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Why a small ship cruise is the best way to discover Hawaiian culture

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Cruising around Hawaii on a small ship gives a chance to really connect with the magnificent culture



By [Sharon McDonnell](#), TRAVEL WRITER

12 SEPTEMBER 2019 • 5:40PM

After a conch shell was blown announcing our group's arrival in Molokai's extremely lush Halawa Valley, we pressed our foreheads and noses against the faces of the family we met while breathing in – the traditional Hawaiian greeting, or *honi*.

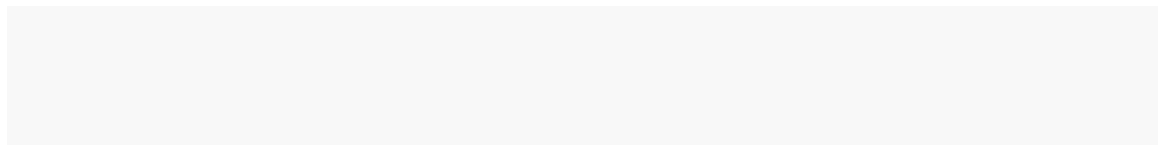
We were learning about ancient Hawaiian traditions from the Solatorio family, who have lived in this valley, one of the earliest recorded settlements in Hawaii, where Polynesians settled as early as 650 AD, for 50 generations.

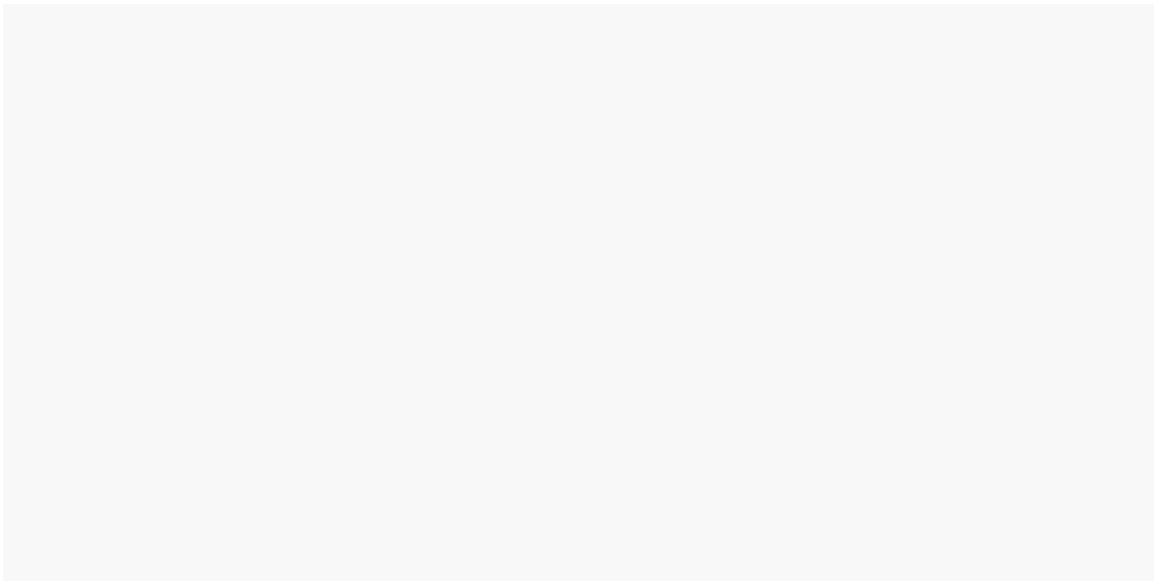
“There was no me, my or I – just our or we. Everyone lived off the land, each family had a specific responsibility and everything got done. Certain families were designated to take care of streams, others irrigation ditches and so on,” said Greg Solatorio.

“At age five, you learned to bring home something to eat, that you fished, picked or caught.”

