

TRAVEL & LEISURE

February 1997

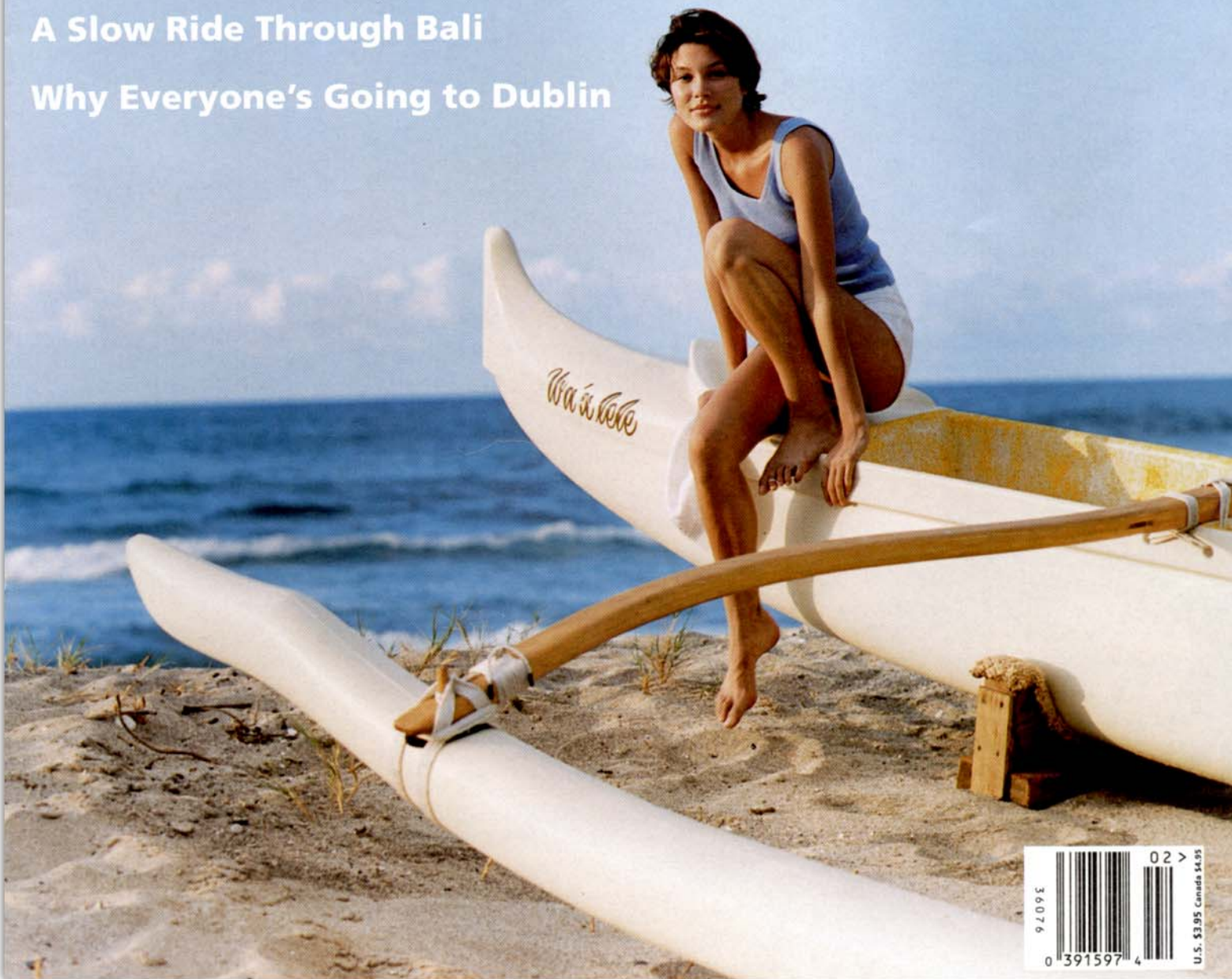
the sexiest new spot in
Hawaii

Virginia: The Ultimate Guide

Canada's Rocky Mountain Lodges

A Slow Ride Through Bali

