARIE/Tribune-Herald

Sunlight and clouds dapple the rangeland along the Old Mamalahoa Highway near Waimea.

chiefly cans and bottles. One cave even has the rotting remains of a couch left just inside the entrance.

So it's best to simply to admire the caves from outside, and perhaps take a picture of their fern-lined mouths. What's inside is only saddening and enraging, and

perhaps an object lesson in what a visitor doesn't want to be remembered for.

It's indicative of the nature of this road that, with its almost-nonexistent shoulders and many curves, there are few places where one can pull over and stop safely. What Old Mamalahoa Highway has

to offer — this one, and just about any other Old Mamalahoa Highway as well — can be savored without ever getting out of the car. It's a gift that the byway gives only to those who can take it on its own terms: by slowing down to its Model-T speeds, absorbing the scenery that would

otherwise zip by, and giving up, for a while, that ever-present modern sense that we need to get somewhere else as soon as possible.

The only reason to drive a lost highway is to get lost for awhile, oneself — to enjoy the travel and forget the destination.

LENNY From B1

and-a-half hours. Nice way to see the city. I should know as I spent five years in London, much of that riding buses.

WONDERFUL CELINE

Before I forget, I went to see Celine Dion the other night. First time since she opened and I gotta tell ya, it was wonderful. A lot of entertainers, both in Las Vegas shows and on television, love to spoof her, but she puts on one helluva show. You don't

Sept. 11. Cutler said he will soon have a new location for the Hall of Fame. Let's hope so. Some fascinating stuff about the history of our town. It would be a shame not to preserve it for the public.

CELEBRASIAN GALA

Now for my Culture Corner: The Las Vegas Art Museum is holding its sixth annual Asian Art Now exhibition featuring a wide variety of contemporary Asian art. Also

Ave., and will continue there through July 24. My only question is: What the hell does Canadian photographs have to do with Asian art?

Good luck and I'll see you on the Strip.

Len Butcher is a columnist for the Las Vegas Review-Journal. His column appears each Sunday in the Tribune-Herald's Travel section. If you have a question or a Las Vegas experience you would like to share with Lenny, please e-mail him at lennylv@cox.net. Include your full name and the town where you live.

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