

# Face-to-Facemask With Colorful Sea Life

## Snorkelers Explore Marine Wonders Within Crater of Hawaii's Molokini Islet

By HILLARY HAUSER

MOLOKINI, Maui, Hawaii—A swarm of black surgeonfish jumped out of the water like a pack of piranhas to attack a piece of a bagel I'd thrown overboard. Right behind them came a gang of silvery-gray rudderfish intent on the scraps, and with this the sea erupted into fish mayhem.

Adventure I had just anchored inside the shallow, crescent-shaped Molokini crater, a submerged volcano off the coast of Maui, and I had thought the bagel would help to get the fish interested just before we went over the side with our snorkeling gear.

As it turned out, this was wasted energy. "Molo," as the locals call Molokini, is already a berserk ichthyological zoo. The fish are so accustomed to interacting with humans, they race to a boat the moment it pulls into the area. If anything, a snorkeler will spend more time shooing fish away than looking around to find them.

It was a bright June day last year and Brian Taylor, who owns Adventure I with his energetic wife, Bonnie, was busy ushering everyone into the water. In the 45 minutes it took us to cross from Maui's Maalaea Harbor to Molokini, he had outfitted 20 people—singles, couples, children, retirees—with snorkel equipment and given an enthusiastic demonstration of how to use it. But mostly he talked about the wonders of the sea off Maui, about the humpback whales they'd seen rolling around near the mouth of Maalaea Harbor the day before (an unusual sight that time of year), the ono and mahi they caught the day before that—and he gave out tantalizing hints about what everyone was going to Molokini to see: fish, fish and more fish. He told us to look out for Garbanzo, the moray eel with no teeth ("He'd starve if we didn't feed him!"), and a small white-tipped reef shark that occasionally cruised the area ("A pal, not to be feared").

A few passengers said they'd never been in the ocean at all, including one Southern Californian who said she liked swimming in her pool at home, but that the ocean always made her feel as though she'd "fall in and drown." For passengers who absolutely can't swim or who have no confidence in their ability to swim, the Taylors provide boogie boards so they can float on the surface while looking underwater with a face mask. They usually stick close by such people, taking them on more-or-less personal tours and reassuring them while pointing out interesting things to see. Brian Taylor worked 20 minutes with the woman who said the ocean made her feel like she'd drown. Everyone gets in the water, no matter what, because the experience is too good to miss.

We snorkelers stepped off into the water from the swim step at the Adventure I's stern and were immediately bombarded by fun-loving, bagel-eating surgeon and rudderfish. The surgeonfish, named for the sharp scalpels on each side of their tails, were the pushiest. They swarmed in tight circles, picking at pieces of food offered to them by the snorkelers and darting out of the huddle at the slightest sniff of food being passed around.



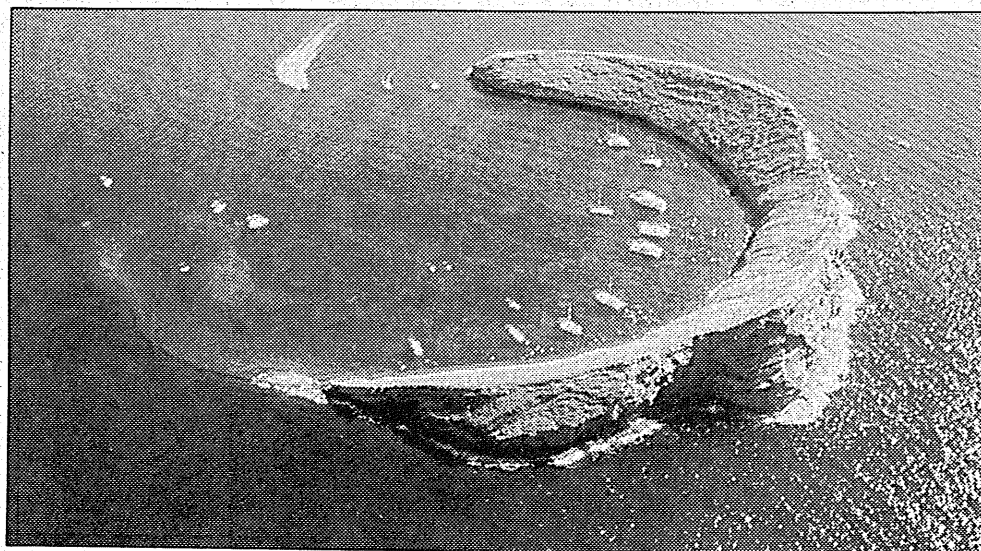
DOUGLAS PEEBLES

A visitor swimming with mask and snorkel has a close encounter with fish inhabiting the protected shallows of Molokini crater.

**As I floated, peering through my mask, a blue-green parrotfish ambled in to take a bite out of the reef, leaving teeth marks in the coral.**

The big, gray rudderfish, called *nenue* in Hawaiian, also milled about in tight groups, quick to move in at the sign of bread.

