



INSANITY IN THE ISLANDS

What it's really like to ride in paradise

By Ron Lawson

HARDER THAN BLACKWATER?

Mr. and Mrs. Philboyd didn't really want to sit next to me on the airplane. Each was wearing a fresh *lei*, they smelled of tropical flowers and they look refreshed and happy after their Hawaiian holiday. In contrast, I smelled faintly like jungle rot, there were big bags under my eyes and I probably wasn't smiling. They were tanned and glowed with good health. I was slightly dehydrated and my feet, exposed by my beach thongs, were dyed black and looked like they hadn't been washed since Hawaii was granted statehood. However, the stewardess made them sit, so they tried to make the best of it.

"Been vacationing in the islands?" Mr. Philboyd finally asked while the stewardess was saying something about what to do in the "unlikely" event of a water landing. I really wanted to hear what she had to say. Catastrophes seemed perfectly likely to me at the moment.

I waited until she had finished and then replied, "No. I just went over for a motorcycle race."

"Really? That sounds like fun. I used to ride myself. Had a Harley 45 with a sidecar. Thought about racing, but . . ." Mrs. Philboyd frowned and elbowed him gently. "How'd you do?" he asked, to his wife's obvious dissatisfaction.

I smiled. It was the first time I had smiled in days. How'd I do? I had to think about that for a second or two.

POLYNESIAN GEOGRAPHY 101

A long, long time ago, something on the order of five million years, there were no hotels in the Hawaiian islands. There was no airline service going to the Hawaiian islands. In fact, there were no Hawaiian islands. Then a hot spot formed below the ocean and molten magma bubbled through the continental plate, forming the island of Kauai. The plate moved northward, taking Kauai with it, while the hot spot remained, eventually building other islands. Oahu formed, complete with 214 golf courses, then Maui, then the big island of Hawaii. Right now the island of Loihi is coming up south of the other islands and should break water, ready for condos and resorts, in a few thousand short years. There are Japanese investors who can hardly wait.

◀ *Although some parts of the Hare and Hound run near the ocean, most is in the dense jungle that never sees sunlight.*

THE ISLANDS

Why is this important to dirt bike riders? Because the island of Kauai is the site of what might be the most difficult motorcycle race in America. More difficult than Barstow-to-Vegas, more difficult than Blackwater. Kauai is so old that the lava that originally formed the island has had time to decompose from rock into bottomless silt. When that silt is wet it creates the most slippery mud, the deepest bogs and the most impossible hills.

For 36 years now, the Garden Island MC has been holding a Hare and Hound on Kauai every Labor Day. That makes it about the third-oldest continuously run off-road motorcycle race on U.S. soil. (Okay, okay, so Hawaii wasn't a state when the race first ran, it was still a U.S. possession.) In all those years, very few mainlanders have ridden the race and very few islanders have spent much time riding on the mainland. That means the race has evolved in almost total isolation. Today there's nothing like it anywhere in the world.

SO DID YOU WIN?

I looked at Mr. Philboyd. He seemed genuinely interested. Mrs. Philboyd looked genuinely annoyed. "I didn't do very well. Not very well at all. Actually, I was disqualified," I confessed.

He reassessed me. "Did you get caught cheatin'?" he asked, suddenly frowning. "I hate cheaters."

"No, no, nothing like that." I had some explaining to do. "The checks in this race are unmanned. The club doesn't have enough people, so they just hang a bunch of tickets at various points in the jungle. You have to pull one ticket from each check and figure out a way to carry them all with you. There are 30 checks altogether and if you're missing just one at the end, you get disqualified."

"So you were missing one ticket?"

"No," I said, starting to sink into a mild depression. "I was missing seven."

He was silent for a while. I didn't think he understood, but now that I started I felt like I had to try to explain everything. "On the mainland we're not used to looking for tickets hanging in the trees," I said. "The first few probably knocked me in the head; I just didn't know what they looked like. The locals hardly even slow down, they just pull a ticket, stuff it into a can and go. They say a long time ago the first guy in would grab one for himself and throw the rest into the woods, but that kind of thing doesn't happen very much any more."

"So you might have won if you had all the tickets, huh?"

I looked out the window and covered my mouth with a napkin, trying to look casual. "Uh, sure." What the heck, I figured, how's he going to know? Mrs. Philboyd eyed me suspiciously. She knew I was lying.

POLYNESIAN GEOGRAPHY 102

Kauai records the most rainfall of any spot in the world. The rain is so pure that



residents usually have some sort of system for capturing the water that runs off their roofs and using it for drinking and washing. Dirt bike riders adapt to their wet environment by riding the smallest, lightest bikes they can find. One year John Domke was the only rider to finish the Hare and Hound. He was on a trials bike. A number of other years a local man known as "Junior" won overall on a Kawasaki KX80. Last year only five riders finished, and none of them had all their tickets.

