

## Chapter 18



*Chris Newbert*

# Down the Tubes in Hawaii

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*Strike whilst the iron is hot.*

— *Rabelais*

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Crawling like a Piltdown man across the floor of a darkened cavern deep inside a Hawaiian volcano, I balanced myself with one hand and carried a flashlight with the other. Underwater photographer Chris Newbert, a National Park Service ranger, and I inched our way deeper into the miniature cave. My hard hat banged on the jagged ceiling. It didn't take long before my hands were ragged from the sharp lava on the floor.

We were exploring the Kilauea Volcano on the big island of Hawaii. A month later, that same volcano exploded with pent-up, molten fire.

During the summer of 1982, Chris Newbert invited me to Kona to explore the lava tubes of Kilauea with him. Lava tubes are veins through which the blood of the volcano flows. Were it not for these tunnels, much of the hot lava spilling from the heart of the volcano would not reach the sea. When a volcano erupts, the lava flows downward and seaward in molten rivers that move as fast as water. The sides of the rivers are the first to cool, forming ridges on both sides that build up until they meet at the top. Thus, an insulated channel is formed, allowing the lava to flow as long as the volcano continues to spill. Some lava tubes are seven miles long—immense subterranean caves that have subsequently developed their own biological, geological and cultural systems.

In the hot island sun, ancient Hawaiians discovered that the caverns of the

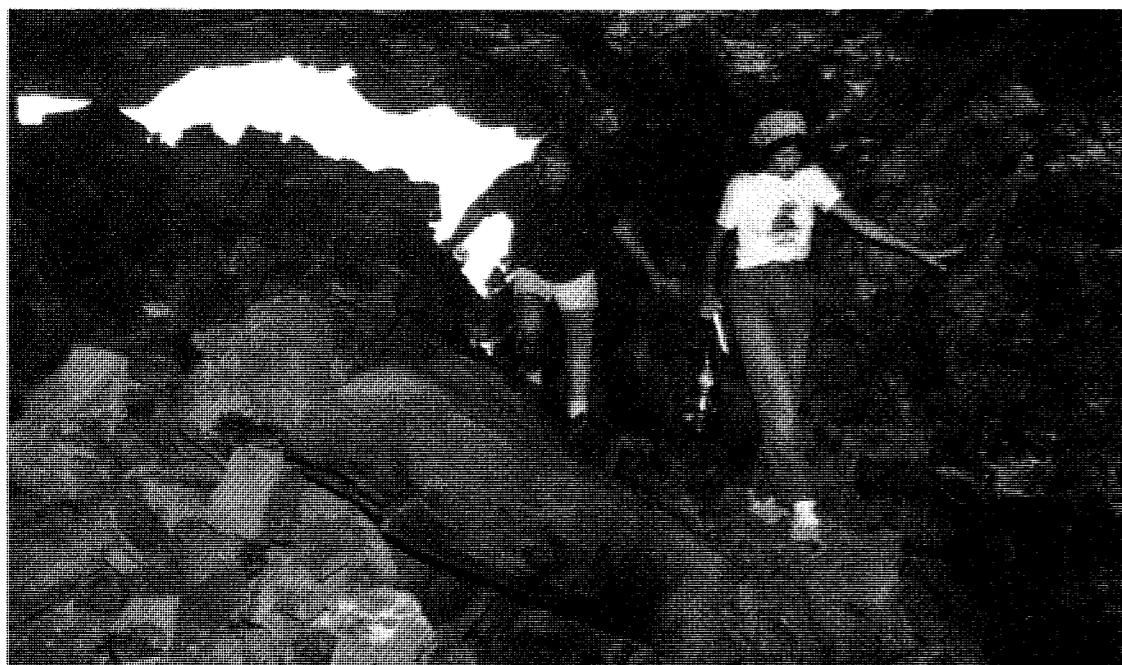


Photo by Chris Newbert

The entrance to the tubes requires a climb down a rocky path.

these entrances with additional rock so that only one man could pass through at a time. The narrow doorway kept an entire tribe from stampeding at one attack.

