

## Over the Hill in Fatu Hiva

by Howard Eskildsen



### View Near the Top

March 23, 2012 Over the Hill in Fatu Hiva: Omoa to Hanavave

The night before, we all went to bed early in anticipation of the great hike we would take from Omoa to Hanavave the following day, which we had regarded as the high point of our trip. We had been walking nearly daily, with a couple of 10 mile treks thrown in, to prepare for this rugged event. But our preparation had been on level ground and the past several months in cool weather. Would we be able to make the 10 mile hike that climbed nearly 1500 feet in the warm, humid weather? Tomorrow would tell.

I slept a bit fitfully, partly due to a late, heavy dinner and partly in anticipation of the trek. After steep hikes in Nuku Hiva and Ua Pou Wanda had decided that her legs were not up to the tortuous ascent and descent, and Royal had second thoughts as well due to an ankle sprain in Nuku Hiva. Fairy and I wondered about the heat and humidity as well as the prolonged steep trails.

We awoke in the dawn twilight and arose to watch the sunrise and the approach to Fatu Hiva. The boat came to rest in the bay with breakers pounding the rocky beach at Omoa. The road we would be taking crossed a gentle stream to the left of the beach and turned seaward for a short distance before disappearing up the ridge covered with pandanus and palms. At breakfast the conversation centered on plans for the trip with combined optimism and trepidation. Royal had reluctantly decided to give it a try as had 43 others onboard the Aranui 3. We were eager for immediate departure, but that was not to be. The schedule called for visiting Omoa and seeing the museum, a tapa and flower demonstration, and the Catholic Church before setting out on our hike.

The tenders carried us to the dock where we carefully timed the surge to safely step ashore between swells. A faint trail led up the gentle slope of the valley floor to a building with a tin roof where others had already gathered. We paid the fee to visit the museum with its collection of Marquesan stones, carvings, tikis, and weapons. Open windows provided sunlight for illumination, and a cooling breeze. We thanked the wife of the museum owner, who courteously posed for a photo with Fairy by her side; then we went to the adjacent courtyard for the tapa demonstration.



A lovely lady with flowered tiara and colorful pareo sat on a mat on the ground in a small clearing surrounded by rough wooden benches with our friend, Steven, describing her work. We gathered round to watch her strip a mulberry limb of its inner bark; then tap it repeatedly with a wooden mallet over a smooth, flat stone. The taps rhythmically echoed through the surrounding trees as the bark piece became wider and thinner, then she folded it in half and tapped more. Finally she stopped, unfolded the bark and revealed a nearly square piece of freshly made, bright white tapa.

Next she displayed various fragrant plants including ylang-ylang, dill, mint, basil, tiare, vahivahu, and sandalwood and passed them around for us to smell. They were used to produce fragrant ornamental cachets, known as umuhehi, which could be worn in the hair. To make the umuhehi, she cut the eyes out of pineapple and threaded them together on a plant fiber, added various plants that we had examined, and sprinkled it with sandal wood. She showed how this could be worn in the hair, then placed it in a large, flat leaf and passed around for us to enjoy. It held a most pleasant perfume from the natural island products, and we were all quite pleased with the final results.



After the demonstration, the group was directed upslope to another open air pavilion where goods were for sale, and a native local band performed with great enthusiasm. We made our way over an overgrown, rock-paved path to the pavilion. After purchasing some tapa and a carved bowl, that friends who were not hiking agreed to take to the boat for us, we finally made our way to the church for “last rites” before the 10 o’clock departure. Though at first we would have preferred to depart earlier on the hike, the demonstrations were very interesting, and it would have seemed quite inconsiderate for nearly a third of the occupants of the Aranui 3 to turn their backs on the people who had worked so hard to prepare presentations and wares for them.



In the rough grounds around the simple church, the marchers gathered for final instruction and body count. Down the road from the church, double, back-to-back tikis watched over the beach, and we hoped that either they or the Virgin Mary would watch over us for the next several hours. Finally we set off down the road towards the tikis and sea for about 100 yards; then turned right towards the river. The church and the tikis disappeared from view as we crossed

the narrow cement bridge, turned seaward once more for a short distance; then angled upwards along the densely wooded road.

As advised, the road was quite steep, and we panted heavily and sweat profusely as we found our pace and stride up the incline. Some wondered quietly to themselves if the decision has been wise, but there was no time to turn around and catch the boat before it left the harbor; one way or another, they had to make it over the ridge.

