How I Got The Story: Kalaupapa National Historical Park

By Jennifer Bain
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To get to Kalaupapa National Historical Park in Hawai'i, National Parks Traveler needed National Park Service permission, a Board of Health permit and a flight on a nine-seat aircraft/Jennifer Bain

It was five months and three days from the moment that I put out feelers to see if I could get permission to visit Kalaupapa National Historical Park until the day I flew to see it on the Hawaiian island of Moloka'i.

I'm a long-time newspaper journalist who loves the thrill of the chase, but the invisible challenges of working around National Park Service rules can be daunting when gathering stories for the *National ParksTraveler*.

In this case, I was flying to O'ahu from Toronto to write about Pearl Harbor National Memorial and Honouliuli National Historic Site when I heard about the little-known national park on a neighboring island that's a former isolation colony and still home to seven people with Hansen's disease (leprosy).

I would need the National Park Service to sponsor my visit and the Hawaii Department of Health to approve a visitor permit. Then I'd need to fly over on a nine-seat aircraft in the morning and get everything I need before returning seven hours later.

While in Kalaupapa, I wouldn't be allowed to interview or photograph any patient-residents or their homes without written consent. Since the chances of me stumbling upon someone who would agree to a chat on the spot were slim to nil, I would need other angles.



Superintendent Nancy Holman sits outside the headquarters of Kalaupapa National Historical Park/Jennifer Bain

Luckily, Superintendent Nancy Holman wants to help tell stories about all the work her team is doing.

When I first emailed her December 16 she replied right away to say she wouldn't be available for more than a month. We booked a Microsoft Teams meeting for January 21 to discuss "ideas and strategy," and wound up chatting for an hour about a potential May visit.

With monk seal pups due around that time, extremely rare plants, a historic preservation team, an abora-cultural program, religious pilgrims, stewardship activities and a newish management plan, there would be plenty to write about. But, of course, Holman would have to run my media request up the chain to D.C.

I waited almost a month before nudging her. She soon asked for my legal name to request a Department Of Health visitor permit. That permit came through on February 21, so I could finally call Mokulele Airlines, say I was on the approved visitor list, and buy a ticket for the half-hour flight.

It then took until April 30 for Holman to secure NPS approval to do interviews. We fine-tuned angles via email until I finally visited May 19, mindful that I would be expected to dress modestly, go straight to the State Office with ID to collect my visitor tag, and wear it at all times. There would be no medical facilities for non-patients and I wouldn't be allowed beyond the fenced boundaries of what's called the Settlement without my sponsor, Holman.



Even with a permit to visit Kalaupapa National Historical Park, you can't cross the Settlement boundaries without your sponsor/Jennifer Bain

"Kalaupapa is a pretty unique place," Holman said in an email outlining how the long-awaited day would unfold. "It is considered to be very isolated and restrictive."

It was all of those things and so much more.

Limited guided day tours of Kalaupapa (led by a patient-owned company) haven't happened since before the pandemic, but everyone's hoping they will resume any day now. Mindful of how lucky I was to be there, I made the most of my seven hours and tried to pack all the people I met, and all the experiences I had, into a story that I hope will inspire others to visit when the time is right.

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I spent a lot of time photographing invasive axis deer and feral pigs while visiting Kalaupapa/Jennifer Bain

Stories about: Kalaupapa National Historical Park, Pearl Harbor National Memorial, Honouliuli National Historic Site

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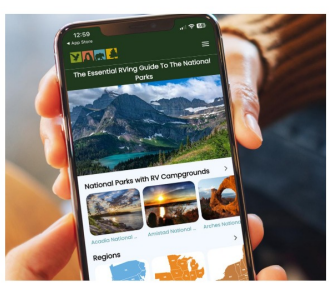
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