Why Everyone's Going to Dublin



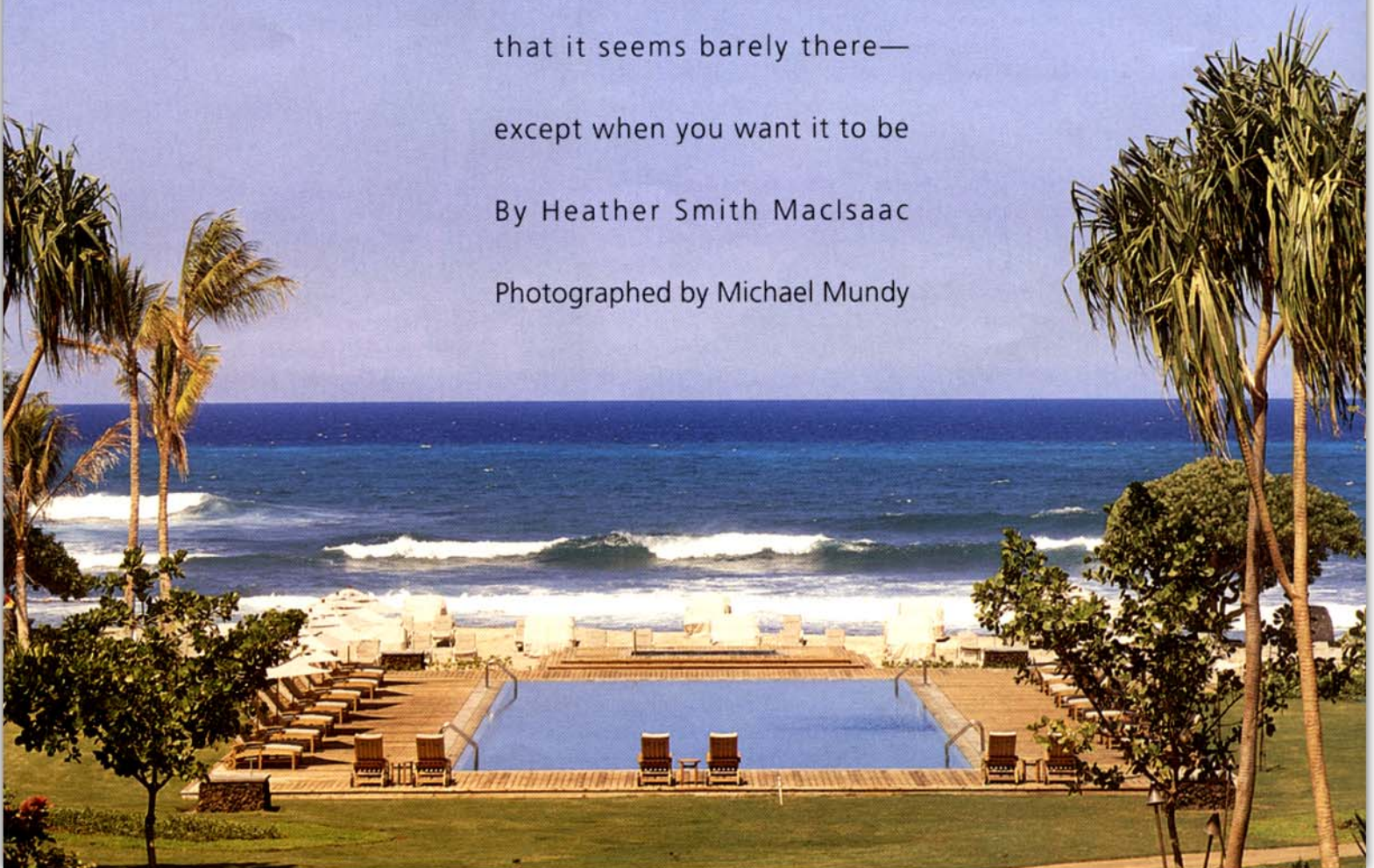
You come to the Big Island to
see Hawaii, not a high-rise
hotel. The new Four Seasons
Hualalai knows that, and blends