The other fishes of Molo seemed more content to eat what fish normally eat, which is not bagels. Flitting about the corals in 30 feet of water were several species of butterflyfish, swimming in pairs just like butterflies do. The ones I saw at Molo were typical of butterfly fish around the world—predominantly yellow and white with black markings. One, called a masked butterfly fish because of its black eye mask, resembled a raccoon. Nearby, a pair of long-nosed butterflyfish poked their thin, forceps-like beaks into cracks in the reef in search of algae and tiny sponges. As I floated motionless on top of the water, peering through the round window of my mask, a school of yellow, white and magenta wrasses darted through the scene; their cigar-shaped bodies starting and stopping on proverbial dimes, and a big blue-green parrotfish ambled in to take a bite out of the reef, leaving big teeth



DOUGLAS PEEBLES

The eroded tip of an extinct volcano forms a crescent above the ocean's surface.

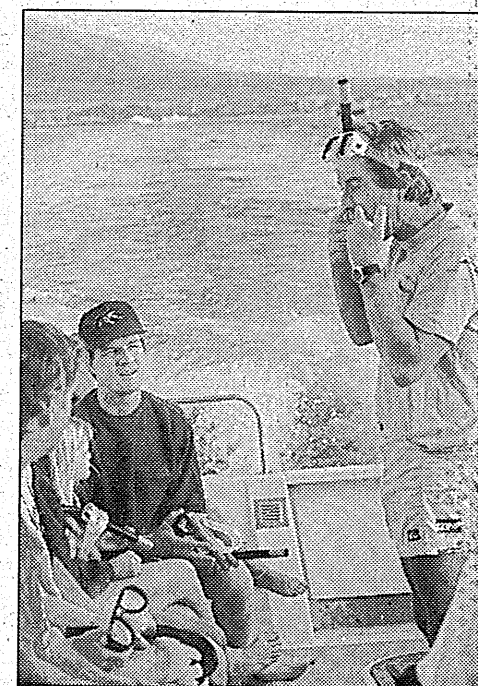
marks in the coral.

For me, the best part of the experience was the swarm of lemon butterfly fish that were so intent on my handout of crackers, they stayed with me persistently in the greatest display of hope I've ever seen. They made me feel like an underwater Pied Piper, that I could charm them to follow me anywhere, even home.

Molokini, meaning "many ties," is a little bubble of a volcanic ruin, a partially submerged caldera on the southwest slope

of magnificent Haleakala ("House of the Sun"), the inactive volcano that towers 10,025 feet over the island of Maui. The once-fiery, violent Haleakala erupted repeatedly in centuries past, spewing lava into the sea in molten rivers that formed lava tubes on the way down. During one such eruption, Molokini burst forth in a release of pent-up earth to form its own little crater.

While Haleakala is crowned at its summit by the largest of all extinct craters—20



HILLARY HAUSER

En route, passengers take instruction.

miles around and 2,720 feet deep—Molokini is not even 1,000 feet across, a small, steep-sided cone that looks crescent-shaped from the air because one eroded portion is submerged. The crescent side sticks up about 160 feet above the water. Inside the crater, the sea is protected and shallow, while on its outside, the crater plunges in a steep series of ledges.

The day before the Adventure I snorkeling trip, my husband, Jim, and I had made a scuba dive along the outside surface of the crater. We took our own boat, which we keep on Maui—a small inboard-motor Radon Craft, a smaller version of the boat Jim uses at home to dive commercially for abalone and sea urchin. Experienced divers, we anchored just inside the crater, swam out of the shallow inner waters and over the outside ledge, then dove down the slope to about 150 feet. Even at that depth, the tropical ocean was a clear blue and visibility was such that we could see other ledges below us, one at 200 feet, and below that, another one partially obscured in a deep cobalt haze. Steps and ledges . . . it was like being on a giant staircase to the bottom of the planet.

But just as it is in any ocean, the best underwater views at Molokini are in the shallows, where sunlight reigns. As on land, sunlight encourages the growth of marine plants, which are food for the fish and invertebrates—and where home and food is, the fish congregate. Another big draw for snorkelers is the acres of corals inside the crater that provide home and shelter for the zillions of kaleidoscopic fish.

