

[About Hana Hou!](#)
[Hawaiian Airlines](#)
[Subscribe](#)
[Contact Us](#)



Vol. 11, No. 4
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>> [On One Breath](#)



>> [Rolling Sculptures](#)



>> [Return to Olosega](#)

[Hana Hou! Home](#)
[Media Kit](#)
[Marketplace](#)
[Current Issue](#)
 > [Magic Dragons](#)
 > [Semiprecious](#)
[Confections](#)
 > [Soap Springs Eternal](#)
 > [Wine of the Rising Sun](#)
 > [Return of the Konohiki](#)
 > [Maui Bloomsday](#)
 > [Papaya, Mango ...](#)
[Grumichama?](#)
 > [Mapping the Void](#)
 > [Remembering the](#)
[Games](#)
 > [In the Garden of](#)
[Earthy Delights](#)
 > [Ace of Holes](#)
 > [On One Breath](#)
 > [Rolling Sculptures](#)
 > [Return to Olosega](#)
 > [Threading Cultures](#)
 > [The Uber Tuber](#)
 > [Gone Filming](#)
[Best of the Islands](#)
[Back Issues](#)
[Events](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Site Archive](#)
[Crossword](#)

Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



Gone Filming

story by [Julia Steele](#)

photos by [Chris McDonough](#)

[Tom Vendetti's movies](#) are driven by curiosity. He gets shards of stories, glimpses of lives, and he's off and running. For example: A few years ago, Tom—who, in addition to being a filmmaker, is a psychologist on his home island of Maui—took a group of patients on a camping trip to Lana'i. All suffered from serious mental illnesses. Sam, a Cambodian man, was in particularly bad shape and suicidal. "I need to return to Cambodia," a despairing Sam told Tom as the two sat together on the beach in Lana'i. "I need to go back to heal."

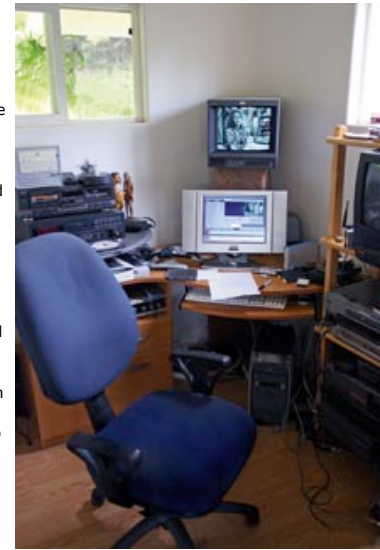
Sam's story poured forth. At age 14, during the Vietnam War era, he'd joined the Cambodian navy. At 17 he was recruited by the United States and sent to Texas for training, told he would soon be returning to Southeast Asia. But then came the Khmer Rouge's ascent to power, and there was no way back into Cambodia. Watching with horror as the Khmer Rouge systematically destroyed his country—and with no news of his family—Sam went into a severe depression. He was still in it years later, living on Maui yet profoundly lost and adrift, when he met Tom.

Tom, listening, was immediately convinced that Sam was right: Going back was exactly what he needed. "People can recover," Tom says, "and they are the experts of their own bodies." That night Tom told Sam that he would help him go home. And, because Tom was Tom, he would make a film about it, too.

Six months later, the pair was in Phnom Penh. They'd done a media blitz, put out an all points bulletin that Sam was back and trying to find any members of his family who might still be alive. One afternoon when they were on a boat headed out of the city, they received a cell phone call. Sam's 81-year-old mother had heard an announcement on the radio and was calling to say that she was alive and that she had traveled to Phnom Penh with Sam's brother and nephew to find him. Sam and Tom got off the boat as quickly as possible and returned to the city. After a joyful reunion, the family then drove 56 miles to the village where Sam's family was living. When they pulled up, there were seventy-five people waiting for Sam, including two long-lost sisters. Everyone hugged him and kissed him and wagged their fingers at him. "Where have you been?" they asked lovingly. He'd been in hell—but he was back. And it just kept getting better. On the day Sam left Phnom Penh to return to Hawai'i, another brother showed up—a fisherman who'd been out at sea when he heard on the radio that Sam was in Cambodia. He'd come in from the ocean to find him.

"Today," says Tom, "Sam is a totally different person. He raised funds to build a school in the village. The Royal Opera of Cambodia performed in his honor." And the whole tale is documented in Tom's deeply moving 2003 film, *Years of Darkness: A Spiritual Journey to Recovery*. Tom is the first to tell you that really, he can't help himself: He has to make movies. It is his method of storytelling, his way of recording the amazing people and events that routinely enter his life. Is it that he actually receives more of life's gifts than most or that he's just more aware of those gifts? No matter—they come regardless. There was, for example, the time in 1983 when Tom headed to Everest Base Camp in Nepal, a young man traveling the world. Turned out the guy sitting in front of him on the plane was Tenzing Norgay, the legendary Sherpa who'd ascended Everest with Sir Edmund Hillary. And Tenzing was about to embark on a two-week trek to meet none other than Hillary himself. "Perhaps I can walk with you," he said to Tom after they disembarked from the plane, and the two made a pilgrimage toward the mountain. When they arrived at their destination, Tenzing ceremoniously introduced Tom to Hillary as a friend.

While that gift came before Tom actually got his hands on a camera and began making movies, it informed the film he has just completed, *Bhutan—Taking the Middle Path to Happiness*. It was his love of the Himalayas and his respect for the mountains' cultures that drew him to Bhutan. "I always wanted to go there," Tom says. "For years I was going to Katmandu, but Bhutan was restricted and very expensive. Then I saw some incredible black-and-white still photography shot in Bhutan by a photographer who lives on Kaua'i, John Wehrheim. I told him I'd like to make a documentary." One thing led to another. Tom wrote to the Bhutanese government explaining his desire to make a film that would explore that kingdom's commitment to its peoples' happiness. To his shock and delight, another gift was bestowed: "Congratulations!" came the letter from Bhutan's



government. "Your proposal has been accepted. When can you come?"

Tom and his crew were some of the first Westerners ever allowed to make a politically oriented film in the country. Tom's frequent collaborators, flutist Paul Horn and composer Christopher Hedge, gave a concert for Bhutan's king, accompanied by Jigme Drukpa from Bhutan's Royal Academy of Performing Arts. There were interviews with officials and citizens young and old. "We were amazed at the joy and optimism of the people," says Tom, "and the overwhelming support for their government and its ideals.

"It's a matter of being interested in something," says Tom, musing further on his filmic odyssey, "a human or cultural element that I think should be shared with the world."

Page: **1** | [2](#)

[\[back\]](#)