A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

Pele Is Angry, But Oh So Beautiful

A long time ago, in a land far away, the goddesses were battling. Pele, goddess of fire, was defeated by Namaka, goddess of the sea. Banished, Pele set sail in a sacred canoe, from Kahiki out across the empty Pacific.

Three thousand miles later she came upon the Hawaiian Islands and settled on the island of Kauai. There she lived until one day the vengeful Namaka found her and put out her fires with salt water and tidal waves.

Pele moved to Oahu, then Molokai, then Maui, each time forced onward by the wrath of her more powerful sister. Finally, after the fiercest battle of all, she went to the Big Island of Hawaii where she lives in the fire pit of Kilauea, the world's most active volcano. It is said that when the clouds glow red you can see the form of a beautiful women, Pele.

Some years ago, after a period of calm, Pele became angry and was having spectacular temper tantrums. I had been to Hawaii before but never during an eruption. This was not to be missed!

I persuaded some coworkers, all non-pilots, to journey with me to Hawaii, a ten thousand mile round trip from Montreal. I arranged to rent a Rockwell Commander 114 for ten days.

To pay homage to Pele we would retrace her steps from Kauai to the Big Island. In the process we would circumnavigate every major Hawaiian island.

After ten hours of sitting in airliners we take a day of rest and recreation. Then it's back to Honolulu International to pick up N4888W, Triple Eight Whiskey. The Rockwell is a truly fine looking airplane! It has beautiful lines and the high cruciform tail gives it lots of presence.

Following the check ride I take my associates for a quick peek at Oahu. One of my passengers is on his first trip to Hawaii. Not only has he not been here, he's never done this - it's his first flight in something smaller than a 727.

He is totally awestruck as we cruise along Waikiki Beach, round Diamond Head and circle the undersea preserve in the collapsed crater of Hanauma Bay. The water is astonishing shades of turquoise, aquamarine, green and blue. White sand and coral are visible beneath the transparent surface.

The next day we depart on our positioning flight from Honolulu to Kauai, Pele's first Hawaiian residence. The hundred miles is mostly over deep blue Pacific, mostly out of sight of land. In the event of the untimely demise of the engine we wear inflatable life vests at all times and carry a life raft and survival equipment.

Upon making landfall, we commence a clockwise tour. The pinnacle we are circling, Mount Waialeale, is the wettest place on earth, enjoying 460 inches of rain each year. If that amount of moisture fell as snow it would be literally a mile high! The runoff from this continuous deluge has created the Waimea Canyon, known as the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. We explore this 3,000 foot deep gorge, ever mindful of the unyielding walls and the floor which rises into the cap clouds.

To the west of Kauai lies Niihau, the "Forbidden Island". There, with no outside contact, pure Polynesian Hawaiians still speak and live as their ancient ancestors. We respect their wishes and suppress the desire to go satisfy our curiosity.

It is only days since the worst hurricane in a century devastated Kauai. Our hotel, just re-opened, is missing a number of significant pieces. One building appears to be perched on steel stilts. The entire bottom story had been swept away, yet somehow a single bathtub had survived in its place. We pass a couple of days being earthborn tourists and emulating beach gods in the surf.

The ancient Hawaiians had astutely figured out the intricacies of Plate Tectonics. As the Pacific Plate moves northwestward it moves over a hot spot in the earth's crust. Magma, molten rock from the earth's interior, spews forth as lava, layer upon layer. Over eons a volcanic island is formed.

Eventually the volcano rides the plate away from the spot and becomes dormant then extinct. When growth stops, the end begins. The elements, wind and rain and surf, relentlessly erode the massive peaks until they disappear back beneath the waves, perhaps to become an atoll capped with coral.

Now we would step in the footsteps of Pele. Our Rockwell would become a time machine, transporting us from the ancient Kauai, over the hill at six million years of age, to Oahu, Molokai, Maui and finally to the Big Island, a youthful million years old.

We cruise low along the North Shore of Oahu. Fearsome waves are dotted with fearless surfers. At Makapuu

Point, twelve foot waves break right on the beach, to the delight of some crazies out boogie boarding.

At Molokai we come across the Kalaupapa leper colony - a cluster of little houses, a chapel, and a white lighthouse on an ebony beach. It's isolated on a toe of black lava sticking out from vertical cliffs. The only land access is by mule. Sea access is hampered by the pounding surf. Hollywood could not have created a more cut off place for a leper colony. For a hundred years, until the 1960's, lepers were sent here, shunned by the world at large. What a strange contrast from the usual image of Hawaii as a paradise.

Along the coast, green cliffs, their faces striped with waterfalls, climb vertically into the nearly permanent clouds of the windward side. Deep valleys are carved by the frequent rain dropped from the trade winds as they climb over the island.

Over Maui, we go up past 10,000 feet to peer into the crater of Haleakala, the site of the last battle between Pele and Namaka. Clouds pour through a gap in the rim then disappear once inside. The crater floor is 2,800 feet below the rim and can easily accommodate the entire island of Manhattan, complete with yellow cabs.

We point our nose at the Big Island. To our left, under the windward cloud cover is Hana, where Lindbergh is buried. To our right, way, way below, in the perfectly clear leeward air, is the tiny crescent of Molokini, a jewel rumored to be home to many hammerhead sharks.

