

Maui

Luxury's new look: Before the drastic downturn in the number of Maui visitors, two resorts started major transformations that may yet pay off. In the case of the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua, the multi-year, \$180 million metamorphosis has stressed eco-friendly and cultural components, capped by the October opening of Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program, which offers family activities with naturalists in local marine and forest preserves. Terrace rooms start at \$299; see www.ritzcarlton.com for packages involving a fifth night free, golf, spa or dining options.

To the south, the Grand Wailea Resort Hotel & Spa (www.grandwailea.com) has spent \$50 million on improving what it does best: splashy opulence. In addition to furthering the trend of "residential" furniture and huge flat-screen TVs, the resort has restored its famous Wailea Canyon Activity Pool (the one with the elevator, slides, caves, etc.) and has upgraded its six restaurants (including a total redo of the Botero Bar).

Although Maui's high-end resorts aren't known for cutting costs, they are making deals in their fashion: The Four Seasons (www.fourseasons.com/maui) is offering a Whale Watching Package, with a complimentary excursion and fifth night free, while the ultra-luxurious Wai-



Jeanne Cooper / Special to The Chronicle

The lure of hiking is strong.

Wailea Beach Villas (www.wailea-beachvillas.com) is discounting its sprawling \$1,000-a-night suites by 20 percent and tossing in goodies like a free sedan or minivan and daily breakfast.

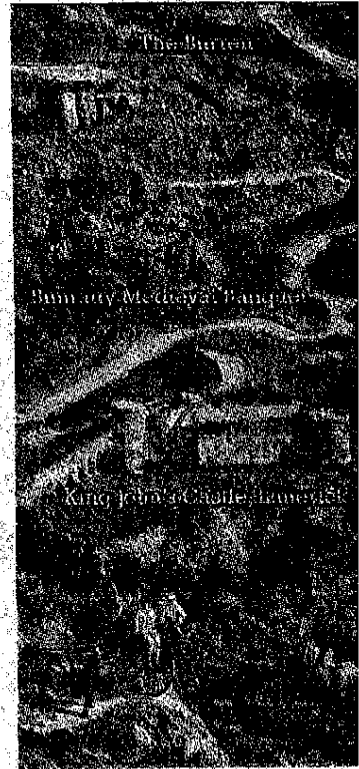
Thrift tip: The Ka'anapali Beach Hotel (www.kbh-maui.com) has a more affordable Whale Encounter for two that includes a partial ocean view room for five nights, compact car, whale-watching trip, daily breakfast, \$50 dinner credit and other perks, for \$1,585; a room/car/breakfast package is \$245 a night. On Napili Bay, the recently remodeled, 44-unit Mauian Hotel (www.mauianhotel.com) includes free breakfast and Wi-Fi; its May special offers ocean-view studios for \$195 a night. Or maybe you're feeling lucky: Destination Resorts' Maui Mystery Vacation Package (www.drhmaui.com) starts at \$95 per person, double occupancy; you'll get a discounted rate on a Wailea condo, but won't know your exact view until you get there.

HAWAII AND ONE OF THE GARDEN ISLAND'S best spots for dining in general, suddenly wilted.

But on the South Shore, all of Jones' 18 holes are still good to go at the challenging Poipu Bay Golf Course (www.poipubaygolf.com). Nearby, the Ko'a Kea Hotel and Resort (www.koakea.com) is finally set to open almost 17 years after Hurricane Iniki shut down the erstwhile Poipu Beach Hotel. Anita Brooks helped redesign the 121 rooms befitting a luxury boutique hotel, which will include a Hawaiian-themed spa and Red Salt restaurant; introductory rates start at \$299 a night.

Thrift tip: Stay in Kalaheo, upland from Poipu, and you'll enjoy cooler nights along with cheaper lodgings and golf. The 15-suite Kalaheo Inn (www.kalaheoinn.com) recently rolled back its nightly rates to 2008 prices, with studio kitchenettes for \$83, one bedrooms for \$93-\$103 and two bedrooms for \$133; its three-bedroom, two-bath house rents for \$183 a night. The neighborhood Kukuiohono Golf Course ((808) 332-9151) built in 1929, offers nine holes for \$9.

Former Chronicle Travel Editor Jeanne Cooper writes the Hawaii Insider blog and biweekly Aloha Friday column for SFGate.com.



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SIGN SPOTTING

By Doug Lansky

Some people might get a bang out of throwing stuff away — or maybe out of littering. At least that's how it appears from this sign in Khon Kaen, Thailand.

Submit your unintentionally funny sign photos to www.signspotting.com. If we use one, you will receive \$50 plus the chance to win an around-the-world ticket.



TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTING

By Christopher Elliott

Insurer dawdles

Q I am having a difficult time getting an impossible time — I bought a policy through my travel agent for a trip to China. It covered medical expenses, among other things. Unfortunately, we had a medical emergency while we were away, and my husband was hospitalized. I made a claim and submitted receipts, including documentation from our tour g