

April 11, 2010----

MAUI, Hawaii--I'll never make all the scenic drives this beautiful world has to offer.

My brakes are squeaking and my lights are dim.

But I'll always remember how the mountains of the Amalfi Coast in southern Italy recall the teardrop ridges of the Pacific Coast Highway in northern California. And how historic Route 66 is timeless for a weekend getaway of body and mind. I'll never tire of the raw beauty of Highway 61 out of the Mississippi Delta into Natchez -- a big reason I often drive to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

I probably appreciate great drives so much because I live in Chicago.

I spend a lot of time on the Highway to Hell, aka. the Eisenhower "Expressway." That road is as outdated as the president it is named after. So when I'm crawling by the Austin Avenue exit (on the left side?), I close my eyes and pretend I am on my new favorite highway: the Road to Hana in Maui.

The Hana Highway is 52 miles of two-lane switchbacks, twists and turns -- just like life.

It runs by rainbow eucalyptus, maroon cinder cliffs and dramatic waterfalls. It has 600 curves and 52 one-lane bridges. There's an unwritten code of courtesy in that the first driver to reach the bridge waits with a sunshine smile for the other driver to move through. Natives yield and give you the happy "shaka" sign, a fist with the thumb and pinky poking out.

Chicago natives yield and give you a different sign, using just one finger.

Unlike the end-of-the-rainbow lure of California at the conclusion of Route 66, or Key West, Fla., at the end of U.S. Highway 1, not much awaits in Hana (pop. 1,700) besides the Hana Bay State Park.

Getting there is all the fun.

Earlier this year, I hit the Road to Hana in a rented Toyota with a notepad and some used CDs by Hawaiian artists Ells and John Cruz. I picked up the music at Request Records (the only independent record store on the island) in Wailuku Town, which reminded me of Key West circa 1979.

I knew this would be no ordinary trip when Ells' "Let's Do It Again" CD featured a hip-hop Hawaiian cover of the Captain & Tennille's "Muskrat Love."

You don't see any muskrats on the Road to Hana, but there are mongooses, wild pigs, chickens and myna birds.

The road was built out of volcanic rock cinder in 1926 -- the same year as Route 66. The state didn't pave the highway until 1962.

I turned right at the K-Mart by the island's Kahului Airport to get on the Hana Highway. I drove six miles south through sugar cane fields to get to the old plantation town of Paia (pop. 2,499), the last place to stock up on gas and supplies for the road trip.

Paia is a hippie/surf outpost, and I found lots of young, barefoot gypsies roaming around the central business district. It was like reliving my assignments in Soldier Field's parking lot during Grateful Dead concerts.

I had a BLT lunch at Charley's, 142 Hana Hwy., a restaurant and bar where Willie Nelson hangs out when he is in Maui. Nelson, Kris Kristofferson and Neil Young are some of the country/rock stars with homes in Maui. The Red Headed Stranger sometimes sits in the back saloon at Charley's.

I pulled out of town and into the Hookipa lookout for my first dramatic view over the Pacific Ocean. The crashing waves underscored Hookipa's history as a major surf spot. The annual Aloha Classic windsurfing competition is held here. I stood there, feeling the trade winds and wondering why bars aren't named Trade Winds anymore -- although Chicago's Rip Tide is still going strong.

As I drove on, temperatures dropped about 10 degrees and it grew misty. I noticed how bright the eucalyptus trees' colors turn when wet.

I switched back and forth between my CDs and radio station Native 92.5 FM, but by the time I made it 20 minutes down the highway to the Huelo Lookout Fruit Stand, I lost radio reception.

The fruit stand happened to be selling a wacky "Hana Audio Tour" CD, a self-guided drive tour featuring "Uncle Boy Kanai" and "Captain Aloha" along with K. Kanekoa covering Willie's "On the Road Again."

I usually don't go for this kind of stuff, but the \$20 CD proved invaluable in explaining the surrounding foliage and animals. It had a map and flower guide pointing out the guava and paperbark trees, as well as the bright red African tulip tree. There was no explanation, however, for the patchouli-smelling hitchhikers I almost picked up. You can have your pick of hitchhikers along the Hana Highway.

The zig-zagging road is 52 miles long but it takes several hours to drive one way. You rarely go over 35 mph. I was told you can spot the locals by how fast they drive. Just like fans of good mysteries, they know where the twists and turns are.

The road isn't just about scenic views. There's a little history along the way. The YMCA Camp Keanae at mile marker 14 once served as headquarters for the prison chain gang that built the first highway.

The nearby Keanae Arboretum was built by natives to grow taro, a staple of the Hawaiian diet. It's free to visit and has a fine collection of 150 tropical plants, including eye-catching red and yellow hanging lobster claws.

I never saw a truck on the Hana Highway, and I only spotted one dude on a cell phone -- and he was safely parked on the side of the road.

The remote highway wasn't littered with signage and there were minimal roadside attractions. (But be sure to pull over for Aunty Sandy's fresh-baked banana bread at the Keanae Landing Fruit Stand, just a shot off the highway at mile marker 16 in Haiku.)

At times, I turned off the music, rolled down the windows and heard nothing. I was free. Just like when I was a younger man, the road was wide open in front of me.

