

Hawaii's Niihau off limits, mysterious for years

By Claudia Capos

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

NIIHAU, Hawaii — Our pilot, Dana Rosendal, revved the twin engines of the Agusta 109A helicopter and taxied 30 yards down the runway of the Port Allen Airport on the southern shore of Kauai. Seconds later, the powerful rotors lifted the aircraft and its five passengers off the ground with stomach-wrenching force, and Rosendal's voice crackled over our headsets: "Next stop, Niihau." We were headed for Hawaii's Forbidden Island.

Few people, even Hawaiians from other islands, have ever set foot on Niihau. Noi Igou, the housekeeper at our rental beach bungalow in Kauai, cringed at the mere mention of the name and whispered: "You cannot go there. It is forbidden."

Niihau's reputation is well deserved. For nearly a century and a half, the privately owned, 70-square-mile island, located 17 miles southwest of Kauai, has been off limits to outsiders, earning it the "Forbidden" moniker. Elizabeth McHutchison Sinclair purchased the island, along with parts of Kauai, for \$10,000 in gold from King Kamehameha V in 1864 and vowed to preserve its traditional Hawaiian culture and language. Her descendants, the Robinson family, have continued to honor that commitment.

Sinclair's grandson, Aubrey Robinson, closed Niihau to visitors in 1915, and his grandsons, Keith and Bruce Robinson, the current co-owners, have shielded the remaining 170 native inhabitants from the encroachment of modern technology and conveniences. Islanders still hunt and fish with knives and spears and speak their original Niihau dialect. Village elders handle most day-to-day affairs. The only way to reach Niihau legally is by taking one of the half-day helicopter tours or daylong hunting safaris operated by the Robinsons to offset the cost of providing emergency medical transport for sick islanders. Any contact between tourists and native Niihauans is prohibited.

The Robinsons still own a vast tract of land in southwest Kauai, as well as Niihau, and some aspects of their real-life saga bear a striking resemblance to the plot of the movie "The Descendants," which was filmed at locations around Kauai.

We ran into Keith Robinson, a true descendant, by chance at the Niihau Helicopters office in Kaunakani, Kauai, before our scheduled flight. "Niihau has quite a bit of history,"



CLAUDIA CAPOS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Seen from Kauai's western shore, Niihau appears almost ethereal on the horizon. The island is privately owned, a haven for Niihau natives, who can have no contact with tourists, and a site for US military testing.

said Robinson, 71. "It may not look like much. We maintain a low profile and try to keep life as simple and uncomplicated as possible."

The preservation of native culture and wildlife is not the only reason Niihau is kept under wraps. Despite its image as a pristine island where "time has stood still," Niihau has had a long-standing, little-publicized relationship with the US military, which has conducted special-operations training and research and development on top-secret military defense systems here.

"We're doing national defense work that's critical to our country," said Robinson, who carried his signature green hardhat tucked under his arm. "Technology for the DEW [Distant Early Warning] Line was developed secretly [during the Cold War era] on Niihau, and now we're considering putting in a small airstrip for the [Air Force's] C-17 short takeoff, heavy-lift program."

The Navy currently maintains a radar-surveillance installation on Paniau Ridge, the island's highest point (1,280 feet), and stages practice maneuvers in the Kaulakahi Channel separating Niihau from the Pacific Missile Range Facility-Barking Sands base on western Kauai. It's not uncommon, Robinson added, to look up into the night sky and observe the bril-

liant collision of an antiballistic missile with its test target. Income from military contracting activities provides steady revenue to support the island's residents and upkeep.

Robinson, a noted conservationist, has created a safe haven for many of Hawaii's endangered species. His Highland Scottish ancestry, strict King James Bible-based religious upbringing, and prowess as a military sharpshooter in the National Guard provided the inspiration for his book, "Approach to Armageddon" (Destiny Publishers, 2011).

Robinson's revelations whetted our appetite for adventure, as we flew west across the 5,200-foot-deep Kaulakahi Channel, doing airborne pirouettes to watch humpback whales in the choppy water below. A fickle south wind made the flight unusually bumpy and blanketed the horizon with mist. "There's an island out there, I swear," Rosendal said over his microphone. And then, magically, Niihau appeared in front of us.

For the next 20 minutes, we were treated to a whirlwind aerial tour of Hawaii's smallest inhabited island. Lying in the "rain shadow" of palm-crowned Kauai, Niihau is mostly low and arid, with sparse grass and shrubs and two parched lakebeds. The helicopter skimmed over scraggy kiawe trees that clung stubbornly to red-tinged

volcanic soil. The whirl of its engines flushed jet-black Polynesian boars and mottled Merino sheep from the underbrush. Along the western shore, Rosendal pointed out Kamalino Bay where Captain James Cook landed in 1778, but carefully skirted Bruce Robinson's family farmstead and a scattering of single-story island cottages in Puuwai village.