After watching him pound poi, the taro plant paste that, it seems, Hawaiians are happy to eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner, we tasted it, both plain (an acquired taste, one I haven't acquired) and with preserved fish. He showed us a book on Molokai's pre-history that an archeologist at Honolulu's esteemed Bishop Museum researched with his father, Pilipo, now 80, and demolished myths left and right.

Pineapples aren't native to Hawaii (they were brought from South America), nor are ukuleles (Portuguese immigrants from the Azores brought small four-string guitars), macadamia nuts or sugarcane.





The Safari Explorer has what mariners call “feet” – she can get into wild areas other ships can’t visit CREDIT: UNCRUISE

We were in this enchanted spot thanks to UnCruise Adventures, after a drive on a road hugging the coast past a thrilling contrast of colours: knife-edged green velvety cliffs, dark-blue ocean, black volcanic rocks and churning white waves, beneath a sunny azure sky.

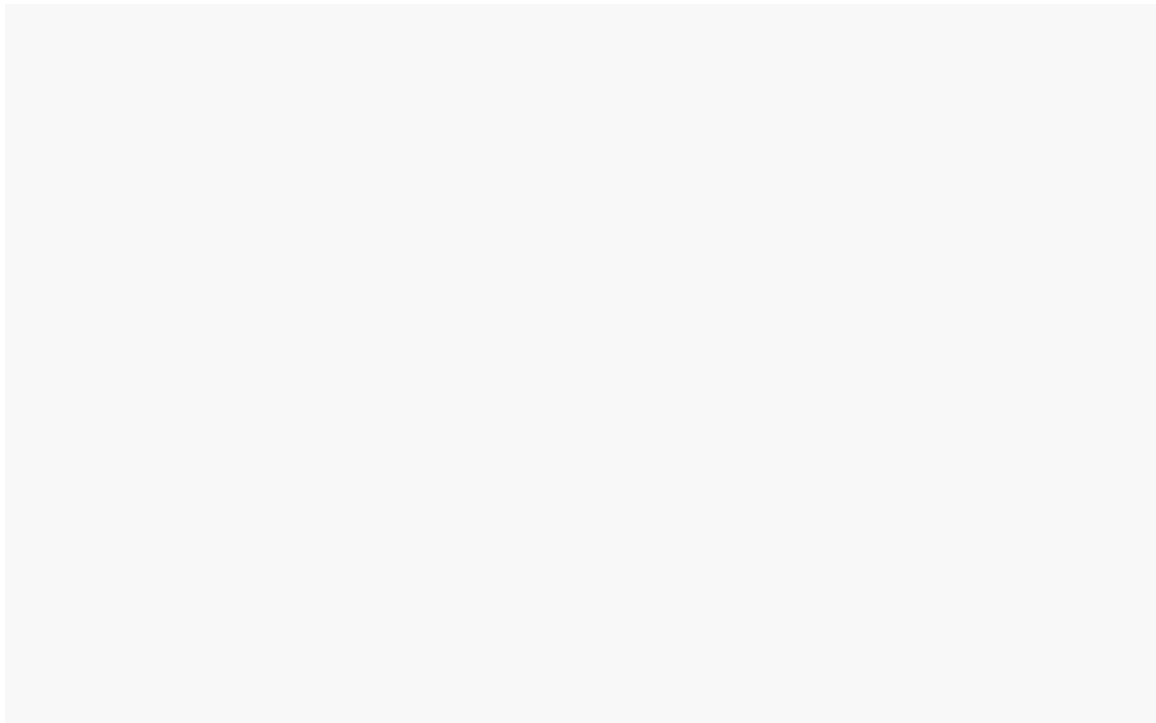
Our seven-night voyage within Hawaii began and ended on Molokai, an atypical Hawaiian island without a single traffic light or structure taller than three floors, just one hotel, a two-block main street heavy with the scent of plumeria blossoms and less than 7,000 people. Lanai, a sleepy island once home to the world’s biggest pineapple plantations (now gone), Maui and the Big Island (the latter two with dozens of hotels and nightlife) were also on the agenda for our small-ship cruise. But 'small' was an exaggeration: our 145ft Safari Explorer had only 18 cabins.

