

Haleakala Sunrise



I've heard many times that seeing the sunrise from Haleakala is one of those magical experiences that can stay with you for a long time - for many it is considered a spiritual journey. I don't think I realized it at the time, but looking back I feel it was a gift from God that He allowed me and Nisha to experience His wonders in an unexpected way.

Having been in Peru and Machu Picchu recently and experiencing a deep amazement at being in a special place, I wondered how this was going to compare. The trip to Peru had been fairly ambitious - even what some say is one of those "bucket-list" things, and I felt it would be hard for anything else to compare. It seems that my ambition had gotten a bit "tired" since I got back from Peru and I've often been tempted to "dumb down" my expectations on subsequent experiences. We had originally decided to just go up Haleakala in the morning after breakfast and make it leisurely (ambition wasn't a priority), but upon talking with many other folks who had been up Haleakala for the sunrise, we changed our minds and kicked up our ambition for what would turn out to be a quite a special experience.

The day started early with the alarm buzzing around 2:45 am - not quite what would first come to mind on a Hawaiian vacation. The tour guide on our first day highly recommended it, and warned us to bring "every stitch of clothing we had" since most people don't think to bring more than a bunch of shorts and hawaiian T-shirts for their beach vacation. To make sure we were warm enough we even stole the blanket from one of the beds in the room (hoping housekeeping wouldn't get suspicious later on!)

The drive through the blackness of night felt like a pilgrimage - we joined the ranks of cars heading up the switchbacking mountain roads around 3:30 in the morning. Not a single car passed in the opposite direction. We would see all the cars in front of us turning left and then turning right - they all followed in a line without anyone deviating. The sky was a dark inky black - covered with clouds. A few light rain showers kept the wipers going as we started up the lower slopes of the mountain. I had doubted myself a bit on the journey as we winded our way along the dark roads - was this really a good idea?

The journey felt more than just a physical one - it was spiritual as well. Although we had plenty of evidence of what was to come (we heard many stories and seen tons of pictures), we had to pass

through the toughest part of the darkness - the part just before dawn. My mind had fallen numb. In a way I was just looking forward to it being over and going back to bed. I wonder if that's how the Israelites may have felt when they got to the Red Sea and Moses was about to lead them through the waters, but they wanted to just go back to Egypt where life was predictable.

Every one of our days in Hawaii, we could see most of Haleakala socked in clouds (the windward slopes are some of the wettest on Earth), but could glimpse parts of the summit clearly above the clouds. It had been hard to tell what the summit would be like and if we would be lucky. I had heard stories of folks that woke up early and drove the 2 hours to just see a bunch of fog and thick clouds - as we got higher I realized how Haleakala started to feel like a "mission" that needed to be "accomplished", and if the view was socked in, the mission would have failed in a way (like we would need to go back next year and try again).

Behind us as we passed through the cloud layer, the setting near-full moon cast eerie streaks through thin bands of high clouds to the west. The subtle shapes of the lower clouds were evident in dark traces of shadows. Jupiter shone brightly to the west, nearly at opposition. Orion gleamed overhead. Seeing the bright stars started giving me a renewed ambition to continue moving forward.

Gone were the lush pineapple and sugarcane plantations as we climbed higher along the Haleakala highway - I could see the outlines of trees and shrubs in the fading moonlight. Soon afterward the scenery was replaced with rugged lava flows punctuated with occasional small shrubs as we crossed the national park entrance around 7000 ft. The line of cars continued inching up the windy slopes of the upper mountain.

It was still pitch black when we reached the small upper parking lot by the visitor center near the top at 10,000 feet (we had been lucky to grab one of the final precious parking spots!). In my eagerness I actually parked in the wrong parking lot initially before realizing we could indeed park right at the summit. The cops showed up right after us to patrol and put up the LOT FULL signs - whew we just made it. The car thermometer had dropped from a balmy tropical 82 degrees to a chilly 45 on our way up (they said the adiabatic cooling rate is about 3.5 degrees per 1000 feet, so the math worked out pretty accurate). We were on a mountain bigger than Mt Everest - there are over 19,000 feet of mountain below the ocean, and the summit is over 10,000 feet above the ocean, so from bottom to top, Haleakala is almost 30,000 feet high!

