



Waves of emotion: After completing the Hana Relay, most runners refresh themselves with a cooling ocean swim (right). Exchange zones (left) are festive, and many vans are festooned with team decorations.



This magical Hawaiian race includes towering mountains, gorgeous views, and an unbeatable postrace dip in the Pacific. Oh yeah, and guava goop on your shoes

The Hana Relay

BY MARK R. JOHNSON

I'm completing my ninth mile of the day when suddenly my shoes begin to hit the road with a disconcerting squish-squish-squish. Running with roadkill fruit—in this case Hawaiian guava—caught in the soles of your shoes is bad enough. But when you're stuck with the stuff while pounding down a steep hill, you have a particularly nasty problem.

Still, I decide that no fruit is going to take me out of the race, so I slow down and begin scraping. That's when I'm passed.

Despite being caught in the same slick predicament, this guy overtakes me



with bounding steps, making no effort to rid himself of the fruity mash. Then I realize why: He must be a local, and dashing through squishy fruit is probably second nature.

As I continue scraping along, I can only shake my head in admiration. Who could have imagined a race in which a fruit-savvy stride would give you an edge?

The Hana Relay is just such a race.

Held annually on the magical island of Maui, the 52-mile course threads through some of Hawaii's most brilliant scenery—a landscape brimming with gardens, gushing waterfalls, incredible views, and, yes, fallen fruit on the roads.

The course is broken into 18 legs of varying lengths, with the shortest covering 1.9 miles and the longest, 3.5 miles. It's run by six-person teams, with each team member carrying the baton three times. The other five constantly play leapfrog in a vehicle. Designated hand-off areas, conveniently set at some of the best viewpoints on the island, serve as exchange zones.

The relay starts in lowland Kahului, where the landscape is thick with sugar cane, and then uncoils along the lush, northern side of the island. Climbing a path beneath the slopes of Mt. Haleakala, the course passes through a stream-percolated rain forest before concluding in the quaint haven of Hana, a remote town overlooking a beautiful bay.

Our team has flown in the day before from Bend, Oreg., and San Diego and Menlo Park, Calif.: my wife and I, her parents, and two of our friends—a mix of 20-somethings and 50-somethings.

On race day we rise early, awakening in the 5 a.m. darkness to ready ourselves for a long day. For breakfast, we get into the island spirit, slicing papaya onto our cereal, and drinking glasses of sweet tropical nectar.

Several stars still pierce the western horizon as we drive to the start, the sky just beginning to fill with orange light. The race has a cap of 85 teams, and entrants run the athletic gamut. At the start, we see a number of bronzed hard bodies fitted with heart-rate monitors, but also plenty of weekend warriors.



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Overall, we're a good mix of Spandex and surf trunks.

I run first, and find myself alone almost immediately, as we all settle into our race paces. Although I can see other runners, it feels as if I have the island all to myself for a solitary, gorgeous morning run. I run past fields of tall sugar cane, their stalks nudged by a gentle breeze. Ahead, Mt. Haleakala, "The House of the Sun," puts on a great show when the sunlight burns through its lofty cloud cover, and splays across the landscape.

Not used to carrying a baton, I tuck it into the back of my shorts. Several minutes later it slips out, and I have to scramble after it. A runner passes me, and I curse myself. But I regain my stride and round a bend, where I see my teammates smiling and calling my name.

Resembling impromptu tailgate parties, the exchange zones bring the teams together, their vans and pick-ups parked in tight clusters. Runners crowd around,

Paradise found: The long, twisty Hana Highway, perched above the Pacific, is one of Hawaii's most scenic drives (and runs). Ravenous relay teams carb-load at roadside food stands.

swilling energy drinks, munching bananas, peeling off shoes and socks, stretching, and listening to music. Like a band of running Gypsies, we'll travel together throughout the day.

I spot our team's next runner, sprint for her, and pass the baton. Moments later, I'm glugging water as the rest of us pile into the van and head off down the road. The inside of the van resembles a roving locker room. Already, ours is a messy mixture of shoes, towels, clothing, and coolers.

At the next exchange zone, we hear reggae music pulsing from a nearby van. Everyone scrambles out to join the scene, and I find a grassy area under a palm tree for a few minutes of light stretching. Keeping loose is a constant chore when you're spending much of the day in a cramped van.

Different teams stay loose in different ways. I notice one team outfitted in nothing but running shoes and grass skirts—they literally rustle as they run. Another team wears glittery streamers.





Some have decorated their vehicles. A mangled CPR doll is tied like a trophy to the front of one van, and a pair of giant, inflatable sharks is strapped to the roof of another. Few teams lose sight of the fact that they've entered the Hana Relay for fun.