Our dinner at the Molokai Museum & Cultural Center (our only meal not aboard ship) was a feast: octopus stew in coconut milk with taro leaf, mango chicken, spicy poke (ahi tuna), *kālua* pork and salmon cubes, accompanied by two locals playing Hawaiian music. Our ship meals were civilised, gourmet affairs, always a choice of seafood, meat or vegetarian dishes, made from local ingredients – such as Thai yellow coconut milk curry, steak with Kona coffee rub, goat cheese in a honey soup flecked with thyme.

Almost all passengers were aged over 50, but there were four children, ages 10 to 14, in a three-generation family with two sets of cousins. Almost everyone was from the western US (the UK is UnCruise’s fourth biggest

market behind the US, Australia and Canada).

Before dinner, we socialised at the bar for wine, beer or the cocktail of the day. Our expedition leader gave talks in the lounge, on topics like endemic species (25 percent of all marine life in Hawaii is endemic, or found nowhere else and native to Hawaii), coral reefs (no touching, please; it's a living thing, and habitat for marine creatures) to types of fish. Every day, a Hawaiian film was watchable on the televisions in our cabins – I was delighted to see a documentary on the Molokai family we met this way, Sons of Halawa – and so were many DVDs in the library.



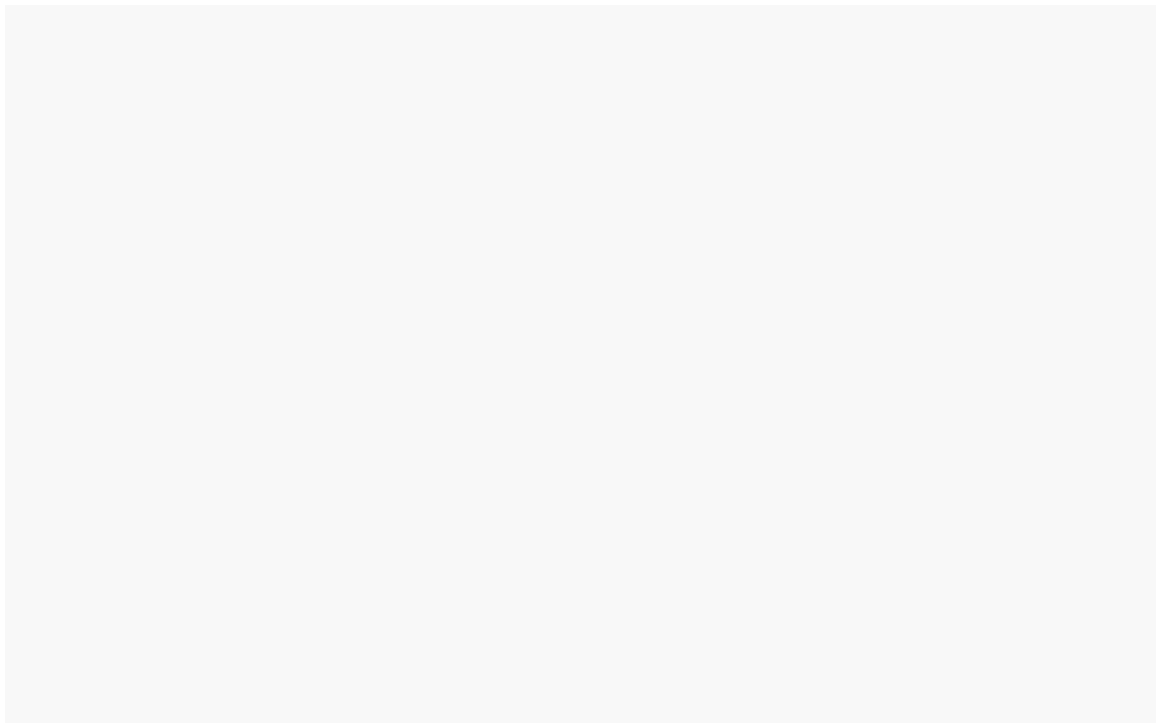
'Molokai, an atypical Hawaiian island without a single traffic light or structure taller than three floors.. heavy with the scent of plumeria blossoms' CREDIT: ISTOCK

