

# Top Places to Visit

Here you will find our personal recommendations for the top places to visit, and the best things to do. While only our suggestions, we think you'll agree these places are the cream of the crop. Big Island of Hawaii definitely has its fair share of gems to behold...

## [Akaka Falls State Park](#)

The stroll to reach Akaka Falls is almost as beautiful as the falls itself. After a taking a short set of stairs turn left and you will be led on a paved pathway through amazing greenery and small waterfalls flowing into babbling streams. Everywhere you look you are surrounded by giant Ti plants, bird of paradise, torch ginger, bamboo, and split leaf philodendron.



You will hear the dull roar of the waterfall before you see it. Just as you round a corner you will catch a glimpse of Akaka Falls free-falling 442 feet through a green-lined gorge. In our opinion, the best time to photograph the falls is early in the morning on a slightly cloudy day.

## [Hawaii Volcanoes National Park](#)

Originally founded in 1916, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HVNP) is a living, breathing testament to the awesome power of Mother Nature. HVNP is located 30 miles southwest of Hilo and 96 miles southeast of Kona. It's open year-round, 24 hours a day. HVNP is home to Kilauea Volcano, the most continuously active volcano in the world, and the park offers the unique experience of walking on land that is younger than you are. Visitors are also witness to the world's largest volcano Mauna Loa at 13,677 feet. Mauna Loa, meaning 'long mountain,' encompasses a huge chunk of the Big Island (see our geology page). In recognition of its outstanding natural values, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park has been honored as an International Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site.



### [Rainbow Falls State Park](#)

One of several falls along the path of the Wailuku River, Rainbow Falls is a gorgeous waterfall to visit early in the morning. Its name originated from the fact that on some early mornings a rainbow can be seen arching across the falls. Waianuenue Falls is its Hawaiian name which means “rainbow seen in water.” Like all waterfalls, Rainbow Falls’ display is dependent on recent rainfall.



### [Pololu Valley Awini Trail](#)

If you take the time to drive all the way to [Pololu Valley](#) at the end of Highway 270, don't settle for the view from the overlook! Take the time to explore.

The trail, sometimes referred to as Awini Trail, that leads down to the black sand beach ([Pololu Valley Beach](#)) takes approximately half an hour to hike. The dirt and root trail can be steep in places, but the various views of the valley along the way make even part of the walk worth it. You will find the trailhead near the parking lot. Look mauka and you should see a brown sign guiding you to the trail. It is smooth sailing going down, but getting back up can be a real workout.



### [Waipio Valley](#)

Located along the Hamakua Coast on the northeastern coast of the Big Island of Hawai'i, Waipi'o Valley is the largest and southernmost of the seven valleys on the windward side of the Kohala Mountains. Time and nature's elements have carved an unimaginably massive valley filled with deep green-encrusted cliffs cut by plunging waterfalls. Its floor is carpeted with forests and neatly formed taro patches interspersed with the homes of its few residents. At the mouth of the valley the ocean licks the mile-long black sand beach which is sliced in half by the river that is partially fed by the 1,200 ft. free-falling Hi'ilawe Falls which resides deep inside the valley.



The road into the valley is incredibly steep and out of respect for the residents we do not encourage driving into the valley. However, we have been told that it is fine to walk in and hike to the beach, but do not explore the interior of the valley without a tour guide.

### [Hilo](#)

The most notable location on the East side of the Big Island of Hawai'i is undoubtedly Hilo town. Hilo is the island's largest city (second largest in the state - population wise) and also takes the title for the wettest city in the United States (70+ inches yearly). Hilo is an especially lush city with several gorgeous orchid gardens, interesting parks (the most prominent being Liliu'okalani Garden), museums, and other various attractions. Hilo borders a beautiful bay and is often cooled by sea breezes and tradewind showers.