Rosendal landed the helicopter on a flat patch of ground along the northern coastline, overlooking nearby Lehua Island, a state seabird sanctuary. We scrambled out, feeling like modern-day Robinson Crusoes. We walked 100 yards to an open-air pavilion that provided protection from the hot tropical sun. But Niihau's hospitality ended there. This oasis of calm and tranquillity had no toilets, changing facilities, running water, or food.

"Most of our visitors are sophisticated travelers who want to see new terrain and do something really different," Rosendal explained, as he set down a cooler filled with sandwiches, canned guava juice, and macadamianut cookies. "The forbidden concept only makes the island that much more attractive. It's a good place to hang out and relax."

Nancy Kelley of Rocklin, Calif., said curiosity had prompted her to book the helicopter tour for her and her husband, Dick. "Since the island is

If you go . . .

Niihau Helicopters offers half-day excursions at \$385 per person, with a minimum of five passengers per tour. Flights leave from the Port Allen Airport on Kauai. For details, go to www.niihau.us/heli.html.

forbidden, we're taking a rare opportunity to come over," she said.

While one member of our group swam in the cool, crystalline water, Doug and I joined Nancy on the beach to collect pupu, tiny shells that wash ashore during the winter months. Niihau women use momi, laiki, and kahelelani shells to create intricate earrings, bracelets, and leis, which are sold in gift shops around Kauai. Some elaborate leis are valued at thousands of dollars. During our beachcombing, a group of islanders drove up to the helicopter in a 1950s-era Dodge weapons carrier. Their surprise appearance caught Rosendal off guard, and he quickly strolled out to the landing area to talk. They soon drove off.

After a break for lunch, Doug and I set off in search of native wildlife and African big game animals brought to the island by the Robinsons. Niihau's lava-ledge-fringed shoreline and secluded beaches are favorite haunts of endangered Hawaiian monk seals, and we soon spotted some snoozing on the sand.

Heading back into the kiawe trees, whose long spines pierced the soles of our shoes, we surprised a mother boar and seven or eight babies frolicking at the waterhole inside an abandoned cattle corral. With high-pitched squeals, they scampered away into the trees. One heavy-set boar stood his ground, glowering at us from the brush. We moved quickly back toward the helicopter, where two albatrosses were shrieking and bobbing their heads in a bizarre mating ritual.

We left Niihau late that afternoon and Rosendal made one final sweep of the terrain to look for eland, an elusive, fleet-footed African antelope. As the island receded into the blue haze, we recalled Robinson's earlier comment about his inherited island stewardship. "The world is becoming increasingly turbulent and chaotic," he had said. "No part of the globe is exempt, and Niihau is caught in the middle."

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The energy to reinvent great allure

►CHILE

Continued from Page M1

local pride that Chile's first stock exchange was erected here, not in Santiago.

With prosperity, Valparaíso expanded upward from a narrow coastal plain, scaling a series of cerro hillsides that form a natural amphitheater above the Pacific shoreline. On sinuous cobbled streets, the wealthy erected ornate villas, each jostling with its neighbor for the better ocean view.

Even today, multicolored houses of clapboard and corrugated iron — materials flexible enough to withstand frequent earthquakes — twist with the contours up gulleys and down ravines. In places, the hills are so steep that footpaths resemble staircases; in others, they give way entirely to diminutive funicular railways, or ascensores, whose tiny wooden cabins and clanking machinery were built more than a century ago.

The fall, when it came, was abrupt. In 1906, a powerful earthquake devastated the port, in four tumultuous minutes killing 4,000 and injuring five times as many. Eight years later, when the opening of the Panama Canal effectively closed the Magellan Strait shipping route, the banks closed shop and the businessmen left town.

At first, decline seemed quaint. Artists and bohemians arrived, turning warehouses into ateliers and investing the forlorn port with the kind of whimsical charm that drew Neruda (1904-73) to breezy Cerro Bellavista in 1959. After stuffing his chaotic house with antiques, the romantic poet even penned odes to the scruffiness he found outdoors, delighting in a trash-strewn staircase or a housewife's clothes hung haphazardly to dry.

Walls of graffiti became part of the city's aspect, particularly after Catholic University art students painted 20 abstract murals on Cerro Bellavista's staircases, forming the Museo a Cielo Abierto, or Open-air Museum.

Even during Chile's 1973-90 mili-



COLIN BARRACLOUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rising from a narrow Pacific coastal plain, prosperous 19th-century Valparaíso built upward on hills that formed a natural amphitheater.

tary dictatorship, Valparaíso cultivated a reputation as an artsy enclave, its dirty stairways symbolizing a kind of smudged romance.

But decline soon turned to decay. The twisting alleyways became clogged with trash, the abandoned mansions became a haven for addicts and thieves. The middle classes fled, taking their economic activity and tax contributions with them, leaving a financing burden no mayor could fix. "It's quite simple," the current mayor, Jorge Castro, told me. "Valparaíso is a city without income."

Infested by rats, consumed by termites, racked by earthquakes, and burned by one of the highest arson rates in Chile, the city's destruction was almost biblical in its theatricality. "Valparaíso burns easily," a theater director said. "Things fall down, things collapse."