On a snorkel trip in Maui's Honolua Bay one morning, we marvelled at neon-coloured fish, from orange-banded surgeonfish, blue-striped snapper to spiky sea urchins (I'd seen the latter previously only in sushi restaurants). That afternoon, we kayaked past black volcanic spires called sea stacks. Another day, we kayaked in the Big Island's Kikolo Bay, calm and smooth, past black lava rock flow, mountains and 50 shades of green, into a tranquil lagoon.

Seeing giant manta rays at night was one of the supreme highlights of their lives, a couple from Seattle I met confided, so I looked forward to it. Since the huge, pancake-flat creatures, up to 13ft wide and up to 1,300 pounds, eat

krill, tiny sea creatures, divers at the bottom shine lights upward to draw krill, which in turn draw the manta rays (a “campfire,” our UnCruise expedition leader called it). Guests in snorkel masks clutch a hole in a surfboard and look down at the harmless, toothless mantas vacuum up the krill.

Alas, none appeared – Mother Nature is fickle, so sightings aren’t guaranteed, just like the Northern Lights. Perhaps the show was elsewhere that night (February to April is best; this was August). But I heard such vivid descriptions, I felt I’d seen them. The next day, however, we were rewarded by seeing a pack of spinner dolphins frolicking, leaping and twisting in the air, then swimming right next to our ship – a consolation prize.



Hulihe'e Palace, a former home of Hawaiian royalty, is now a museum CREDIT: ISTOCK

On a visit to Hawaii’s oldest royal palace, Hulihe’e Palace, on the Big Island in Kailua-Kona, we learned about the royals who ruled the kingdom of Hawaii before it was overthrown in 1893, only becoming a US state in 1959.

As a Californian, I was electrified to hear how three Hawaiian princes introduced surfing to California, back in 1885 in Santa Cruz (they attended a military high school just south of San Francisco). Quintessentially Hawaiian, surfing was even documented by Captain Cook in his journals in 1777-78. I was also intrigued to hear that Princess Ruth refused to speak English, and chose to sleep in a grass hut outside the palace, for the sake of tradition.

Legends were woven throughout our journey. The naupaka, an odd half-flower we saw on the Big Island, was born because a princess and a fisherman fell in love, but the gods forbade their union. So the princess tore the flower in her hair in half, and went to live on the mountain alone, while the fisherman returned to the sea. Today, one variety of flower grows by the shore, another variety in the mountains: put them together, to form a single flower. The lovers are reunited at last.

UnCruise's Safari Explorer seven-night cruise (and seven-night pre- and post-cruise land package) around Hawaii from £7,995 per person based on two sharing. Available year-round (0800 316 0194; bon-voyage.co.uk).

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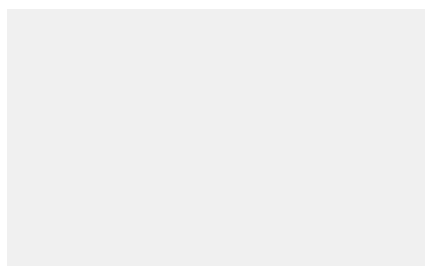