Much of the Big Island is hidden by a cloud deck. Rising out of this are the peaks of the twin 14,000 foot volcanoes, Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. It is impossible to comprehend their gargantuan proportions. From bases on the ocean floor they rise nearly 32,000 feet, a half mile taller than Everest.

We scratch and claw our way up to 14,000 to inspect Mauna Kea, which means "white mountain". Snow, ice really, covers the very top. The surface is dotted with craters, volcanic in origin but reminiscent of the meteorite craters on the moon. The observatory buildings seem incongruous.

We commence the long descent to the Kailua airport on the Kona coast. When Captain Cook arrived here he was greeted by 3,000 canoes carrying 15,000 natives. We get a less splendid welcome but our departure is a big improvement over his since we are not killed and disemboweled, nor are the palms of our hands removed for use as fly swatters.

Today's Hawaiian people are known for their relaxed, friendly nature. Hawaiian volcanoes have a similar reputation. They are not at all like Vesuvius or Krakatoa. They don't explode, spit massive boulders, spew ash into the stratosphere, erase islands, eradicate races, or engage in other nasty practices.

The Hawaiian volcanoes erupt often and for long periods, letting off steam so to speak, and avoiding the build up of dangerous pressures. Admittedly the lava flows do burn buildings and blanket roads. The Hawaiians simply wait for the lava to cool and cut a passage through to re-open the road. This is not unlike winter in Canada.

A greater physical danger comes from sudden tsunamis spawned by the earthquake activity associated with the volcanoes. One quake caused a stretch of coastline to sink three to twelve feet. Like they say, the safest place to be in an earthquake, or tidal wave, is in an airplane, in the air.

We lift off from Kailua and head south down the coast, almost ignoring the incredible black sand beaches and other scenic delights in our eagerness to get to Kilauea and Pele. We all have a fear that the eruption will end minutes before we arrive. We cut in from the coast on a direct course to Kilauea, climbing to 8,000 feet to clear the southern ridge of Mauna Loa, then following the contours on down.

Visibility is now rather poor since we're directly downwind of the eruption. Emerging from the murk we see great clouds of white steam coming from a long line of holes and open fissures. Some of the holes are quite deep, large enough to contain a two-line subway. The ground is black, with yellow sulphur banks ringing the openings. This is the rift zone, the volcano's safety valve.

Aha! There, to our left! Pele really is angry, we hope not at us. The legends say she will not hurt those who believe. Let's hope she believes we believe!

There is the crater, with a fountain of orange lava reaching several hundred feet into the air! It is much brighter than I had expected, incandescent. Surges and spurts often double its height. I'm impressed.

The molten rock splashes back into the crater, into the pool formed there, like fountains in Rome. The lava is as liquid as water yet somehow heavier, more dense, perhaps more like mercury.

One side of the crater has been breached, there is a gap, a spout for the liquid fire to escape. Escape it did, rushing out and heading downhill at the most astonishing speed, a speed I could never have imagined. It was a raging torrent of glowing orange, a river of fire. Imagine the wet suit you'd need to go rafting!

Hawaiian lava is very hot, very fluid and can move great distances, at speeds up to 35 miles per hour! Away from that central high speed stream, a crust had formed, creating a field of black, fanning out on the way down to the sea.

We pursue the lava downhill toward the ocean. In some places it enters the water from a gentle slope, in other places it tumbles off cliffs. In both cases it makes the ocean boil, really riling Namaka. Sometimes when the lava hits the water it explodes, creating glassy black sand for future beaches.

In less than 400 miles, since Kauai, we have come from land created millions of years ago to land being born, literally as we watched. In this year alone, lava would add 180 acres to Hawaii.

One finger of lava had cooled enough to be moving very slowly. It was as high as a house, and a hundred feet

from a house! What an optimist, building a house downhill from the world's most active volcano! The next day the house would be gone. Slow moving lava doesn't crush houses, when it gets close the wood ignites and is gone before the lava reaches it!

One of my passengers is looking quite green from the constant turning and the thrashing we are taking in the turbulence over the superheated lava fields. We head over to Hilo to rent a car and come back for further explorations the old-fashioned way.

I made three sorties to the eruption, one from each of Kona and Hilo on the Big Island, plus one from Kahului on Maui with two more associates who had flown in from Montreal. Each time I felt a little more confident that Pele wasn't going to shoot down my airplane.

The old Hawaiians were not afraid of eruptions, they called them "alealea" - "the greatest of entertainment". Of course they did hedge their bets, appeasing Pele by sacrificing berries, pigs, dogs and the occasional man.

We didn't worry about being sacrificed because, frankly, there were no virgins on board Triple Eight Whiskey.

On the last sortie, as we set out on course to Maui we waggle our wings in a good-bye to Pele. The legends are all true, Pele is indeed beautiful, even if a bit tempestuous. We wished her luck in her struggles with Namaka.

I'll let you in on a little secret: Pele is already building her next home. The newest Hawaiian island, named Loihi, looms ten thousand feet above the ocean floor. It still has some growing to do before it reaches the surface, but that will only take several dozen more millennia. If you come across Namaka, please don't mention this!