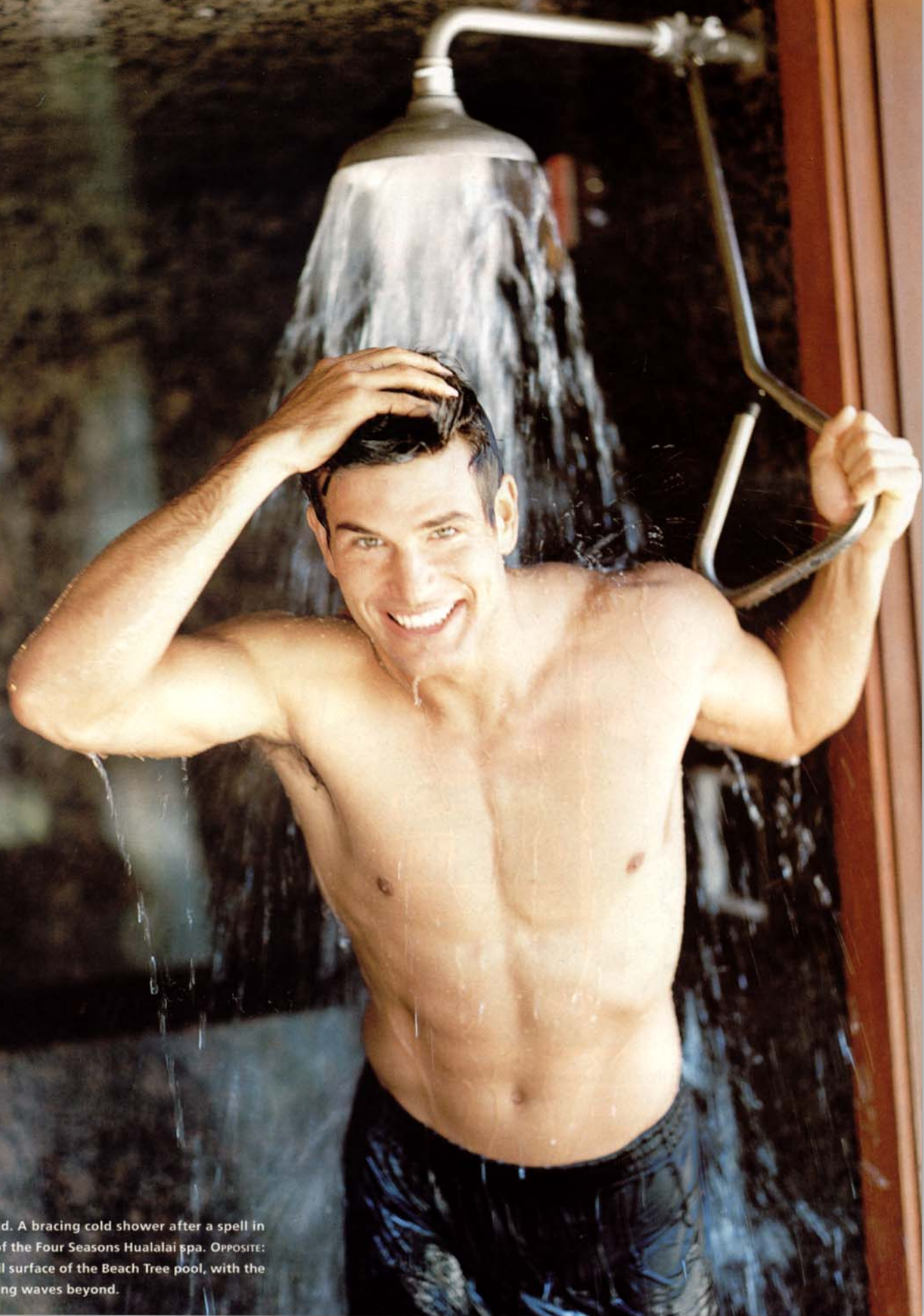
The Invisible Resort

in with sea and sky so well
that it seems barely there—
except when you want it to be

By Heather Smith MacIsaac

Photographed by Michael Mundy





Water world. A bracing cold shower after a spell in the sauna of the Four Seasons Hualalai spa. OPPOSITE: The tranquil surface of the Beach Tree pool, with the ocean making waves beyond.

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ut for the distant torches flickering on what I took to be coastline, I would have thought our plane was descending into a black hole, so intense was the darkness of the Big Island of Hawaii. Stepping from the stale cabin was like being taken off a respirator: the night came wrapped in softest air. My dazed mind followed my cramped body to baggage claim, wondering what lay beyond the stage-lit palms.