The group slowly spread out as some forged ahead and others lagged behind.

Some spoke French, some German, and some English, but mostly we just panted onward and upward. The pavement ended after about a mile and a half and the slope became only slightly gentler, but by that time we had found our pace.





Here and there breaks in the foliage revealed views of the cliffs over the valley of Omoa. Exotic birds sang and called back and forth in the leafy canopy above. Rocks and occasional ruts lined the road that was a bit muddy after some earlier rains, but did not make for difficult footing. As the trip wore on, we began looking ahead to the next switchback wondering if the ridge would be crested or if the slope would change. The bushes by the road become restrooms and sometimes as we rounded a bend in the trail, we saw much more than we wished.

About two hours up the trail we stopped briefly to eat the hard boiled eggs and the oranges provided at the onset. They were quite refreshing, more so than we had imagined, and with our loads lightened by consumed food and water, we resumed onward and upwards. A short while later we rounded a corner, and crested the major ridge that we had been following. We all sighed in

relief and picked up the pace. More vistas revealed cliffs and valleys on one side and seascapes and bays on the other. Though strenuous, the effort had been very doable and the views at this point were more than adequate reward for our effort, and we felt sure that the lion's share of climbing was behind us.

I pointed out the rocky crest of another ridge to our left and confidently predicted that our path would not lead us as high as its summit. From what I had read, the trail leveled out for a while before beginning the descent, and surely we climbed as high as we had to go. Breezes that were much cooler





than they had been in the valley built our morale. With confidence we continued along the path, gently upward and occasionally flat; for about a quarter of a mile.

Oh my God! The trail angled steeply upwards again towards more switchbacks along the ridge that I had so confidently predicted we would not cross. Oh well, for a time my assurances boosted morale, but I doubted I would be believed a second time. We marched past rock cuts



revealing strangely tortured rock that testified of the island's fiery birth. Some formed rounded bunches of pillow lava that had originally erupted under water and then been thrust upward by titanic forces as the island mountains arose.

Along the way pickups and SUV's passed by with food for our summit meal or with paying passengers that had not truly "earned" the view along the trail.

But it was a comforting sign that the upward part of the trail was nearly completed. I ambled on ahead of Fairy and Royal on one of the steepest portions of the climb so far; then rounded a bend, and autos, tables, and food came into view. We were there! I rushed back around the bend and waved to Royal and Fairy and announced that the summit was just around the corner. In spite of my earlier predictions, they again believed and picked up the pace, this time not to be let down. After two and a half hours of nearly continuous uphill hiking we had reached the top.

Food rested on a table against a road cut and two benches loaded with gear and hikers lined both sides of the road. Across from the food, picnic tables sat under a canopy loaded with more hikers, all happy and hungry from the morning's effort. We downed more



water and juice, and filled our plates. The food was delicious and plentiful, but after all that exertion I was not all that hungry. I ate about half of my plate of food; then gazed at the countryside while Royal, Fairy, and the others finished their meals.



### At the Top of the Trail

The eastern ridge of the island lay above us, covered in green except where sheer, dark cliffs left no footing for foliage. The heads of the valleys of Omoa and Hanavave met in a pass beneath the ridge. To the left, three small pillars arose from a notch in the eastern ridge, and a hole gapped below them, revealing blue sky beyond. Fewer trees appeared on the Hanavave side than in the Omoa valley, but brush and grass covered most land, and flowers of all sorts decorated the sloping green hills.

The trail angled gently downward towards more descending switchbacks. A short distance into our descent a seaward opening between road cuts beckoned. Just before we reached the vista, a carload of tourists, who had not done the hike, pulled in front of us and blocked the view. We



had no option but to wait until they took their time at the site while occasionally looking at us as if they wondered what we were doing there. One lingered quite a while, so I decided to shorten the delay.

A five-foot tall, irregular boulder stood centered at the vista, just behind the fellow who stood precariously near the drop off. I stepped to a lower notch, then up to the top, balanced and began

taking photos from an angle that the fellow could not block. Fairy and Royal gasped at my precarious perch, but it was steady and the view magnificent. By the time I finished, the tourists had all loaded back into the car that had lugged their derrieres up the road we had walked, and vanished around the bend. When I stepped down from the rock that had been so close to the



precipice, Fairy and Royal looked at each other and then at me, obviously startled, and Fairy said, “Well, now our hearts can start beating again.”

