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## Superferry gets holiday boost in riders

Soaring airfares may be helping Alakai as it nears projected loads

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Hawaii Superferry reported its heaviest loads yet over the Memorial Day weekend.

The interisland ferry carried more than 5,500 passengers and 1,500 vehicles between Maui and O'ahu over the four-day holiday period. That's an average of 393 people and 107 vehicles per one-way sailing.

The numbers are still slightly below the company's projected passenger load of 410 people per voyage, but with the summer vacation months ahead and calmer seas, Superferry officials are looking forward to continued gains in ridership.

"It was a great weekend and, of course, sales have been ramping up every week since we got into regular operations (in April). We've been increasing about 500 passengers a week for the last four weeks," said Hawaii Superferry President and CEO Tom Fargo.

The growing popularity of the new interisland ferry is due to a combination of factors, Fargo said, including the summer travel season, competitive fares and "the unique experience" of sailing aboard the company's 350-foot, high-speed catamaran, Alakai.

Before a six-week drydock period that began in February, the Alakai was carrying an average of 115 people and 40 cars from Honolulu to Maui, and 87 people and 39 cars from Maui to Honolulu.

Based on current bookings, traffic for May — the ferry's first full month of operations — is projected at more than 21,000 passengers and 5,800 vehicles, Fargo said.

For comparison purposes, statewide interisland air traffic was estimated at 41,600 passengers per day in a 2004 report by Enterprise Hawaii on the economic impacts of the Superferry.

### **attractive fares**

The Alakai has a capacity of 866 people and 282 cars. It makes a daily morning run between Honolulu and Maui, and offers an afternoon roundtrip as well, on Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Rising airfares and travel costs may be boosting public interest in the ferry, said transportation management expert David Bess, a professor at the University of Hawai'i's college of business administration.

"When you look at what's happening with the price of fuel, the cost of rental cars and the economic difficulties, people are looking for alternatives to keep costs down," he said.

"Depending on how many people are going over and these kinds of things, (the Superferry) is an alternative."

Superferry is offering \$39 passenger fares and \$55 vehicle fares through June 5, with extended promotional pricing of \$49 per passenger and \$65 per vehicle offered for travel from June 6 through Sept. 30, except during peak periods.

The cheapest one-way fare between Maui and Oahu offered yesterday on the Hawaiian Airlines Web site was \$64.

## **fuel surcharge waived**

By waiving its fuel surcharge, now at 49.8 percent, Superferry so far has been able to shield noncommercial customers from escalating fuel prices that are driving up costs for all transportation sectors.

The fuel surcharge, calculated monthly based on the price of fuel, is added to the cost of a ticket. On a \$49 Superferry fare, the surcharge would be an additional \$24.40 without the waiver.

Airlines also factor in fuel surcharges in determining fares, either including it in the ticket price or adding it onto fare quotes.

Fargo would not comment on how long the company would be able to absorb fuel costs without passing them on to customers. He said Superferry will continue to evaluate its pricing policies, which are regulated by the Public Utilities Commission.

In any event, Fargo said cost may not be a determining factor for many travelers in choosing between the ferry and interisland airlines, because of the vast differences in the kind of service each provides.

"The real advantage (to Superferry) is that you can take your car and all the kids and the cooler. I think that makes it kind of a unique, attractive experience," he said.

## **race cars on board**

Each day the Alakai operates, the company also is able to erase memories of its herky-jerky startup period, when the ferry faced lengthy delays and cancellations caused by protests, legal challenges, rough seas and unanticipated repairs.

"Reliability is key and now that they have that resolved, coupled with calmer summer seas, I would think they would attract a lot of passengers over the summertime," Bess said.

Kahalu'u residents Teckla Lopez and her husband used the \$5 promotional fares they purchased during the Superferry's initial startup in August to sail to Maui over the Memorial Day weekend.

The Lopezes, owners of a 1927 Ford Model T, were part of a 20-vehicle group of classic-car owners who boarded the Alakai over the weekend. On previous trips, the car enthusiasts shipped their cars to Maui and the Big Island on barges.

"It was terrific," said Lopez, 62, of the ferry. "Our whole gang really enjoyed it. They want to go again."

The Alakai also transported approximately 20 race cars to Maui for the George "Flintstone" Andrade Memorial Day Weekend Drags at Maui Raceway Park.

Bryan Gomes, 40, of Kahalu'u brought his 1969 candy-orange Camaro on the ferry in an enclosed trailer. He said he prefers the ferry to barges because "you're with your vehicle and you don't have to take a day off to get your vehicle down there" to the harbor to load it onto the barge in advance.

Gomes said he paid \$550 to transport his trailer on the Alakai, about half what it would have cost on a barge.

With no auto-racing facilities on O'ahu, Gomes said he and others are looking forward to competing in more Neighbor Island events. "It's something to look forward to," he said.

Fargo said there are no plans to increase the frequency of afternoon service to Maui from four days a week, or to begin service to Kaua'i. Superferry is expected to launch service to the Big Island next year, after delivery of its second \$85 million vessel.