With a National Park Service ranger as our guide, Chris and I started our project by exploring a dark, volcanic tunnel near the top of Kilauea. The guide called the tunnel a "fresh one", since it had been formed in the most recent blowup. The tunnel was small, spread from the central core of the volcano and only three or four feet from the floor to the ceiling. The entrance is well-camouflaged in an enormous field of pillowy lava that crunched beneath our feet like spun glass.

Crawling inside this darkened cavern, I soon realized how sharp lava can be. In fact, I ripped the seat of my pants with the stuff.

There are two types of lava: a'a' and pahoehoe. A'a' (pronounced "ah-ah") feels like it sounds. As sharp as razors, it could also be called ouch-ouch. The other type of lava, pahoehoe (pronounced "pah-hoi-hoi") is smooth. Outside the cave I picked up a piece of the pahoehoe. It was glassy and interesting. I stuck it in my pocket.

The Park Service ranger proceeded to tell us a funny story about how the

Pele's lava. After the article had appeared, the *National Enquirer* received tons of lava chunks in the mail from readers who didn't know where else to send it.

When no one was looking, therefore, I slipped my little lava souvenir out of my pocket, carefully placed it back onto the enormous lava field, and told Madame Pele I was only kidding.

Working from the top of Kilauea, Chris and I explored the other lava chambers between the crater rim of the volcano and the sea. We heard about one that contained a freshwater pond, home for a species of aquatic animal found nowhere else in the world. The pond, we were told, is deep enough to scuba dive in.

Some lava tubes provided habitats for certain insects also found nowhere else on the planet, such as the big-eyed, one-eyed spider. Most of these insects are blind adaptations of their sighted insect cousins living outside in the world of light.

Some lava tubes empty out from cliffs into the sea, and one of these serves as a playground for children who climb into one end of the tube and jump out the other into the ocean below. The lava spills that made it to the seafloor exploded on contact with the water, creating subsea caverns where the marine animals of the night hide by day—squirrelfish, soldierfish, octopus and the regal slipper lobster.

The underwater lava tube Chris and I explored is about four miles south of Kona. Chris found it by locating its cinder cones near the edge of the sea. Outside the cave, the water was very clear, and I could see where the lava had first hit the sea. The stuff had cooled, dried and caked instantly. It had formed a series of big caves, at a depth of 40 feet.

In one cave, our lights illuminated the far corners of the cracks and ledges, where bright red squirrelfishes and soldierfishes (called menpachis) hung suspended, looking at us with their big black eyes.

In another underwater cave, we squeezed through the opening, our scuba tanks banging against the ceiling. An octopus took off, muddying the water. At the back of the cavern was a regal slipper lobster, a cave creature endemic to Hawaii and found mostly in the underwater lava tubes. Its head looks like a lobster tail and its tail looks like a lobster tail, so that the regal slipper lobster looks like it's swimming against itself at all times.

The most dramatic part of our volcanic spelunking centered on the burial caves—the lava tubes in which ancient Hawaiians placed their dead. Deep inside

CALL TO ADVENTURE

The underground cemetery showed that people were laid to rest within and without burial canoes.

A closer look illustrates that a burial site was used for more than one person (opposite, above).

One solitary figure still retained a necklace completely intact (opposite, below).