We continued down the winding road. The next vista revealed more of the upper portions of the Hanavave valley, and the brown windings of our road wrapped itself around the lower hills like a snake, coursing farther and farther down the valley.

Very few trees appeared on the grassy landscape below, but black volcanic boulders stood out here and there in patches on the steep green slopes. Far, far below, a white cross stood on the crest of a knoll overlooking the bay.



Our hearts slowed down, but our quad muscles began to ache from holding back

on the downward grind. Finally the paved section of the last part of the hike came into view, but it turned out much farther than it appeared. We rounded one bend expecting the pavement to appear, only to discover another of switchbacks to traverse before reaching the final grade to the pavement.



The three pillars in the notch above Hanavave valley appeared larger, but higher up the skyline, and the hole piercing the ridge before them became more distinct.

Occasionally glimpses of the bay at Hanavave came into view, and finally we were cheered to see our floating home, the Aranui 3, which we

had last seen in Omoa bay. In time we arrived at the same level as the cross on the knoll over the valley, but the floor of the valley still appeared a long way off. We hiked on with our



destination in view, and finally found ourselves on the pavement that would carry us all the way to the valley floor.



Though thrilled at the prospect of being on the final leg of the hike, and fully confident of our ability to finish, the concrete roadway proved to be a greater challenge than expected. It was far steeper than any other section of the road, and the burn in our muscles intensified as we held back our weight with every descending step. One couple we passed was having trouble with their knees, so we demonstrated the zigzag pattern of walking diagonally across the road to lessen the stress on the knees.

Around another bend the village of Hanavave came into view with dark rocky pillars rising from a volcanic dike on its far side.





Some rugged, angular portions of the cliffs gave the appearance of great stone tikis gazing up the canyon. Tropicbirds soared in the currents around the rocks, with their long white tails contrasting magnificently against the dark background. Farther up the valley a waterfall came into view, and we began to hear the babbling of the river below.

At last we descended into the trees at the lower valley and the road nearly leveled. Houses appeared here and there, with some inhabitants curiously gazing at the pilgrims passing by.



Below the towering rock cliff, that I had envisioned to as the “stone tiki” we stopped momentarily to gaze upwards at its knobby heights. It looked very rugged and rough, as if ready to cast stones on any stragglers that lingered too long; we promptly moved on.

Down the road lined with palms, pandanus, flowers, and homes, we saw the familiar faces of Wanda and Kathy, who had traveled out to greet

us. They and others congratulated the tired threesome for making it all the way. Wanda gave us all hugs, even though we were soiled and drenched with sweat. We chatted a little, but our thoughts were on the boat with the showers and cool air that awaited. The final steps along the road and onto the tender were the happiest ones we had taken that day. Soon we were back onboard, little worse for the wear, with nothing that soap and water, and perhaps a Tylenol or two could not fix.

Later we gathered on the sun deck for a Mai Tai and to watch the sunset play with clouds by the horizon. As day faded, the sky turned orange and cast a spectacular golden glow over the mountains and pillars around Hanavave. Shadows of clouds near the horizon cast crepuscular rays; blue banners that contrasted with the orange



background and radiated away from the sunset. Venus first appeared as the light faded, then Jupiter. The sight was too beautiful to interrupt by going to the next day's briefing, so we lingered on the aft deck to marvel.

I gazed intently lower to the horizon on a line from Venus towards where the sun had set. As the sky darkened a bit more, the thinnest crescent of the day old moon appeared slightly above the clouds on the horizon. It was visible for about 15 minutes before slowly sliding gloriously below one of the clouds; and my search for the ephemeral had been richly rewarded. We took photographs as the sight slowly faded, and then it was time to go to dinner.

Paul and Tom and others had gone fishing the day before, and our table was rewarded with the fruits (or should I say fish) of their labors. Beautifully prepared plates of sashimi, made from raw red snapper atop cabbage, were brought to our tables. We dined to our content and praised the mighty fishermen who provided us with such abundance. Fisherman Paul graciously shared the fish with friends at other tables since there was far too much for us to eat. To our surprise, the regular fare was also provided, but we had eaten so much fish that we could do little more than taste duck and dessert that followed.

We did not linger as usual at the table, though the food and friendship was fabulous; we were eager to retire. Ah, to bed, to sleep without worry or dread of challenges that we might not be able to meet, or that our dreams might have been for naught. Only the thoughts of the glories we had seen occupied our minds, and the effort that we had done to make those dreams reality made the accomplishment even sweeter. Oh, such sweet dreams!

