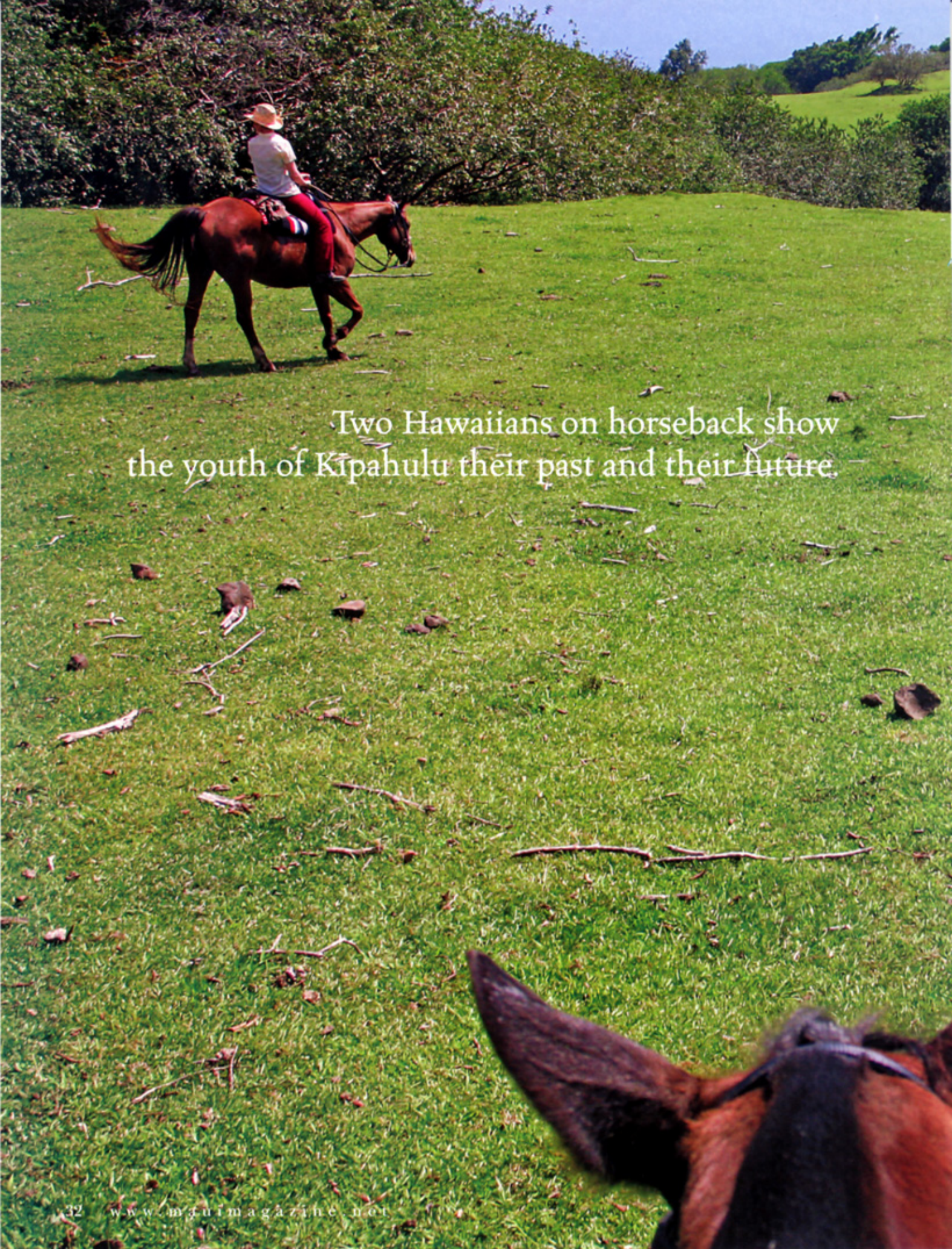