At first, teams seem to stick to themselves, intent on the logistical challenges of moving from one exchange zone to the next. But their worries soon fade, and the rhythm of the race takes over. Runners begin to intermingle and chat: "Did you run that last leg?" "Can I

have a sip of that?" "Man, that bald dude was flying!"

With its countless hills, more than 50 one-way bridges, and about 600 sharp turns (many overlooking cliffs), the 52-mile Hana Highway is one of the most scenic roadways in all of Hawaii (and one of the most dangerous for motoring tourists). About midway through the race, the route becomes even more sinuous and dramatic.

You run over bamboo-walled hillsides, and under towering stands of

cinnamon-colored eucalyptus. Bristly pineapple heads poke up in surrounding fields. Waterfalls ribbon through the foliage, and the sweet scent of colorful blossoms follows you everywhere. Atop steep, horseshoe-shaped bays, where turquoise waters break upon the beaches below, you can look across to the bay's other side and see your competition bobbing along. Can I catch her? Is he gaining on me?

But maybe, just maybe, you don't care. Most of the time, I was perfectly

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happy to be running alone, enjoying the stunning views.

When my last leg comes around, I feel wonderfully relaxed. Or maybe just hammered. Either way, I know I have my hardest run ahead: a 3.3-mile section, with 2.1 miles of an unrelenting hill.



While waiting for the baton, I'm distracted by one of the most incredible vistas of the course—a terrace of greenery that gives way to an endless blue ocean. The scene lulls me into a tropical trance. Then, barely turning in time, I see a flushed face and a baton thrust toward me. I grab it and go, wheeling around and propelled by a shot of adrenaline.

The hill seems unending and I stare fixedly ahead, stealing side views only when the slope eases up. It's hot, but a breeze rifles through the roadside jungle, and the soothing sounds of waterfalls offer a peaceful contrast to my labored breathing.

Coming off the top of the hill, I'm not paying as much attention as I should. That's when I hit the guava fruit

smear. Slowed by the guava, I run cautiously, trying to scrape the fruit off my shoes. No hurry, though. After all, I'm running through paradise.

Our team eventually reaches the finish in just under 7 hours. We haven't set any records, but we've done okay, placing smackdab in the middle of the pack. (The winning team clocks a 4:53.) At the posttrace festivities on a baseball field in Hana, a band gets funky under a giant tent, and runners mingle barefoot, exchanging race

Glorious tranquility: As the relay teams spread out, many runners enjoy solo efforts that allow them to appreciate the lush surroundings.

stories while waiting for free massages.

Our van's a mess. We're a mess. But we couldn't be happier. We cool down in the shade of a coconut tree, replenishing ourselves with guava juice (poetic justice). After enjoying the party, we walk to a nearby beach where gentle swells roll onto the coffee-colored sands.

And, plunging in, we collect our reward. **R**

While trail running near his home in Bend, Ore., freelance writer Mark R. Johnson often dreams of the Hana Highway.

Want to Enter?

Here's what you need to know about participating in the Hana Relay:

The Race

The 30th annual Hana Relay will take place on September 8. It's open to just 85 teams. Go to www.virr.com for more information.

The Place

From the U.S. mainland, you can reach Maui directly via United, Delta, Hawaiian, and American airlines. Other major carriers service Maui with a layover in Honolulu. Rental vans are in demand for this race, so reserve one well in advance from any of the major agencies.

Prerace

Base yourself away from the bustle of Kahului in the nearby historic town of Wailuku. Ten minutes from the airport stands The Old Wailuku Inn (800-305-4899), an elegant bed-and-breakfast with whirlpool tubs. Or bunk the team at the Maui North Shore Inn (www.hostelhawaii.com), a hostel/hotel. Fuel yourself at A Saigon Café or Saeng's. For stellar lodgings on the water in nearby Paia, call Mama's Beachfront Accommodations (800-860-HULA). Check out www.visitmaui.com for lots of additional information.

Postrace

You've earned it, so reward yourself when you reach Hana with a stay at the deluxe Hotel Hana-Maui (800-321-4262). Or spread out in a rental home from Hana Plantation Houses (800-228-4262) or Hana Ali'i Holidays (800-548-0478). Dining options include the Hana Ranch Restaurant or the Hotel Hana-Maui. You can pick up essentials such as Kona coffee—and pretty much everything else under the sun—at the Hasegawa General Store. Visit www.hana-maui.com for additional listings.

You'll find much to explore in the area around Hana. Don't miss the jungle hike to the pounding 400-foot Waimoku Falls in Haleakala National Park, or a dip in the sculpted rock pools at Oheo Gulch. Red Sands and Hana Bay are the best places for a requisite morning swim.