The neighboring islands around Maui used to all be connected as one large island – like the 5 volcanoes (soon to be 6 with Loihi) that make up the Big Island. Only West Maui and Haleakala are still connected, but Lanai and Molokai used to be part of Maui, comprising a massive shield volcano over 13,000 feet high (comparable with Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea today). Many years from now, with continued erosion and subsidence of the sea floor, the great volcano of Haleakala will sink and become lower on its northwestern journey, eventually falling into the same fate as the older Hawaiian islands. Although most maps only show 8 major islands, there are actually over 100, continuing past Midway atoll, and ending at Kure atoll whose highest point is only a couple feet above sea level (the volcano itself is completely submerged and only the fringing coral reef still stands above water). There are in fact almost 100 additional ancient volcanoes along the chain – the Emperor seamounts – that continue, though they are all underwater now. Learning about this wonderful geology, I felt I was part of something greater while standing at a particular moment in time upon the summit of the great volcano.

The zodiacal light shone as a bright triangle wedge to the east, preceding the dawn. Not many people have ever seen the zodiacal light or even know what it was. Also called a "false dawn" it is caused by

the sunlight reflecting off particles in space orbiting the sun (such as comet dust and pieces of asteroids). It is only visible at certain times of year (after sunset in the spring, before sunrise in the fall) and you need very dark skies to observe it.

To the right of this band of light was the brilliant "Ka i'a ui o ka lain" (the Turning Milky Way of the Heavens), which stretched from horizon to horizon. The moon had set and Orion was shining high as was the Pleiades and the bright setting Jupiter with its Galilean moons visible easily in binoculars. M42 (the Orion nebula), M13 (the Hercules cluster) and many other objects were clearly visible. A shooting star zipped overhead - icing on the cake.

I was glad to get there about 20 minutes before the sunrise to witness the surreal celestial sphere surrounding the summit of Haleakala. I was amazed at the construction of the road to the top, constructed in 1935 during the great Depression - our rented Chevy climbed the hill with no problem. I've only remembered being able to see the sky so clear and the zodiacal light so bright two other times - once on a 4-day 4-wheel road trip through the remote stretches of Death Valley and once on a safari in Africa surrounded by zebras and wildebeest near Lake Manyara in Tarangire national park. This moment would rank with those others in my life experiences.

I felt that until we reached the summit on this journey, my brain had been mostly working on the left (logical) side - my mind was rather numb and thinking without emotion. But from this point on, my creative part was about to be inspired in ways I would have not imagined ahead of time. With emotions being brought right to the surface of my mind, even simple things such as a few words of a song, a Scripture verse or even a silly scene in a cartoon could bring me to tears at random times over the next several weeks.

Utilizing every bit of clothing we brought (I was in 4 layers) - we were glad we had the blanket from the bed of our condo - it came in handy to keep us warm on the windy and barren summit. Around 100 people were all huddled together to watch the growing light as it began filling in the shadows around the grey puffy clouds below. The stars were quietly fading one by one as the sky brightened. Soon we saw the crepuscular rays announcing the arrival of the sun as the farthest streaks of high cirrus in the distance started taking hues of bright crimson, orange and yellow.

The sky brightened quicker than I realized as the sun continued to creep up from beyond the horizon - I realized how the human eye adapts to changes in light so readily. My camera exposures probably brightened by an f-stop every minute - going from 1/10, then 1/20, then 1/40 and so on. I was glad to have a new camera with a decent panoramic mode and that didn't have "bugs" in the sky with every picture! I knew this moment wouldn't last so my finger was feverishly clicking away at the shutter button. The battery was getting a workout as many megabytes of memory were flying on the SD card.