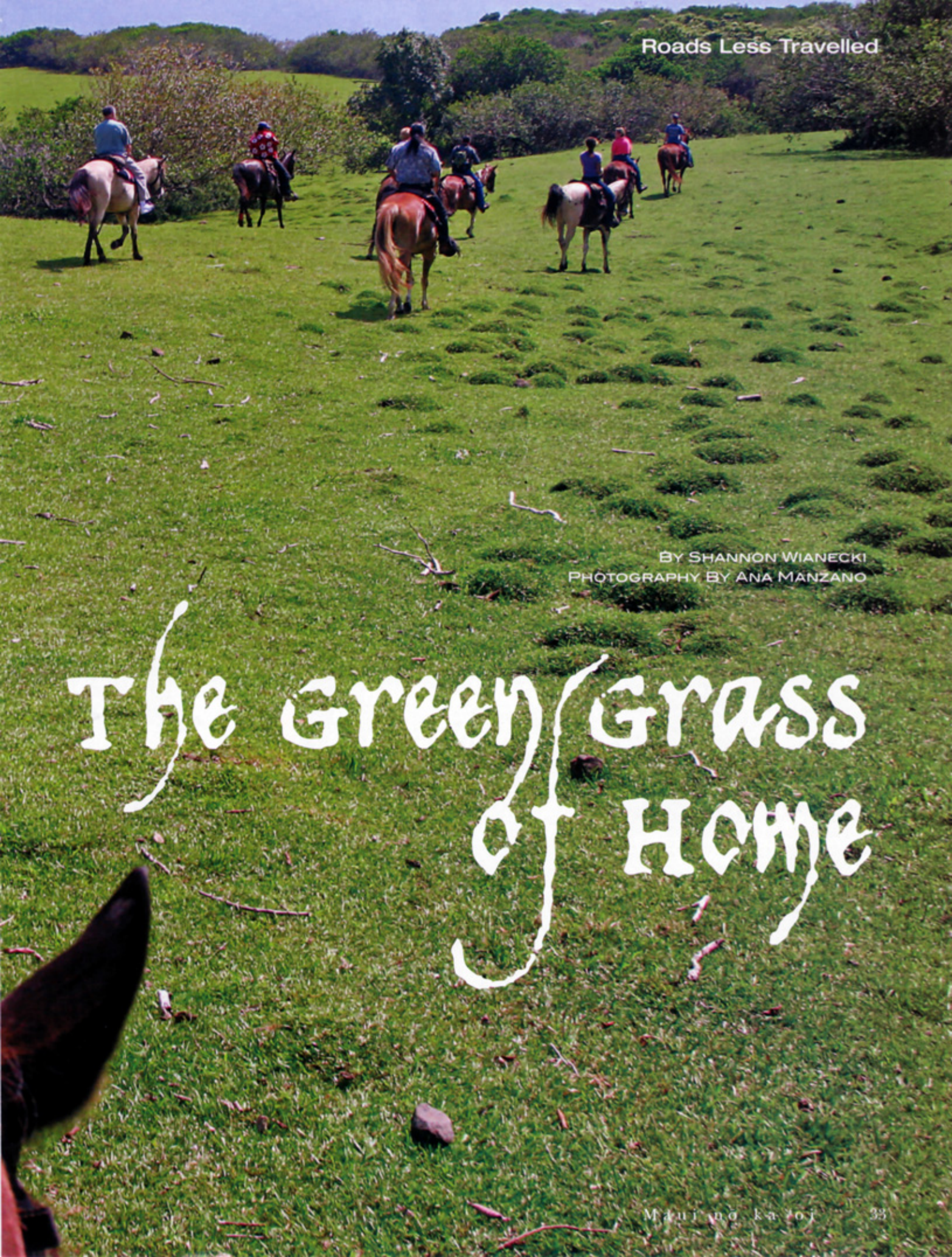