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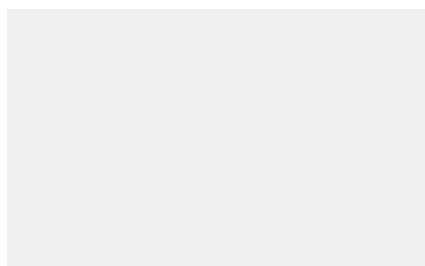
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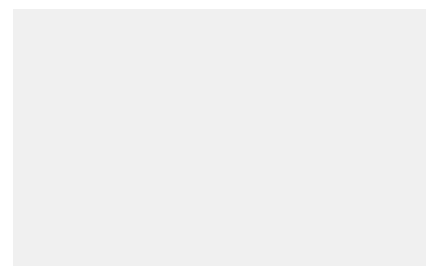
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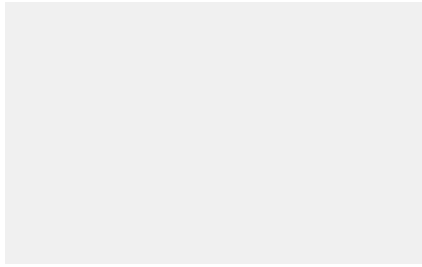
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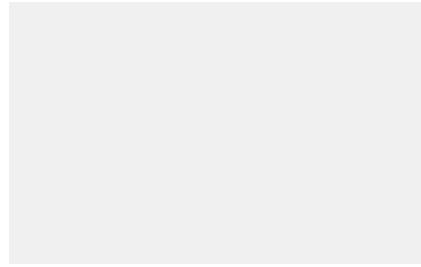
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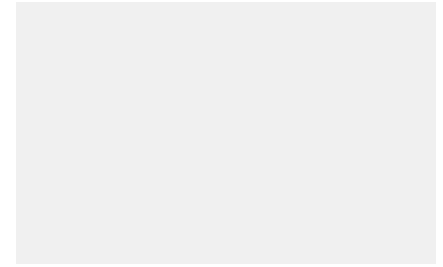
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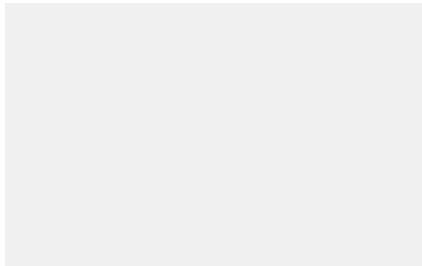
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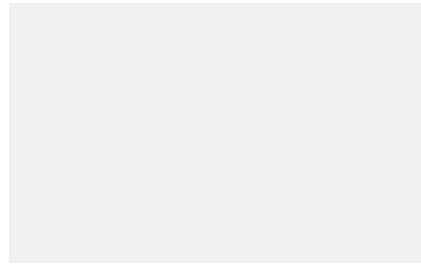
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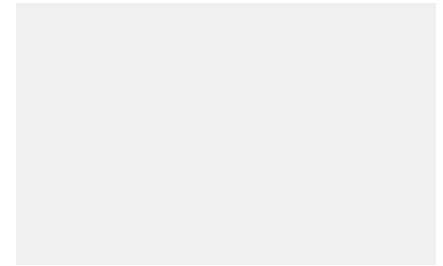
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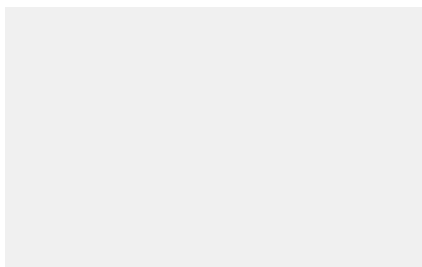
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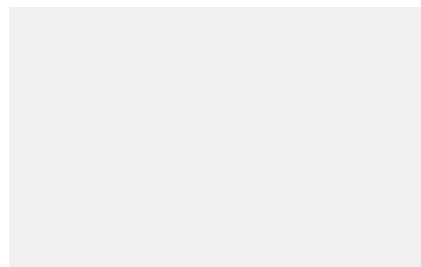
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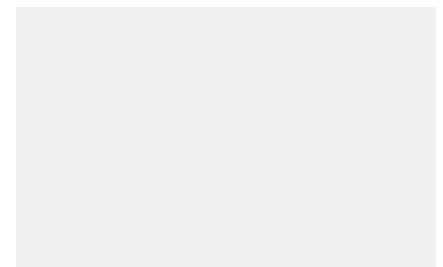