We all cheered when the sun first made its first peek through the clouds, bathing the summit hut in a warm light. Although the temperature was still around 45 with probably a below-freezing wind chill, it felt 10 degrees warmer in the golden morning light. The wait had felt a long time, but I was reminded of God's faithfulness with the rising of the sun in the song "You are So Faithful" that starts "As the sun that rises everyday, You are so faithful". The wait was definitely worth it. I felt like we were on an airplane soaring high above the clouds. Looking along the infinite vastness of the heavens above the clouds invoked an intrinsic attitude of worship.

Supposedly the summit is the 3rd or 4th best spot in the world for astronomical observations - many millions of dollars of telescopes are located there, including the PAN-STARRS and the Maui Space

Surveillance System, which has discovered many asteroids and comets. The gleaming white domes shone in front of the triangle-shaped shadow cast by Haleakala looming in the distance. Mauna Kea, Mauna Loa and Hualalai on the Big Island poked through the clouds into the clear air above the prevailing inversion layer. The clouds routinely only reach to about 6000-8000 feet, and today was a typical day.

I felt like being on a castle on a cloud, something straight from a dream. In fact the night before I finished this story I had another dream about floating on the clouds! In my dream, the clouds were flowing like waves right to the doorstep of my house and we could walk out the back door and start skating across the clouds. But in my dream when I tried to take pictures, they would all come out fuzzy, and in my frustration – I somehow realized it was all a dream when I wasn't able to capture the moment forever. But here in real life, my new camera worked like a charm!

Being in a place that was like heaven on earth, I knew the time was limited and I would relish the photos for years to come. But the photos were not an ends in themselves – they were simply a means of being able to share God's glory. I couldn't take the pictures with me when I died and went to heaven. But in heaven I would be constantly surrounded by God's beauty that cameras and photos would be obsolete anyway! I wouldn't have to live in the past and only relish memories of the past as if the present would be gloomy and the future was going to be dark and uncertain – I would be constantly relishing the present.

After being above the clouds enjoying the view for a while, I came upon another perspective - I started to realize that although it was a great mountaintop feeling being on top of the world, it was a barren one. Very little life can survive on the barren summit. Being almost perpetually above the weather, water is scarce (signs on the road warned us that we should carry water due to shortage), and we had to plan accordingly.

The "crater" of Haleakala (actually not a volcanic crater, but a deep bowl-like depression caused by erosion) was full of cinder cones - like mini-volcanoes inside the big one. They reminded me of how when I was a kid at the beach I would make "volcanoes" in the sand and press my pinky finger at the top to make a little hole (the caldera). Except these were a whole lot bigger! We considered doing a hike to the first of them (about a 4 mile round trip according to the map - they looked a lot closer in real life) but after seeing how dry and barren and windy the summit area was, we changed our mind and just enjoyed pictures from the visitor center! We all too quickly realized how much we missed the lush life in the rainforest below us. We changed our minds and opted for a nice 2-mile hike through the rainforest to Twin Falls on the road to Hana instead of the barren hike to the cinder cone.

The summit reminded me of camping at Pisgah crater in the Mojave desert over New Years a few years back - windy, cold and rugged. It looked like just a bunch of rock and sand (though the volcanic geology is superb). Yet even though the environment was extremely barren, life is quite tenacious and exotic plants called silverswords manage to survive - their succulent leaves retaining precious moisture. Endangered carabid beetles have been recently re-discovered after having been believed to be extinct for 100 years (the rangers even warned people about hiking off the trail since people might inadvertently step on some precious life).

The brakes on our Chevy got put to the test as we wound down 10,000 feet of switchbacks back to the coast. It was only about 10:00 in the morning when we were most of the way down - although we had been up for almost 8 hours already! Pineapple and macadamia-nut encrusted pancakes with papaya and coffee hit the spot to cap off a wonderful adventure into the netherworld above the clouds.