Two Hawaiians on horseback show the youth of Kīpahulu their past and their future.



By Shannon Wianecki
Photography By Ana Manzano

The Green Grass of Home

"When I want to get away from the hustle and bustle of Kīpahulu, I just go Kaupō," says Kahu Naone, my guide for the day.

Uh . . . hustle? I try prodding my unhurried horse up the hillside while contemplating these words. Quiet, remote, rural Kīpahulu isn't exactly a boomtown. But while tagging along on a horseback tour with Maui Stables, I discover that Kīpahulu *is* an epicenter—a special place where ancient Hawaiian protocol mingles with 21st-century business.

Kahu Lyons Naone and Ed Lincoln

"Our goal is to provide them with a means to stay on their ancestors' lands," says Lincoln.

The drive out to Kīpahulu is a treat in itself. The "backside" road bumping through Kaupō is a primer for the upcoming horseback adventure. Haleakalā shows off its finest for the early birds. Every rain-carved crack and crevice on the mountain's slope is outlined in golden morning light. Crab-claw blossoms hang from bare wiliwili branches—colorful remnants of the native foliage that once ruled this land. One crosses the threshold into Kīpahulu, where a carved sign announces Maui Stables.

Ed Lincoln greets his guests, smiling, "Aloha kakahiaka!" ("good morning"). We walk up to the stable past several impressive ki'i, (wooden statues), standing over ten feet tall amid bananas, ti, ginger and 'awa plants. A bowl of starfruit beckons from the picnic table. Not being much of a horse-person, I'm surprised by the stable's fresh smell.

While we wait for the latecom-

ers, Lincoln explains what Maui Stables is all about. "People talk about how the Hawaiians were. It's not a 'were' thing for us. The cultural practices and the lifestyle here are very much the way our ancestors lived and treated the land."

The horseback tours were begun to employ local youths who'd otherwise have to travel away from home for jobs. They work as kāko'o (apprentices), learning old and new strategies for self-sufficiency. Ultimately they will assume ownership of the business.

"Our goal is to provide them with a means to stay on their ancestors' lands," says Lincoln. "They're establishing [the business], they're setting it up. We owe money on it, there's loans taken out. They'll learn how to deal with those 21st-century demands."

Lincoln's piercing blue eyes soften as he strokes the nose of a

The horses are each named after winds and rains common in Kīpahulu.

Kamehameha conquered the islands.

"I was trained in my work since the age of six. This was my training ground, so this is their training ground," says Naone, nodding towards the young men and women readying saddles for our ride. "The boy over there is Hāna. This is his first day. He came here to learn more about Hawaiian language, chants, sacred sites, medicinal plants—and of course, to train horses."

The horses are the picture of health: shiny coats and smartly

chocolate brown mare. "Our second goal is the sharing of the culture. We believe it is time to bring this knowledge out and share it with as many people as possible."

Lincoln introduces Kahu Kapiʻioho'okalani Lyons Naone. ("Kahu" is his informal title—meaning "guardian" or "caretaker"). They honi—touch foreheads and noses, inhaling—in traditional Hawaiian greeting. Naone is a lāʻau lapaʻau, or native herbal healer. A retired police sergeant and U.S. Customs director, Naone now teaches Hawaiian culture at Maui Community College and here in Kīpahulu—his hometown. He points beyond the stable. "I was born there," he says. His family has lived on this land for centuries, long before

trimmed manes. They're each named after winds and rains common in Kīpahulu. Their names are carved on their saddle lockers. Two new colts have yet to be assigned lockers. Their arrival was, "unplanned," says Lincoln with a grimace. "Neighborhood stallions just jump the fence. Nothing can keep them away. Our mares are in Planned Parenthood now," he jokes.

I am not surprised. A particularly virile-looking ki'i stands tall nearby. This environment emanates strength and fertility.

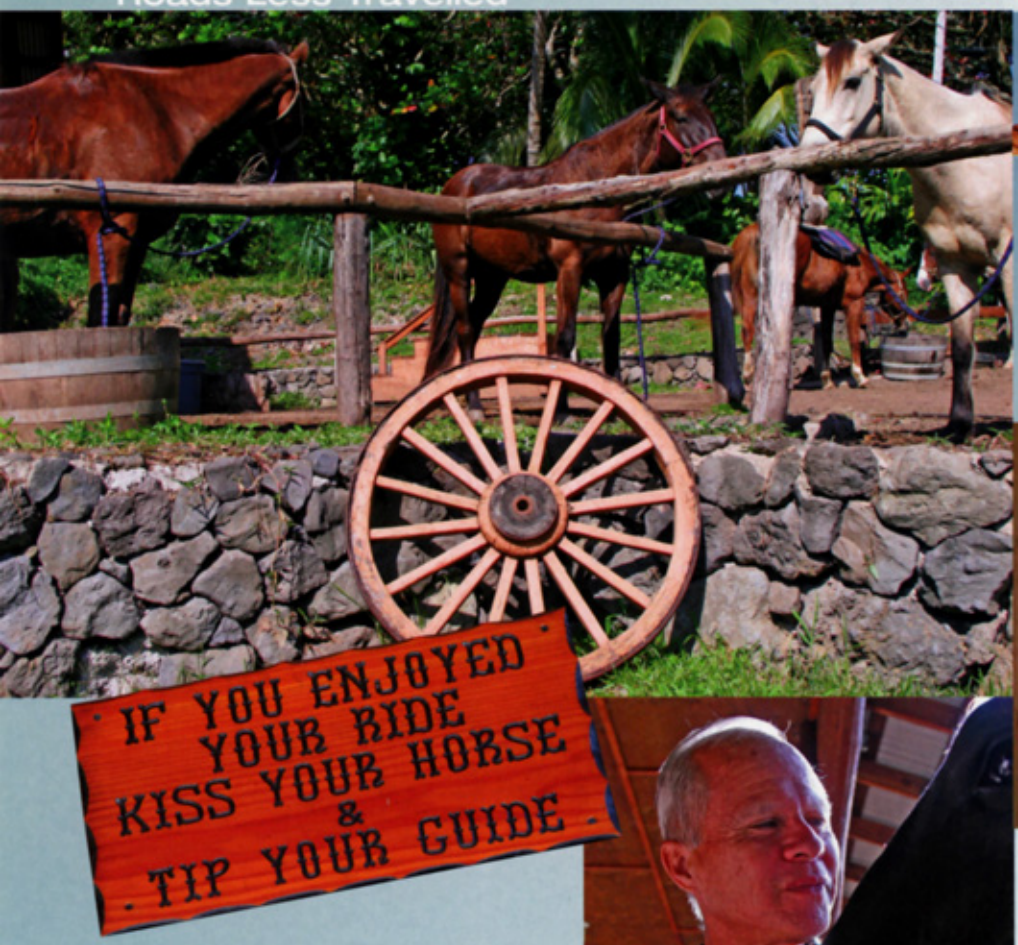
Lincoln summons us into a circle for an oli (chant). Keoni Smith, a handsome young horse trainer, begins. Naone, Hāna and the other kāko'o join in, harmonizing. *Total* chickenskin. They are asking for a silencing of our minds, so that we may soak up whatever wisdom we encounter today while in the forest.