Luckily, getting to the new Four Seasons Hualalai at Historic Ka'upulehu is simple: you exit the airport to the left, and turn left again in six miles. As I drove I watched car headlights trace, like another flight pattern, the route of Highway 19, which parallels Hawaii's western edge, the Kona-Kohala coast. On the periphery of my own car's night vision, I detected nothing but an eerily burnt landscape. Then a sign for Hualalai appeared, followed shortly afterward by another: a small slab that emerged from the volcanic rock. This sign was the most understated announcement of a Four Seasons I'd ever encountered—a clue to the experience that lay ahead.

Guests arriving in daylight are greeted by the ocean, which is, after all, what they've come for. From the formal entry court, monkeypod trees frame a picture of blue: the sky fading to palest forget-me-not at the horizon, waters shifting from cobalt depths to turquoise shallows, and in the foreground a perfect sheet of azure—the Beach Tree pool. A water welcome seems logical; far better than a hotel building that stands between guests and the sea. Who ever proposed that man could or should one-up nature—on the island of Hawaii, of all places?

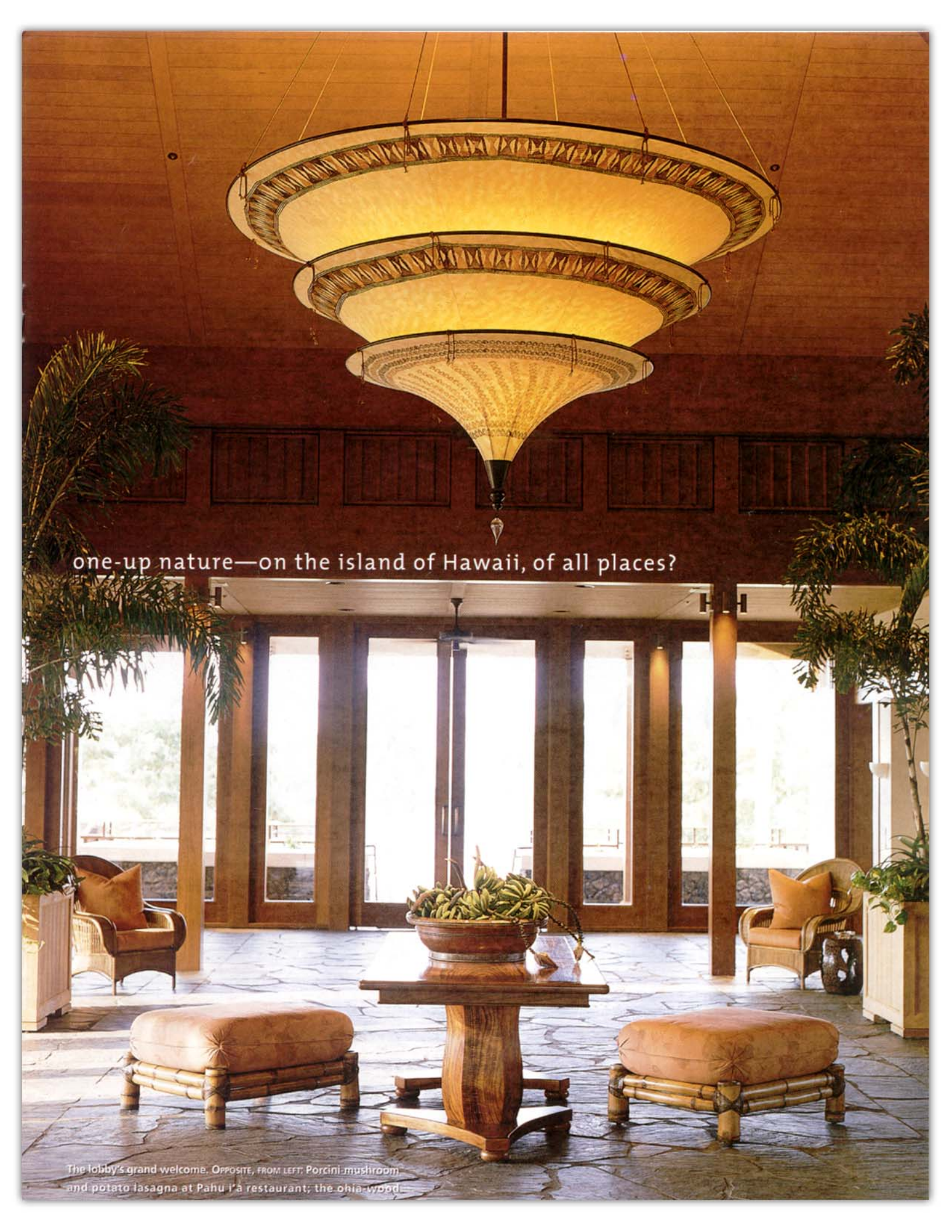
Arriving by night was operatic, a mysterious unfolding of a tropical blossom. I couldn't see the ocean, but I sensed it—the steady tumble of surf, mist lifting off the waves and wafting up to greet me in a lobby that was