Coral reefs are composed of the delicate calcified structures of tiny anemone-like creatures, which slowly but surely build upon each other, generation after generation. Because corals are delicate, the 30 boat owners running snorkel charters from Maui to Molokini use permanent underwater moorings to tie up, and permanent

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# HAWAII: Snorkeling at Molokini

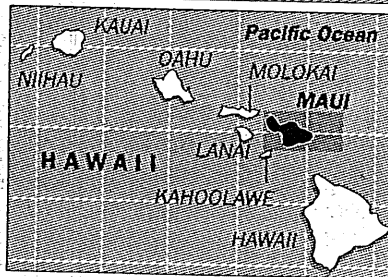
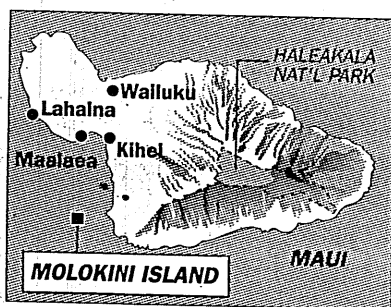
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surface moorings have been installed for public use. That way, anchors are not thrown overboard repeatedly, smashing up corals that have taken 100 years to grow.

Despite such measures, there is concern about so many people swimming about the corals of Molokini; an estimated 500 to 600 snorkelers visit the crater each day. Some marine scientists say that coral reefs have a carrying capacity: Just as pastureland can support only so many cows, a reef can hold just so many divers without damage.

Charter operators who visit the crater keep a close watch on the actions of their passengers to make sure that corals are not being stepped on, and there is a current move to limit the number of boats operating at Molokini to those already in business. So far, the precautions seem to be working. The fish and corals and marine life of Molokini appear to be thriving.

The charter boats that take snorkelers to Molo vary from Zodiacs with outboards to 58-foot catamarans and the 92-foot Prince Kuhio, a luxury cruiser. Adventure I is a sturdy 36-foot Radon snorkel boat with wide deck space and a 12-foot-wide swim step. Typical trips are half-day—leaving Ma-



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laea Harbor at 7:30 a.m., not considered a hardship hour for a sea trip, and returning by noon. That leaves you the rest of the day to do whatever you like to do in Hawaii.

The Taylors, who have been running trips to Molokini since 1985, offer a continental breakfast on the way out (coffee, fruit tray and bagels with cream cheese), and a lunch of sandwiches, chips, sodas, beer and wine. Adventure I provides snorkeling equipment, flotation devices and free use of

underwater cameras, including film (\$5 for 12 pictures). You can basically just go aboard the boat in your bathing suit. Trips are limited to 25 passengers, a relaxing alternative to the larger boats that carry many more on their trips to the crater.

Returning to the harbor, passengers can join the Taylors in trolling for big gamefish. It is not unusual to hook marlin, mahi-mahi or ono—all great-eating, highly prized Hawaiian fishes that cause a big to-do when they're brought in. Boats coming into Maalaea Harbor with such a catch fly appropriate flags to announce their victories.

From December through May, humpback whales come into the channel to calve before moving north. I have been on my way to Molokini aboard the Adventure I more than once when giant, graceful humpbacks gave us all a big show. On one trip, a mother and calf lolled about together for the longest time not far from the harbor, and on another, a couple of whales breached and splashed and dived repeatedly while we all went crazy with our cameras.

Amid another controversy—that of whale-watching boats disrupting whales' normal existence—the Taylors' policy has always been to view the giant mammals from whatever course the boat is already on. They never change their direction of travel when a whale is spotted, a practice that lets the watched whale go about its business undisturbed.

Perhaps the best part of a trip to Molokini is the experience of Maui that one cannot get by staying on the beach or touring the island by car. Crossing the Alalakeiki Channel from Maalaea Harbor to Molokini, you get a closer view of Kahoolawe, an arid island used by the Navy as a target range. You pass the busy, populated coastline of Kihei, the luxury hotels of Wailea and thorn-tree studded Makena Beach, with Haleakala hovering over all like an ancient, now-benevolent goddess.

You look at all this and you get a feel for Maui's place in the ocean and a sense of the land itself.

*Hauser is a free-lance writer based in Summerland, Calif.*

## GUIDEBOOK

### Snorkeling Molokini

**Getting there:** Once in Maui, you can travel to Maalaea Harbor directly from the airport. Take Highway 380 south through cane fields; at the first (Wailuku/Lahaina) junction, take Highway 30 toward Lahaina—you'll see Maalaea Harbor on the left.

**Booking a trip to Molokini:** Adventure I is berthed at Dock 76 in Maalaea Harbor. Trips leave at 7:30 a.m. (passengers should arrive by 7 a.m.) and return at noon. Price is \$50 for adults and \$40 for children to age 12, and includes continental breakfast and lunch. Reservations: (808) 242-7683.

Other Molokini charters out of Maalaea Harbor include Mahana Nai'a Snorkel and Sail, a 58-foot catamaran (adults \$57, children \$40; 808-871-8636), and Prince Kuhio, a 92-foot luxury cruise vessel (adults \$75, children \$40; 808-242-8777).

The Maalaea Activities Center, a booking/information agency in the harbor, books space on all of the harbor's charter vessels for snorkeling, deep-sea fishing and dinner cruises to Molokini; (808) 242-6982.

**For more information:** Contact the Hawaii Visitors Bureau, 3440 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 610, Los Angeles 90010, (213) 385-5301.

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