

HAWAII UN-CRUIISING



DAVID REETHAM / ALAMY



'Talk story' with colorful characters, snorkel at night among monster manta rays, and paddle an outrigger canoe on this off-the-beaten-path 'un-cruise' from Lanai to the Big Island.

JANICE MUCALOV



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THE MAMMOTH RAYS glide up from the inky depths, one by one. Black wings flapping like Dracula's cape and cavernous mouths gaping open, they rise to within inches of my snorkel mask.

"Don't move," I will myself.

My brain registers – they won't hit me. Sure enough, with precision timing, the rays arc backwards at the last moment in a graceful back flip, showing off their creamy white bellies before swooping back down.

Who the performers are in this underwater manta ballet, I can't tell. "They have names like Rachel Ray and Sugar Ray and Stevie Ray," our snorkel guide with Kona Diving Company, Katie Gaab, had told us earlier. "You can identify them by the black tattoo-like markings on their underbellies." XRay, for example, has a big black 'X' on her chest. I'm too gobsmacked by the whole cast to scrutinize individual tattoos.

What does stick in my mind is Katie saying: "They have no stingers." I can see they also have no teeth – just rows of harmless, internal, radiator-like gills sucking in clouds of twinkling plankton.

We're in aptly-named Manta Heaven and the Big Island of Hawaii's famous night snorkel and dive is a surreal experience. Divers sit 40 feet beneath the water's surface, shining flashlights upward. Snorkelers float on top, hanging onto surfboard-like contraptions with spotlights shining down. The light attracts plankton, which in turn attracts the manta rays who put on a swirling, twirling, whirling show of a lifetime as they feed. Silver swarms of darting Hawaiian flagtail fish add to the dream-like scene.

It's a fitting finale to our one-week Hawaiian cruise – or more accurately, 'un-cruise' – aboard the *Safari Explorer*.

The antithesis of a traditional cruise on a large ship, this 36-guest yacht takes us on an off-the-beaten-path exploration of Hawaii. Snorkeling at night with the mantas is probably the most 'touristy' of our excursions, as it's a popular activity on the Big Island.

The practical little vessel visits secluded bays off the Big Island, Lanai, Maui and Molokai between November and April. Safety is top-of-mind, and the crew members expertly help guests of all ages clamber from the ship into the small boats used to go ashore or for water activities. We're in or on the water a lot. The ship carries kayaks and stand-up paddle boards for our complimentary use whenever we're at anchor and the itinerary has us snorkeling with green sea turtles off Maui and ogling sea caves and lava tubes on a high-speed zodiac ride along the Big Island's volcanic coast.

Left: The spectacular sea cliffs on the north shore of Molokai.

Above left: Diving with Hawaii's harmless manta rays.

Above right: Whale watching aboard Safari Explorer.



TEBOR BOGNAR / ALAMY



LEE FOSTER / ALAMY



MARKA JOHNSON / ALAMY

Father Damien mosaic at Saint Francis Church, Kalaupapa National Historical Park in Molokai.

Mule ride from the cliff tops down to the leper colony at Kalaupapa.

Trying out a traditional outrigger canoe.

Auntie Snookie blows into a conch shell.



The only way to get from the top of the world's highest sea cliffs to the isolated site of Father Damien's historic leper colony at Kalaupapa is by a guided mule ride or hike, down 26 very steep switchbacks.

When we're ashore, tours connect us with the Hawaiian culture and people. "You're going to meet some colorful characters," winks expedition leader Brock Munson. Auntie Snookie is one of them. On Molokai – where almost every woman is called 'auntie' – she greets us with a solemn chime by blowing into her conch shell. A spiritual elder with spiky grey hair, she's decked out in a green grass headband, oversized sunglasses and a cell phone clipped onto her pareo. We 'talk story' with her, learning that the moon goddess Hina gave birth to the island.

We also make leis at Molokai Plumerias farm. The delicate Aloha flower buds must be hand-picked off the rows of gnarled plumeria trees in the morning, assembled into leis then shipped in refrigerated coolers so they can be worn before the buds die two days later. It takes about 50 blossoms for a classic lei, and we each take turns painstakingly poking white, yellow and coral buds with a long needle and threading them together.