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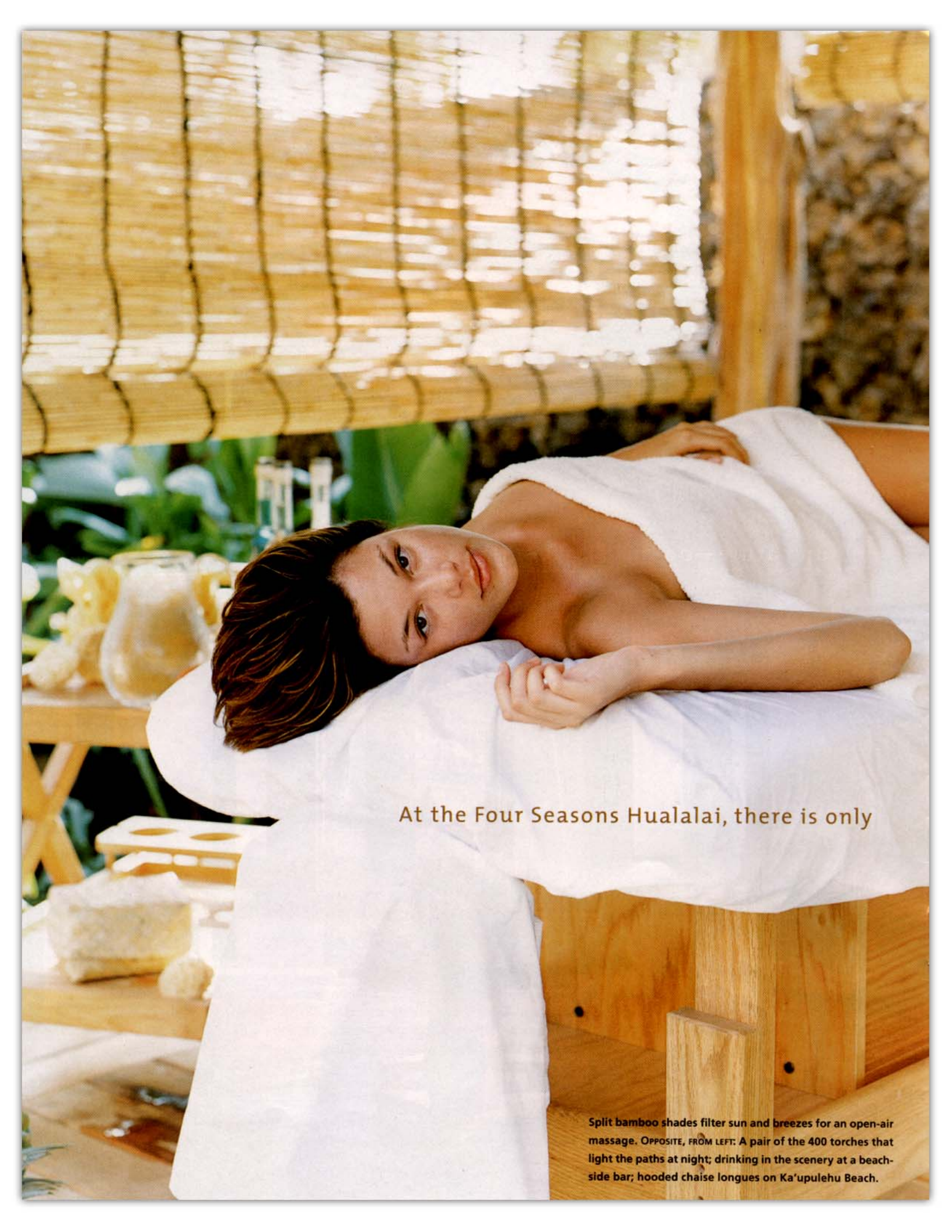
grander in space than it was in attitude. At reception, I offered my credit card and received a cool glass of Hualalai nectar, a mix of fruit juices, in return. Behind the desk, a band of unadorned windows cleanly reflected the glow of a chandelier hovering like a manta ray high in the mahogany-timbered space. The following day, I would discover that the mirror-by-night framed a view suggestive of a prehistoric diorama, which swept out across rough terrain populated by wild donkeys and on up to the extinct volcano for which the property is named.