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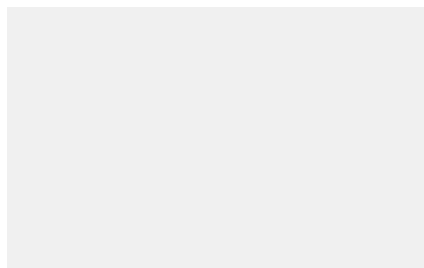
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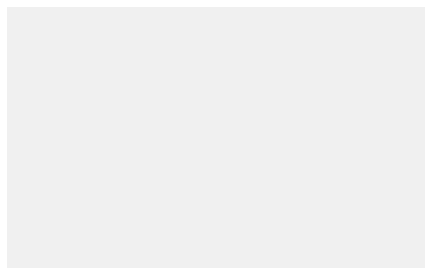
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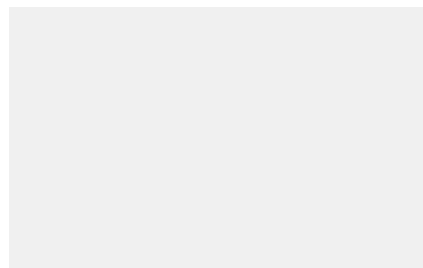
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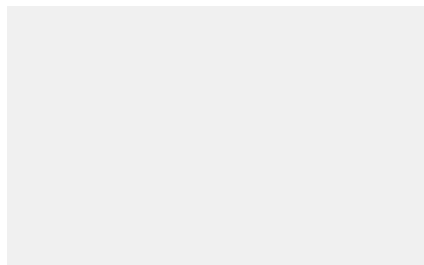
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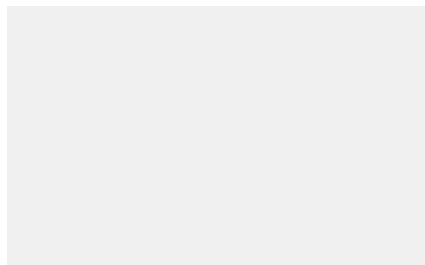
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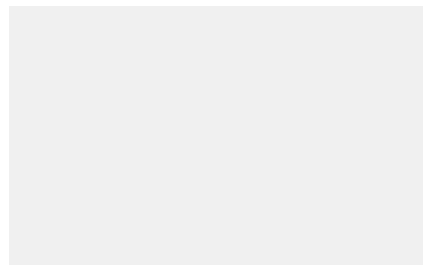
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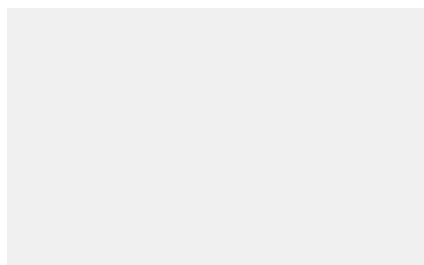
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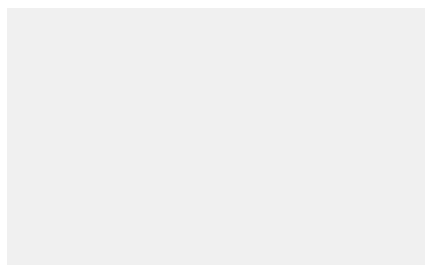
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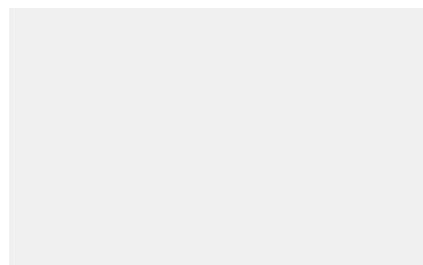
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