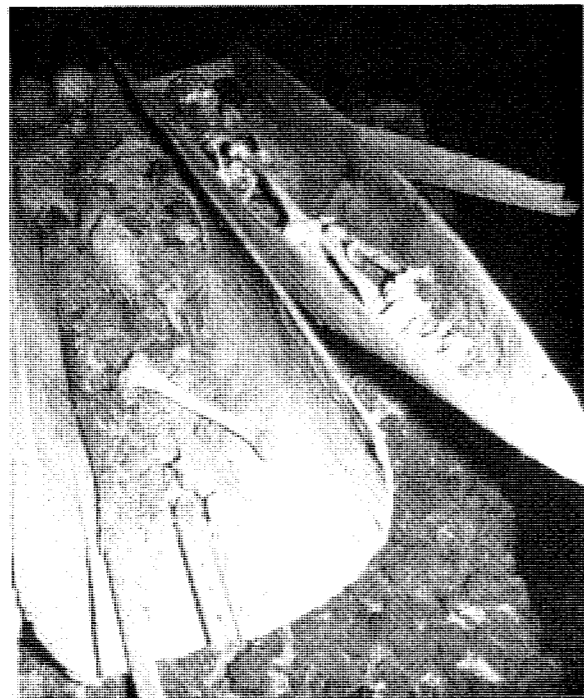


Photo by Chris Neubert

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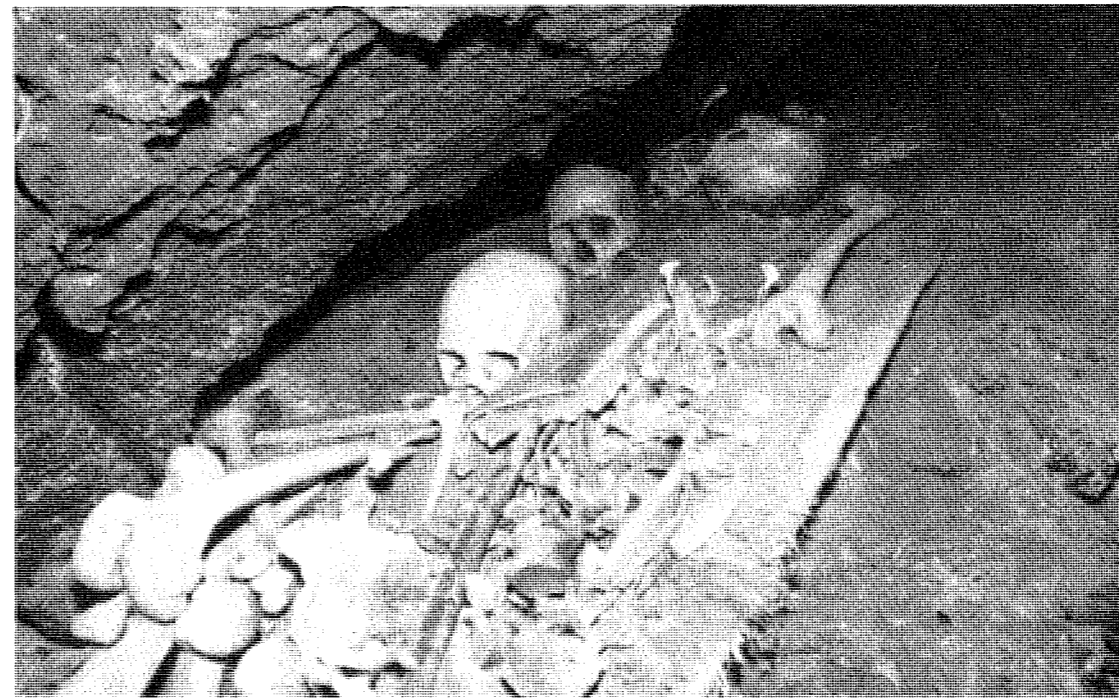


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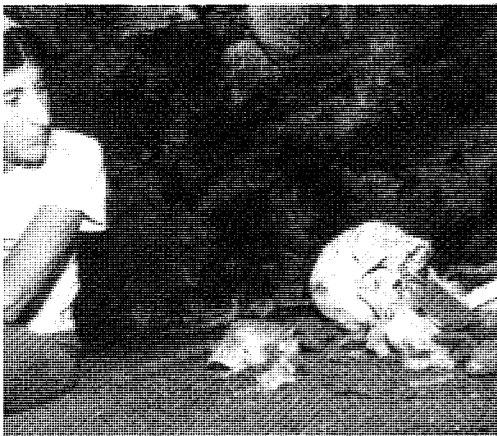


