

Riding the Waves of the Tsunami at Maui's Oldest Rodeo

By Marc Patoile

Middle of the night and on vacation, we are awakened by frantic knocking on the door. Alarm clock reads 5:45 a.m. Open the door to a local neighbor. She blabbers, "In fifteen minutes the sirens will sound and this whole area will be evacuated. Turn on CNN, but you need to leave before the siren sounds, in order to get out." Then, she runs to the neighbor on the other side.



It's amazing how little you really think is valuable in such a situation.

Wake family up. Turn on CNN. Some guy on the tube, talking about a tsunami—a relatively rare but dangerous natural disaster. The local station on an emergency broadcast down to one guy on all stations advising viewers to turn to the front section of the local phone books to show “tsunami evacuation zones” — the low-lying areas that are the islands most vulnerable. We are on the beach, but the phone book confirms that we are a long ways from a safe zone. CNN showing video of the 1960 tsunami in Hawaii, after an 8.3 earthquake in Chile that caused \$24 million in damage and killed 61. There is something unnerving about an earthquake a couple of hours ago causing massive damage and originating from the exact same place as 1960, except this quake is 8.8 and triggering warnings all over the Pacific. CNN advises that the airport may

be closed for many days with massive flooding and are advising those in the evacuation areas to pack food and water for four days, as roads may be closed and shortages may occur.

Gather family around television. Get consensus to leave and immediately pack whatever you need for four days; grab anything valuable, get in car and head for higher ground. It's amazing how little you really think is valuable in such a situation.

We arrive at a gas station just after the national defense warning sirens go off. There is a line two blocks long each side of the gas station. Apparently CNN is quicker than sirens these days. Try another station a bit further from the beach, but the same long lines and traffic is beginning to develop. It's only 6:00 a.m., on a Saturday. Wait over an hour



People evacuate the coastal areas taking whatever they could fit into their cars including this goat!



Rebecca waits out the tsunami with champagne and a rodeo.

in a line of 50 cars to fill the tank of gas. Gas station sells out of gas, water and coffee, just a few cars after us and the girl working there is thankful, as “the owner said I can close and go home when we run out of gas.”

The hazards of vacationing with your immediate and extended family become even more evident in a crisis. Pandemonium strikes as we wait for gas. Should we go higher and get gas there? Will the traffic make moving impossible? Don't worry. Don't tell me don't worry. Remember the museum yesterday? Lt. Kermit Tyler, an Army fighter pilot, was manning the aircraft tracking center near the vast Pearl Harbor naval base, when he received a phone call from a nearby radar station. Two Army privates watching the screen reported picking up a large group

of approaching planes. Lt. Tyler issued an order over the airwaves, “Don't worry about it.”

We agree to drive to higher ground. The traffic is bumper-to-bumper and crawling along at ten mph on the only freeway which heads to the Upcountry. Everyone has the same idea. It is now two hours left to the predicted time when the tsunami will hit. The radio report says a seven-foot wall of water will surround the island, causing massive damage and flooding. A local calls in to the radio show and asks if the surfing will be good, providing a humorous relief from most of the callers who are panic stricken. Another caller pleads for help transporting elders from one of the nursing homes. Red Cross sites are being set up but, “they only open after a national disaster, so don't go there yet.”

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The entrance to the rodeo grounds.



A tropical tack store in Makawao, Maui.

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The roads in the Upcountry are lined on both sides of the roads, at every turn out with a view of the coast. Once in the Upcountry, we decided to head to the rodeo. Yes, the rodeo.

Makawao, in the upcountry of Maui, is home to the Hawaiian cowboy, or paniolo. Earlier in our holiday travels around the island, we learned that since the late 19th century, horseback-riding paniolo have been wrangling cattle in Maui's wide-open upland fields. We had toured the polo grounds just behind the rodeo arena and a farrier had told us that there would be a rodeo on Saturday. Surely the rodeo would be cancelled, like all of the other events, according to the radio. We arrived and one of the cowboys said, "I didn't know there was an evacuation going on down on the coastline as I got up early to catch horses, and by the time we started our first events, we started hearing the news."

In hindsight, being at a rodeo during a national disaster is arguably the best place in the world to be. Seriously, think about it. There are dozens of steers for roping (which look like they might make tough steaks, but probably better eating than the junk food we grabbed from the condo). If the gas stations are sold out of gas for several days, you have lots of big rig diesel trucks to provide transportation and carry supplies. If you are stuck with people during a crisis, horse people have seen more manure and blood than most folks and are less bothered by it. Rodeo contestants are used to hard work and most of them raise some or all of their own food (good people to know if there are food shortages). And, finally, you can escape all of the panicked tourists. We were the only visitors, along with a cowboy and his wife visiting from Montana, along with a couple hundred locals.

One of the rodeo horses gets ready for the ring.



Where in Hawaii can you go where there are no tourists, especially when thousands are evacuated from the beaches and are now lining every road of Maui's Upcountry? I speculated that the prediction of a natural disaster kept most visitors focused on more serious things. A local rodeo contestant dispelled that belief and said, "No, we don't get many tourists up here, just at the shops in Makao where they have a couple of cowboy stores, but no one knows we have rodeo and polo, and even a little bit of show jumping." The small fairgrounds were offering some great pork ribs with rice. Coupled with my champagne which I saved from the condo, it made for a hell of a tribute to life. After a glass or two, the scheduled time of arrival of the tsunami came and went. The news was on at the rodeo clubhouse, as a few of us periodically watched while the roping competition continued as scheduled.



Lauren checks out some of the ponies in Maui's Upcountry.

The 54-year-old Makawao rodeo gets underway.



I don't know about you, but if we are ever faced with being evacuated for another natural disaster, we are seeking refuge at a rodeo, again.

We sat around and talked of what horse people always talk about—the price of hay, the costs of competing, what kinds of events do you do, etc. Hay goes for \$32 a bale in Maui. It costs \$1000 and takes a week to ship a horse to any of the other Hawaiian Islands, due to quarantine requirements in Oahu. The events are few and far between here and the costs of entry outweigh any possibility of recovery in payouts. Show jumping competitions

have the same eight competitors in different classes all day long. It made us appreciate how good we have it back home.

While the strength of the Feb. 27, 2010, tsunami fortunately fizzled before reaching Hawaii, coastal Chile was not so lucky. I don't know about you, but if we are ever faced with being evacuated for another natural disaster, we are seeking refuge at a rodeo, again.



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