For now, I hopped onto a golf cart behind Neal, my porter, and picked up the trail of torches I had seen from the plane. En route to my room we passed the Sea Shell pool, the Pahu i'a restaurant and the less formal Beach Tree Bar & Grill, and the sports club and spa. It was a funhouse ride, all flickering flames and curious shadows, more entertaining than orienting. No matter. My room was a spacious haven full of thoughts



one-up nature—on the island of Hawaii, of all places?

The lobby's grand welcome. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: Porcini-mushroom
and potato lasagna at Pahu I'a restaurant; the ohia-wood

A woman with dark hair is lying on her back on a wooden massage table. She is wrapped in a white towel, with her head resting on a white pillow. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The setting is outdoors, under a large, woven bamboo shade that filters the sunlight. In the background, there are green plants and a wooden table with some items on it.

At the Four Seasons Hualalai, there is only

Split bamboo shades filter sun and breezes for an open-air massage. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: A pair of the 400 torches that light the paths at night; drinking in the scenery at a beach-side bar; hooded chaise longues on Ka'upulehu Beach.

that count: vintage Hawaiian prints caught in circles of dimmed light, a canvas-lined wicker hamper in the walk-in closet, jet-lag-curing bath salts for the oversize tub, and slippers on the mat by my turned-down bed. After pushing open the various glass doors and shutters, I was between the sheets before the ocean breezes had chased the climate-controlled air from my room.

Morning came slowly, with birds twittering and daylight tiptoeing around, until *boom*, the sun was jumping on my bed. Tennis, golf, biking, snorkeling, a spinning class in the sports club, even basketball—the possibilities for exertion at Hualalai are bountiful. But having come so far, I wasn't moving, at least not that day. Getting intimate with *la'i*—“calm,” in Hawaiian—was the only thing on my agenda, beginning with a room-service breakfast of fresh guava juice, a fruit salad with a lime yogurt timbale, and, naturally, Kona coffee.

I had only to step out my door to be on the trail, winding through a landscape of bottlebrush shrubs and royal poinciana trees, torch ginger and orchids, where mere months ago all had been black and barren. Like a coastal *kauhale*, or hamlet, the hotel—243 rooms clustered in four crescents—is barely visible from offshore. The roofline of the staggered two-story bungalows creates its own wave pattern as it undulates



one season: endless summer. Both spa and sports club take utmost advantage

through the fronds of transplanted palms. Every room has an ocean view, every crescent a distinct pool or pond, every guest a favorite crescent. Amateur divers gravitate to King's Pond for underwater tours without undertow. The more central Sea Shell pool scoops up socializers, from toddlers plopped down in an adjacent wading area to sunbathers staking out peninsulas created by the pool's free-form shape. Parents parked near its edge keep an eye on older children circling with their snorkels like sharks in a lagoon.

Less splashy and more meditative is the Beach Tree pool, an elegant tiled rectangle of water with a calm, reflective surface that is perfectly even with its border of teak decking. Large canvas umbrellas provide octagons of shade for the chaise longue readers who tick off the chapters with cooling dips. In the final, southernmost crescent, the water feature is a smaller pool and whirlpool tucked away in a grove of coconut palms. Here is a hideaway for honeymooners and trysters whose residence can be confirmed only by room service.

Heading *makai* (toward the sea) one morning, I picked up a path that earlier had seen a rush hour of visored walkers and plugged-in runners, their footprints sifted over now by sand drifting up from Ka'upulehu beach. A snapping yellow-and-black flag indicated that the wind was high, kicking spray off the pounding surf, making it an ideal day for landlubbing.

At this Four Seasons there is only one season: endless summer. The high temperature averages 89 degrees year-round, and both spa and sports club take utmost advantage. At the club, I smelled (Continued on page 145)

(Continued from page 117) the earth and reached for the sky—practically a reflex action in Hawaii, sure, but this was part of a stretch class held on the lawn between the gym and the aerobics pavilions. Packed with you-name-it-we've-got-it equipment, the gym is a celebration of heavy metal in look if not in sound. And with the sliding glass walls wide open, the air smells fresh as a daisy, even as Darryl, an NFL player turned trainer of the gentle-giant school, teases the sweat out of his subjects.