In 2003, when UNESCO added Valparaíso to its World Heritage list, the decision seemed aimed more at kick-starting its recovery than rewarding local authorities for its preservation.

Spurred by the listing, Chile's national government decided to act. In 2006, after securing funding from the Inter-American Development Bank, it set up the \$73 million Valparaíso Recovery and Urban Development Program to overcome the city's worst ills.

Over six years, the program has bought and restored landmark build-

ings, including the gloriously eclectic Palacio Baburizza and the art museum it contains. It has repainted private homes, installed street lighting, renewed paving, modernized trash collection, and refitted the scruffiest ascensores. It has even sterilized 18,000 stray dogs.

Yet such achievements have met with a chorus of disapproval. Some locals simply hoped for more widespread or profound change after investing "70 years of dreams in just one project," as Castro put it.

Others — who relish the city's seamier side — remained obstinately opposed to renewal. (The fiercest rejectionists counterattacked immediately, vandalizing newly restored ascensores within days of their unveiling.) "There are people who believe that the essence of Valparaíso is its scuzziness," architect Antonio Menéndez said. "I don't think they're in the majority."

The loudest protests have come from preservation-minded residents' associations. So keen are they to protect every centennial nail and historic doorknob, complain architects involved in the city's renewal, that many historic buildings are likely to collapse before they can be rescued.

"Surely it's better to take some action rather than let the city fall into complete ruin?" said architect Mathias Klotz, who recently transformed a

If you go . . .

What to do

Museo de Bellas Artes de Valparaíso

Palacio Baburizza

Paseo Yugoslavo 166, Cerro Alegre

011-56-32-225-2332

The city's fine arts museum reopened this year after a 15-year hiatus. Highlights include Chilean oils portraying Valparaíso's 19th-century golden era.

Museo La Sebastiana

Ricardo de Ferrari 692

Cerro Bellavista

011-56-32-225-6606

www.fundacionneruda.org

Poet Pablo Neruda's whimsical house. Self-guided walking tour available.

Tue-Sun 10 a.m.-6 p.m., \$7.

Where to stay

Hotel Palacio Astoreca

Montealegre 149, Cerro Alegre

011-56-32-327-7700

www.hotelpalacioastoreca.com

A heritage building, transformed in

near-derelect Victorian-style mansion in Cerro Alegre into the Hotel Palacio Astoreca, its stucco-and-brick exterior newly washed in a startling red.

For the foreign visitor, the citywide spruce-up has been an unmitigated success. The reopening of the Fine Arts Museum in the Palacio Baburizza after its 15-year closure is huge, along with the revitalization of the adjacent Paseo Yugoslavo promenade and other nearby streets, with their antiques stores and artists' studios.

"The conversion of Cerros Concepción and Alegre into a touristy, gentrified area is a hugely positive development," said Matt Ridgway, a British property developer who restored a traditional Cerro Alegre townhouse. "Without these changes, many of the historic mansions would simply have fallen down."

Refreshed public space has turned a simple stroll between cerros into a walker's delight, the joy of discovery compounded, too, by the streets' maze-like ability to confuse.

Follow an apparently blind alley and chances are it will open to a row of stucco-and-brick Victorian-style cottages, perfectly ordered and maintained, their facades washed in vi-

2012 into a 23-room boutique hotel. Doubles from \$230.

Hotel Ultramar

Pérez 173, Cerro Cárce

011-56-32-221-0000

www.hotelultramar.com

A century-old house up on Prison Hill, close to the new Parque Cultural de Valparaíso, with spectacular Pacific views. Doubles from \$112.

Where to eat

Malandrino

Almirante Montt 532, Cerro Alegre

011-56-32-318-4827

www.malandrino.cl

Fresh, seasonal ingredients and a wood-burning oven make pizzas here exceptional. \$5-\$15.

Pasta e Vino

Templeman 352, Cerro Concepción

011-56-32-249-6187

www.pastaevinoristorante.cl

Upscale Italian restaurant set in a stylish loft. \$9-\$15.

brant shades.

Skip down a winding staircase and a sliver of glinting ocean could flick into view in a gap between townhouses or a dazzling burst of orange materialize as a patch of flowering strelitzia in the tiniest of cliff-top gardens.

Urban renewal is becoming visible even outside the city's historic districts. Fresh paint is evident on private homes in less salubrious districts like Barrio Puerto and Cerro Artillería. On formerly down-at-heel Cerro Yungay, several clusters of loft-style apartment blocks aimed at well-to-do urban youth have sprung up.

And on Cerro Cárce, the city's former prison has reopened as a world-class rehearsal and performance space for dance, music, and theater.

Valparaíso's long-term future may remain uncertain, but for the first time in decades, the city seems able to breathe. "The Valparaíso of the past, a city more prosperous than the country's capital, is dead," Jacobo Ahumada, the city's culture director, said. "We must search once again to find what we want to be."

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