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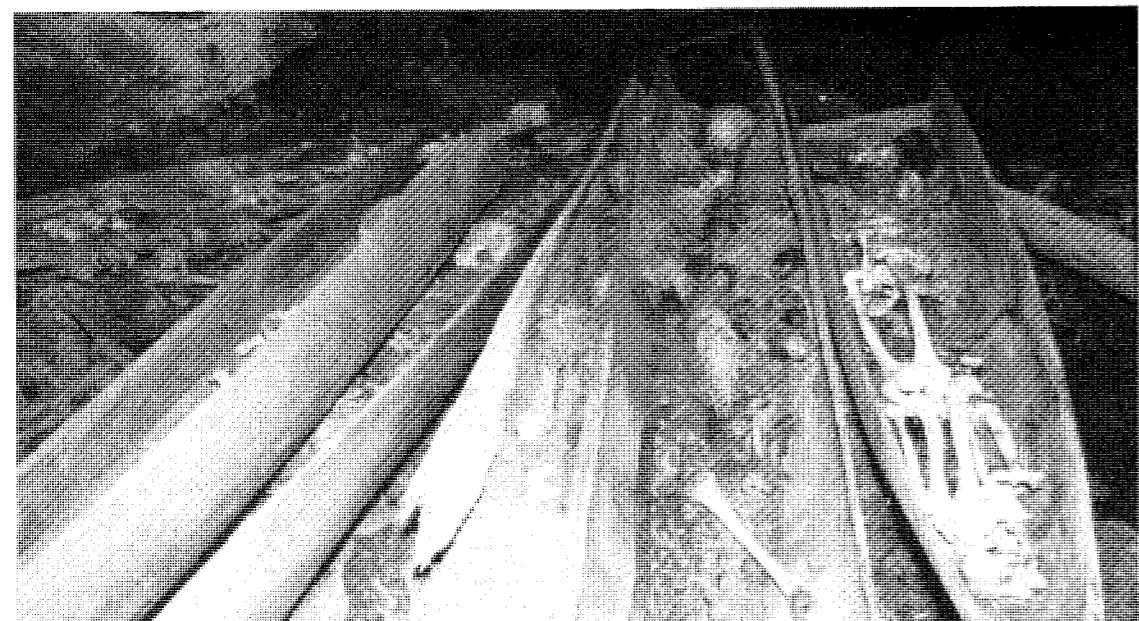


Photo by Chris Neubert

DOWN THE TUBES IN HAWAII

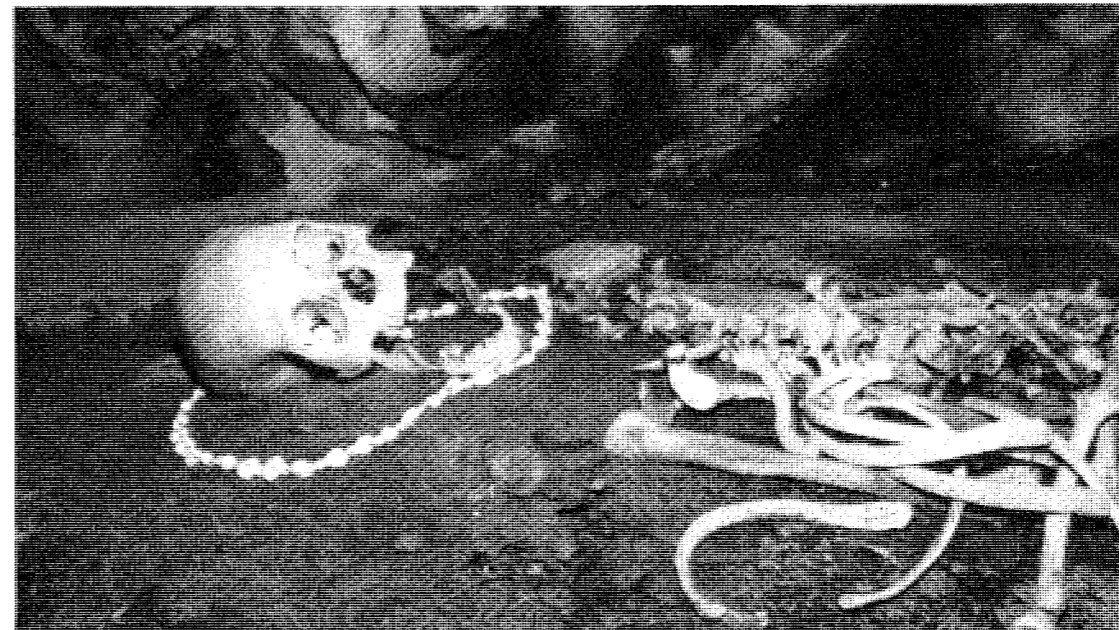


Photo by Chris Neubert

## CALL TO ADVENTURE

Our guide was a brave man for taking us there. In Hawaii, the burial caves are subject to heaps of superstition. Hawaiians, both ancient and modern, will not reveal such cave locations, because anyone who knows the whereabouts of such a cave is a “kahu”—a keeper of the cave. For a kahu to reveal a burial cave location means the punishment of death by the gods.