The resort's spa lies beyond yet another pool (this one strictly for laps). High walls of stacked volcanic rock allow the spa to be both open-air and private, a logical move for a place where bodies, and sometimes souls, are laid bare. Natural materials—slate and teak, grass cloth and split bamboo—bring the outside in, all the way to the locker rooms and treatment rooms. I had heard about *mauli ola* (the power of healing); it's a lot easier to become a believer when you're ensconced in a spa that bears no resemblance to a clinic. Of course, the hands of therapists Rose and Ella played no small part in my conversion.

The resort is rightly proud of its Hawaiian Interpretive Center, where several full-time curators help guests dig deeper into local culture. But I learned more at the spa, soaking up information while Ella administered an energizing lomilomi massage in an outdoor thatched *hale*, where ribbons of air slipped through the slatted shades. Ella defined *aloha*: *a* for *akahai* (gentleness), *l* for *lokahi* (unity), *o* for *'olu'olu* (pleasant thoughts), *h* for *ha'aha'a* (humility), *a* for *ahonui* (patience). I also learned that dedicated hula dancers must gather and weave the flowers for their own headdresses and leis; that *kahuna* applies to a priestess as well as a priest; and that one must never underestimate the power of Pele. Locals hold the volcano goddess responsible for Hualalai's big eruptions in 1800, 1801, and 1859, which created some of the newest land on earth here.

Hiking over a volcanic landscape can be mesmerizing. Lava's frozen patterns come at you in waves: pahoehoe formations resemble swirling eddies; aa is like jagged spray crashing against a seawall. A trail that led me *mauka*



Waiting at the Kona Village beach hut for the morning catamaran cruise.

(toward the mountain) across the thermal black mass left me intrigued and parched. I turned back toward the sea and drank in its soothing blues beyond the intense green of velvety grass—Hualalai's golf course.

What looked from a distance like wayward golf balls turned out to be pebbles of white coral, smooth from the tumble cycle of the Pacific. Jack Nicklaus's go-with-the-flow approach to designing the course was appropriate for this volcanic island and echoes that of the resort as a whole. Instead of truckloads of shrubbery, contrasting textures and colors provide the interest—white-sand bunkers and verdant fairways against darkest rock. And, as Nicklaus himself has admitted, the lava itself is a tricky hazard.

Kukio Beach, at the southern end of the property, is an ideal spot for a

private picnic. From there I wound around the 17th and 18th holes, arriving at the Beach Tree bar just as the sun was losing its grip on the day. It must have been the two mai tais I had in quick succession that made Ella, now turning her talents to the hula, look as if she had stepped forth from a John Kelly portrait of a woman plucking mangoes. Hualalai's signature images come from the work of Kelly, an artist of the 1930's and 1940's; his paintings belong to an impressive collection of native art assembled by the resort. Kelly captured in two dimensions the Hawaiian grace and warmth that Ella embodies—an ease that is contagious. Even if my fellow guests weren't all wearing flowered shirts after a few days, they had more of a sway to their gaits as they paraded up the beach and across a wooden bridge to dinner at Pahu i'a.

Brilliant yellow tangs and pink wrasses glide around in the restaurant's aquarium, and fish is the obvious choice for a main course. Seared tuna sashimi and opakapaka with saffron risotto were the stars of my table, which was close enough to the beach to be bathed in moist salt air. A spotlight on the ocean lifted the velvet curtain of a moonless night, illuminating waves that bowed to me again and again.

The first two courses were light and delicious, but pastry chef Eric Helland's chocolate bombe demanded one more stroll before bedtime. Down on the beach, sandals hooked in a forefinger, I stretched my calves as my toes dredged scoops of drippy sand. The same darkness that had overwhelmed me a few days earlier now seemed embracing. For the longest time, I scanned the sky, an explosion of connect-the-dots constellations. Then came the ultimate reward—five shooting stars, the last with a tail that lingered in an optical blaze before it finally was gone.

Four Seasons Hualalai Kailua-Kona; 800/332-3442 or 808/325-8000, fax 808/325-8100; doubles from \$450. Packages available.