

## **Hawaii's Hana Belt Road: 74 bridges in 60 miles**

**Dawn Duensing, PhD**  
**Historian**

### **Abstract**

The serpentine Hana Belt Road traverses Maui's windward coast for sixty miles, frequently hugging precipitous cliffs as it passes waterfalls and crosses deep, v-shaped valleys. The roadway is renowned for its breathtaking scenery, unique cultural landscapes, and an extraordinary collection of 74 one-lane bridges built to carry horses, buggies, and Model-Ts. Today, the road is Maui's most popular scenic drive.

The Hana Belt Road (opened in 1926) is listed on the US National Register of Historic Places. This paper examines the road and bridges as a remarkable engineering feat and a notable civic achievement that substantially influenced Maui's economic and social history. The road was a tremendous financial and technical undertaking for a county government on a remote, isolated Pacific island. The engineering team and labourers were local and exceptionally skilled. They conquered rugged, inaccessible terrain, and construction was frequently complicated by heavy vegetation, torrential rain, landslides, and floods. Hana's bridges were typical of the era. Most were short spans built of concrete-deck girder or flat-slab construction, simple in composition yet individually designed to suit each location. Maui engineers also understood more sophisticated technology as well as the appropriate places to use it. They designed and built concrete-arch bridges for dramatic scenic impact at several locations, recognizing that arch structures were both suitable and economical for gorges where cliffs could serve as natural abutments.

Considered individually, most of the Hana bridges are commonplace and insignificant. Viewed as a collection, however, the bridges present a consistent and simple design that complements a spectacular landscape. Built to access scenery, the historic Hana Belt Road is now part of the scenery and an integral element of East Maui's treasured cultural landscape. While landmark bridges often capture our attention, this paper reminds us to appreciate the artistry and technology of the vernacular.