King Kamehameha I is buried in a lava tube somewhere on the island. No one, they say, knows where. If someone does know, he is taking his kahu responsibilities very seriously.

Our guide, an amateur archaeologist I’ll call “Gordon” (not his real name, because “Gordon” believes in the kahu curse), took us to “Cowboy Cave”. This burial cave was so named, he said, because one of the occupants was entombed wearing a cowboy hat, blue bandana and boots. Gordon figured the gods would smile on scientifically minded writers and photographers, however, so he took us to the burial site. It lies near a stretch of coast outside Kailua-Kona that is rimmed by an oddly straight row of palm trees.

The entrance of the cave looked different from the normal pile of lava rubble. The lava rocks seemed too regular, as if the doorway had been built up by ancient Hawaiians protecting themselves from warring neighbors. Just inside the door was an enormous cavern, cool and dark.

Gordon led us inside. The ceiling was at least 40 feet high, an eerie place underground. We walked to the back of the main room, turned our lights on and took a left down a side corridor. Another turn, and we were in a cavern not quite as large as the main hall. It was pitch black.

Shining his light on top of a natural rock shelf to his right, our archaeologist friend showed us the coffin that contained the cowboy skeleton, then went off on his own.

At this point, Chris began fiddling around with his cameras. I carefully perched myself on a ledge with four skeletons stretched skull-to-toebone behind me, and began to sketch where everything was. I looked at Chris, who was on his knees, photographing a skeleton on the floor. He had lit a Coleman lantern to photograph by. The lamp cast eerie shadows against the bumps that stuck out from the lava canopy 30 or 40 feet over our heads. It also created a black shadow behind the bone-white skull that remained in a fixed and permanent grin before Chris’s camera lens.

I suddenly saw us both from afar—two people taking pictures and sketching as if they were at a Sunday picnic. I let out a big laugh. The noise set Chris off, and

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he jumped out of his concentration with a yell. His yell set off a yell in me. Gordon came running. He thought we were in trouble.

No, no, no, we said. We got back to work.

I looked at the cowboy skeleton. Whoever that ghostly range-rider was, I could see he had been given a proper and decent burial. He was dressed to the spurs in his cowboy clothes and tucked away in an open coffin on a rock shelf, deep inside the cave.

On the ledge where I sat, there lay a woman with a shell lei around her neck and high heels on her feet. Another bony figure kept its boots by its feet. I drew everything I could see, trying to ignore the unbreathable stillness of the air inside that unventilated tomb.

In another burial cave the bodies had been placed in canoes for rapid transit to heaven. Usually there were favorite trinkets to accompany the departed, like shell leis or favorite clothes.

Chris and I never finished our documentary of the lava tubes, although we keep saying we will, someday, maybe when Kilauea calms down. He has been on a whirlwind tour of promotion for his enormously successful book, *Within a Rainbowed Sea*, which President Reagan presented to Japan’s Emperor Hirohito as a birthday present. I have been running around in circles on other assignments, still ripping my jeans.

That’s the way it is with adventure. You have to strike while the volcano is hot. There are many interesting opportunities in life that come your way all the time. If you let these go by without complete involvement, they suddenly become past history. Going back to anything is very difficult because you may miss what is coming next.

From the volcano experience, I’ve learned now to be thorough and quick when opportunities arise. I regret that Chris and I never finished our exploration of the lava tubes, but I believe that regret focuses too much on the past. As the famed writer Henry Miller once said: Regret, like guilt, is a waste of time.

### Suggested Reading

Christopher Newbert, *Within a Rainbowed Sea* (Beyond Words Publishing Company: Honolulu, Hawaii, 1984).