We mount our horses and set out. My trusty steed for the day, Wai Hā, knows who's in charge. It isn't me. She can sense my aversion to corporal punishment. A guava branch switch dangles uselessly at my side while Wai Hā ambles along at her desired pace.

Hawaiian is spoken throughout the ride. Keoni tells us to head "hema" (left). I lead the reins left and say hopefully, "hema," but Wai hā feels right is better. OK. Who's arguing with 800 pounds of horse? Against the paved road, the clip-clopping of hooves sounds like bamboo wind-chimes. Keoni points out landmarks as we pass them: an old sugar mill, a church, the walls of a heiau (temple), and the "house of flexibility," where human sacrifice was "not unusual." Wai Hā's ears seem to twitch attentively at this.

We turn off the road and head up the mountain. Before entering the forest, our guides intone the words to an oli, asking permission.

Waimoku waterfall



Maui Stables

(In Kīpahulu between mile marker 40 and 41 on Hwy. 37)
PO Box 536, Kula, HI 96790
(808) 248-7799
www.mauistables.com

Judging by the reverent demeanor of the other guests, we're all honored to witness this ancient protocol.

We climb the rocky trail. I struggle to keep my horse from dragging me into low-hanging branches. Naone keeps me company, expertly slowing his horse to our pace. He and Lincoln were classmates at Kamehameha Schools, he says. Later they both fought in Vietnam—Lincoln in the Navy and Naone as a paratrooper. Eventually they returned to the green grass of Kīpahulu. This same grass also holds an attraction for Wai Hā.

We emerge into a small clearing. The group dismounts and walks to the cliff's edge. Guava and ʻōhiʻa trees cover the side of a steep gorge—Oʻheʻo Gulch. We can see all 409 feet of Waimoku Falls and its bubbling twin, Waimuki, cascading powerfully down into the valley. We hear the shouts of swimmers below.

Naone points out the silver trunks of koa trees growing on the mountainside. "Kamehameha built his canoe force of 30,000 from this grove," he says.

Back on our horses, we climb up into a wide green pasture overlooking a valley bristling with bamboo. I hold Wai Hā's reins tightly, a little jealous of the experienced riders, two visitors from Illinois, who get to canter. The horses and riders are euphoric, bounding across the mist-ringed pasture.

Returning home on the road, Naone shows his police-sergeant colors. He subtly maneuvers his horse into the path of traffic, motioning for cars to reduce speed as they pass by. At least within the boundaries of Kīpahulu, time slows enough to allow the old ways to thrive.

Back at the stable, Lincoln teases us: "If your knees hurt, your stirrups were too short. If your butt hurts, your stirrups were too long. If everything hurts—just right." I slide from my saddle, perversely hoping everything will hurt tomorrow—physical proof that I've been on this otherworldly adventure. I touch noses with Wai Hā and say goodbye.

Before we leave, the kakoʻo award us each with a single kukui nut strung on a necklace. "This kukui nut represents the knowledge you gained here today," Smith says. "You can return for more." I glance at his full necklace of beads and imagine one day galloping Wai Hā up to the Waimoku Falls lookout.