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Kauai Plantation Railway takes visitors on a ride back in time

Pacific Business News (Honolulu) - by [Jon Letman](#) PBN Contributor

It took five years, 6,000 ties, 30,000 hand-driven spikes and 480,000 pounds of iron rail, but the **Kauai Plantation Railway**, Hawaii's first new railroad to be built in 100 years, is complete.

The brainchild of Kilohana Plantation founders Fred Atkins, Kirk Smith and Boone Morrison, Kauai's newest train attraction is part of an ambitious business venture combining tourism, diversified agriculture and sugar plantation heritage.

The rail project revolves around two refurbished diesel engines -- a 14-ton 1939 Whitcom and a 25-ton 1948 General Electric -- that pull four custom-made passenger cars along a three-mile figure-8 track around the Kilohana Plantation grounds on the outskirts of Lihue.

The jade green wooden cars, named for Kauai's Hanalei, Wailua, Waimea and Wainiha Rivers, formerly ran at Pearl Harbor before being sold to the White Pass & Yukon Railroad in Skagway, Alaska. When operations ceased, the flat car frames returned to Hawaii and have been fitted with new bodies and refurbished brakes, wheels and running gear.

Morrison, an architect and railway designer, based the new design on trains built in the 1870s that once ran on the Big Island.

Together with railway consultant Brook Rother, Morrison designed the trains to run on a narrow-gauge 36-inch track. The cars can comfortably carry up to 144 passengers on 40-minute tours around Kilohana Plantation.

Morrison praised the railway project as a local effort in which everyone from the investors to the laborers had Kauai roots.

"This was a bootstraps operation by Kauai, for Kauai," he said. "This is us guys and we are very proud of that."

Integral parts of Kauai Plantation Railway are the diversified crops introduced to Kilohana. Pepe Trask, general manager for passenger operations, said more than 50 different crops have been planted at Kilohana, including hardwoods such as milo and koa, tropical staples like mango, papaya and lychee and less-common trees like jaboticaba, cashew and acerola.

Scenic plots of fruit trees and taro patches, which attract Hawaiian wild birds, indicate the growing role of agro-tourism on Kauai, said Atkins, Kilohana general partner.



"The train is great for families or those who remember when trains still ran on Kauai," he said. "Today things are changing so fast so it is fun to step back in time and catch not only a glimpse of Kauai's past, but also its future."

As a visitor attraction, the railway has seen a steady climb in passengers since it opened in January, with about 40 percent of them local residents.

"We didn't anticipate so many local riders, but we appreciate their support," Atkins said.

A 1,000-guest-capacity luau production that opened in March has averaged 700 guests three nights a week, according to Trask.

The luau, diversified-agriculture lots, Kauai Plantation Railway and associated depot and gift shop are estimated to bring some 80 new jobs to the Garden Island.

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