Proudly wearing our floral necklaces, we're walking advertisements for a perfume factory when we later stop at the Kalaupapa Peninsula look-out. The site overlooks the remote finger of land where one of the more tragic chapters in Hawaii's history unfolded. More than 8,000 sufferers of Hansen's disease (leprosy) were banished here between 1866 and 1969. In the early years, they lived without shelter or clean drinking water until Father Damien, a Catholic missionary priest from Belgium, arrived to minister to them and build a hospital. Sadly, he too succumbed to the disease after 16 years of selfless service.

Today, Kalaupapa is still home to some of the last remaining patients who chose to stay here. Once a year, a barge drops off supplies, and there's a small airstrip used for bringing in food. As an optional day-tour, guests of the *Safari Explorer* can visit the former mission, but the only way to get from the top of the world's highest sea cliffs to the flat peninsula below is by a guided mule ride or a hike, down 26 steep switchbacks.

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HAWAII UN-CRUISE



PETER WESR CAREY



ABOUT THE SAFARI EXPLORER

Operated by Un-Cruise Adventures, the Safari Explorer offers small ship adventure cruises, where the focus is on your adventures, not the ship:

- 18 smallish wood-paneled ocean-view rooms, most with outside doors and bathrooms with a toilet and shower only (the sink is in your room)
- Sun-deck with hot tub (minimal shade and used for kayak and paddleboard storage)
- No WiFi, mini-bars or swimming pool – the sea is your pool!
- DVD and book library
- Some larger staterooms have a bathroom with tub and all have a hairdryer, bathrobes, slippers, an iPod docking station, and a TV/DVD player
- Very friendly atmosphere – everyone meets for drinks and appetizers before dinner inside in the one-room library/lounge/dining room
- Dress is casual — shorts and flip-flops are fine for dinner
- 14 to 15 crew who multi-task
- Open ship and bridge policy and only a three-deck ship so it feels like you've chartered a yacht with friends
- Rates include premium wines and liquor, along with most excursions

We experience more Hawaiiana on Maui. The plan? We're to venture out in a large, old outrigger war canoe with a traditional crab claw sail. Nature sadly scuttles that arrangement by providing insufficient wind to power the vessel. Instead, we tour the 62-foot Mo'okiha O Pi'ilani being hand-built by the Maui Voyaging Society. Under construction for 17 years (a labor of love, funded by donation), the double-hulled vessel is a replica of an ancient transoceanic voyaging canoe used by early Polynesians to journey to Hawaii. Like their ancestors, the crew will navigate by the stars and sleep on deck when they eventually sail it to Tahiti.

Of course, we can't just look at an outrigger canoe. Sure enough, we're invited to jump in for a paddle out to sea. We're given 'tourist paddles' with large holes to make them easier for us. Even then, with a guide in front and back, it's still hard work, especially when we have to paddle furiously to get through the surf. A wave washes into our canoe and soaks us from our waists down. I end up as the designated bailer, but it's a losing battle – great fun, but I'd rather sail on the *Safari Explorer*.

We're welcomed back on board from excursions with a cocktail-of-the-day, such as spiked lemonade with fresh mint. Though compact, our rooms are comfy and the food is delicious. We sit at communal tables for healthy, made-to-order meals – from warm-from-the-oven cinnamon buns for an early riser's breakfast (okay, maybe that's not so healthy) to freshly-caught, simply grilled fish for dinner. A young, enthusiastic, all-American crew works tirelessly to make our cruise as enjoyable as possible and we even get treated to a free massage.

More activities are offered including a private luau just for us, hosted by Auntie Noelani, and a hike to a waterfall in Molokai's lush Halawa Valley. The experiences are authentic and show us a slice of Hawaii that many visitors don't see. Molokai, for example, is so undeveloped it doesn't even possess a traffic light! Still, the manta snorkel gets my vote as the highlight. If I'm ever lucky enough to watch an encore, I may even figure out who Lefty and Big Bertha and Vicky Ray actually are. ♦

IF YOU GO The Safari Explorer is operated by Un-Cruise Adventures, which specializes in small-ship adventure cruises. Come summer, the Safari Explorer moves from Hawaii to cruise Alaska. www.un-cruise.com.