The problem usually is that the course is almost impassable when it's really slippery. Scores of riders can be eliminated when they can't climb the very first hill, just a few turns from the mass beach start. Still more are taken out from exhaustion in the tight jungle. The trails are reclaimed quickly by the dense foliage—there aren't enough local riders to keep them clear throughout the year,

so the course always is virgin terrain. Also, the club isn't against throwing in an occasional downhill that's so steep the riders have to toss their bikes down, then follow, sometimes face-first.

Another factor that weeds out riders in really wet years is gas. Even though fuel stops are never more than 20 miles apart, bikes waste so much gas in wheelspin that they often won't make it. As it turned out, 1990 was the driest year ever. The hills were almost dusty. So it should have been easy, even for a *haole* like me, right? Well . . .

IS THERE A DR IN THE HOUSE?

"What kind of bike you ride?" Mr. Philboyd started the conversation again right after the stewardess served lunch.

"I shipped over a Suzuki DR250," I replied. He nodded knowingly. I could have told him I rode a Venture Royale, and he would have nodded knowingly.



Riding in Hawaii can be like riding in Paradise—but not always . . .



Don't come to Hawaii unless you're as adept at pushing as at riding.

◀ Yes, they have motocross in Hawaii. The Labor Day weekend on Kauai has the Hare and Hound, an MX and two trials events.

He continued being polite. "Good bike." I considered this for a second or two. I figured I must have kicked that bike 400 times in the race. I should have just left it in gear and pumped my way around the course.

"Yeah, good bike," I replied. This wasn't entirely a lie. When the DR was running it was really hard to beat. Much of the race consisted of rolling along off-camber hill-sides in tight woods, where there's virtually no trail at all. The Suzuki's power delivery was perfect for finding that rare traction.

More polite conversation: "How long was the race, anyway?" Mr. P. asked.

I answered as indirectly as possible. "It took me about nine hours."

"Goodness gracious. That must have been about 300 miles or so," he said.

I was trapped into telling the truth. "Actually, it was a tad over 45 miles."



The Labor Day Hare and Hound on Kauai was once so difficult that only a trials bike could finish.

"You mean you couldn't average better than 5 mph?" He wasn't impressed at all. Even Mrs. Philboyd snickered. She mumbled something that I couldn't quite hear and shook her head.

It did sound pretty bad. "Well, I wasn't moving all the time," I defended myself. I wasn't sure if I should have told him I spent much more time kicking, pushing and hiking than I did riding. That was the truth. I made about seven really stupid mistakes before I stopped counting. Any one of them would have convinced a more intelligent person to quit. I went over them mentally.

One: Early in the race I had sunk the DR to the bottom of a river. I was using what seemed like a really good line around a bottleneck. Dumb *haole*. There was absolutely no way for me to lift it out by myself, but eventually I struck a deal with another rider and the two of us unglued my bike, then his.

Two: After pulling the bike out, I spent about two hours trying to start it. I wasn't very good at that.

Three: A few miles later a rock bent the chain guide, causing the chain to wad itself between the countershaft and the swingarm. It was quite a mess. For about 30 minutes I tried to unjam things. That didn't work. Then I decided to hike to the nearest road. There was no nearest road. There was nothing but jungle, heat and humidity, all of which were conspiring to kill me with a terminal overdose of paradise. Eventually I came across a broken irrigation pipe in a cane field and drank at least a gallon of water, then I walked back to find the sweep crew looking at my bike. They helped me take off the swingarm, unwad the chain and get going again.

Four: Somewhere in the second loop there was a downhill that was like nothing I had ever seen in a mainland race. The trail started off steep and got steeper—it was kind of like riding down the Gateway Arch in St. Louis.

That was okay, though. It was the log suspended four feet off the trail about halfway down that worried me. I managed to turn the bike sideways and slide under the log at near-freefall velocity, but the stunt almost scared me into quitting.

Five: Near the start of the third loop I found myself hiking again. I had stalled the bike, and in the process of kicking, slid off an embankment. Everything I did just caused the bike to sink lower. The only solution was to walk back to the gas stop (only a mile back), and find six or seven people big enough to bench-press a DR.

Six: It wouldn't start—again.

Seven: I finished—or so I thought. Crowds of adoring race fans didn't care. Everyone had gone home except for the person who counted my checks and started laughing. "You didn't finish," she said. "Without all your checks, you go on the DNF list."

Wrong. I rode every inch of that race. I finished, no matter what the results sheet says.

I looked over at Mr. Philboyd after mentally re-riding the event. "Yeah, I might have been able to shave off a little time here or there."

HAWAIIAN HISTORY

Steven Trinies, one of the top men from Oahu, was the official winner, but he was third man into the finish. First was Paul Daly, who was missing two checks, and second was the pre-race favorite, David Amarin, who was missing one check. Both John DeSoto and big island hero Steve Zoll finished up front but were missing the same check as Amarin. The only other mainland-er in the race was Grant Palenske, and he missed three checks. So it goes.

As for myself, I had the unofficial worst result of the 1990 Labor Day Hare & Hound. There might have been a few people who finished behind me, but they certainly had more checks—and this, I was told, was the easiest race in the long history of the event. I didn't mention that to the Philboyds.

I did tell them, though, I'd like to ride the race again next year. What really scares me is that I think I meant it. □