### [South Point at Ka Lae](#)

The turnoff for South Point Road is between the 69 and 70 mile markers with a large green sign pointing makai. The traditional Hawaiian name for South Point is Ka Lae meaning "the point." The two-lane paved road cuts through macadamia nut groves, pasture land and a Mauna Loa lava flow. About five miles into the 12 mile trip to Ka Lae the road shifts to a one-lane rugged passageway through vast, flat pastureland. Short, scrubby plants cling to the fields while cattle graze. A little further down the road you'll see rows of metal giants reaching toward the skies, their huge metal arms straining against the fierce South Point wind. When it was built in the late 1980s, the Kamoā Wind Farm had over 30 operating turbines. Some of these massive windmills may still spin but many, rusted and broken down are a bit sad against the landscape. Off the road and closer to the point are Tawhiri Power's 14 brand new GE turbines, which when completed in early 2007 were expected to bring power to 10,000 Big Island homes.



### [Crater Rim Drive](#)

Crater Rim Drive is an 11-mile road that skirts the edge of the Kilauea Caldera in [Hawaii Volcanoes National Park](#) and contains several scenic views and hiking opportunities. If you had to choose only one thing to do in HVNP (may that never occur!) this drive would be it. The Park entrance station is just off Hwy 11, 95 miles south-east of Kona and 30 miles south-west of Hilo. Keep right onto Crater Rim Drive for Kilauea visitor center in 0.3 mile. They will be able to answer any questions you may have about the road/trails ahead.



### [Thurston Lava Tube](#)

Located in Thurston Lava Tube is one of the main attractions in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park . Like veins leading from the central “heart” of the volcano, lava tubes direct molten earth toward the ocean. As the lava flows the outer crust begins to harden while the inner lava continues to flow. Once the flow stops, the tunnel formation remains. Thurston Lava Tube could date back some 350-500 years. The tube is named for Lorrin Thurston, a newspaper publisher that played an instrumental role in creating the park.



### [Waimea Town](#)

At the two mile marker Kohala Mountain Road intersects Highway 19. Take a left to head toward Waimea town. It won't take you long to figure out that Waimea is not your average Hawaiian town. These are the lands where west and far west meet and create the paniolo, the Hawaiian cowboy. The Parker Ranch, formerly one of the largest, privately-owned ranches in the country, has a presence in just about everything in Waimea, from the schools to the hospital. At one point in time, the ranch covered 225,000 acres of land, 9 percent of the Big Island.

Hawai'i's history with cattle began in 1793 when King Kamehameha the Great received five head of cattle as a gift from British Captain George Vancouver. The king quickly labeled the cattle “kapu” (off limits) in order to allow them to grow and thrive. What seemed like a great idea at the time eventually turned into a dangerous nuisance for the native people living in Kohala and on the slopes of Mauna Kea.

The wild cattle, which were anything but docile, would rampage homes, destroying property and injuring people. To help solve this problem, the king called on John Palmer Parker, a Massachusetts-born sailor who had already garnered favor with the king in 1809 at age 19. Parker would capture and butcher the cattle, then sell the meat to visiting ships.

The process sounds a lot easier than it actually was since the cattle had adapted to their wild surroundings and were rather quick to avoid being caught. As his fee, Parker kept the best cattle for himself.

### [Halemaumau Crater Overlook](#)

If you were to have visited this overlook in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HVNP) in the 19th century, you would understand how it earned the name “firepit.” During this time a swirling, fiery lake of lava filled the crater. The parking lot is about half way around the 11-mile Crater Rim Drive on the left and a short 10-minute walk down to the lookout. It is not paved, so wear close-toed shoes with good grip.



Once you reach the overlook, you will be peering into the volcano goddess Pele’s sanctuary. Although her flows are plunging into the ocean elsewhere, her home is in Halema’uma’u. Cultural ceremonies are held and offerings are sometimes left for her on the crater rim.

### [Pololu Valley Overlook](#)

As you pass the 28 mile marker on Highway 270 past Hawi, the coast will open up and you will suddenly be treated to a breathtaking view of our next stop, Pololu Valley. On a sunny day you will see the vibrant blue and green ocean crashing into the rugged sea cliffs and the deep green carpet of vegetation lining the sides of the valley. A short walk to the lookout reveals the many folds and creases of the inner part of the valley which drop into a rich, green floor. Lines of ironwood trees divide the lush valley from the grainy black sand beach that meets the ocean.



Early morning is the best time to visit, when you'll have a chance of snagging a parking space in the small lot. Pololu is the end of a string of seven major valleys carved into the northern Kohala coast of the Big

Island which ends with Waipio Valley. This now uninhabited valley was once used to grow taro. The root of the taro plant is pounded down and mixed with water to create a purple paste called poi, a staple of the Hawaiian diet.

#### [Four Mile Scenic Route](#)

Halfway between mile markers 8 and 7 on the Hawaii Belt road you will see a rather large sign that says "Scenic Drive." The Scenic Drive actually begins right after mile marker 11 and runs parallel to the Hawaii Belt Road until it reconnects between mile markers 8 and 7. We have chosen to take you onto the Scenic Drive at this point because most of the beautiful scenery is at this end.



#### [Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden](#)

About 1.5 miles down Onomea Scenic Drive the parking lot for the gardens will be on the mauka side of the road. Admission is a bit steep (\$15 for adults, \$5 for children) but it is money well spent for the vast natural beauty of the Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden. This garden was a gift to the people of the world from Dan J. Lutkenhouse, a businessman from San Francisco.



Currently, over 2,000 species of plants, including a large variety of orchids, heliconia, gingers, bromeliads, and palms, spread throughout the garden mixed with several natural waterfalls and a view of Onomea Bay. With the aid of the map provided by the garden, you will easily spend several hours ambling through the various sections of the garden. Every twist and turn leads to a new plant or tree.

### [Kailua-Kona Town](#)

Nestled at the bottom of the Hualalai Volcano, is the main western city of Kailua-Kona. In ancient times, this area was considered the premier place to live due to the excellent weather and good water. Many kings made their homes here. Later, missionaries built churches and residences turning the tiny fishing village into a small seaport.

The main street, Ali'i Drive, runs along the oceanfront through the heart of the city from Kailua Pier to the Kuamo'o Battlefield. This charming town mixes numerous historical sites with modern tourist attractions. Restaurants, shops, and hotels abound. Sunsets viewed from the seawall are almost always spectacular. During the right conditions the ocean will crash the party and send waves smashing into the bay wall and onto the sidewalks (and unsuspecting tourists!)



### [Kilauea Iki Trail](#)

As you stand at the Kilauea Iki overlook you can see a lightly-etched trail stretching across the crater floor. From your 400 ft high vantage point you might be able to see little specks walking the path: those are people. Kilauea Iki is an approximately four-mile loop that takes 2-3 hours. It skirts the rim of the crater, dips down and across the floor and back up to the overlook. You can either take the Crater Rim Trail to the right around the rim of Kilauea Iki and then down to the crater floor then back up the other side or go left and begin the hike with the descent into the crater. We prefer the first option simply because you can enjoy the beauty of the rim rain forest at the beginning of the hike and the ascent is slightly less arduous.



### [Punaluu Black Sand Beach](#)

The sand comes in many colors in Ka'u – black, green and white. Punalu'u, the most easily accessible black sand beach on the island is a little gem tucked just off highway 11 near mile marker 55. The thick, coarse grains of volcanic black sand, created by the crashing of waves against lava, encrust the waters of this bay.



Graceful coconut palms enclose the beach creating a rich strip of beach irresistible to sunbathers of the human and turtle variety.

During your visit you are likely to see honu, green sea turtles, lounging on the warm sands or floating in the little crevices near the shore. Please do not touch or disturb these protected animals. Sometimes scientists will rope off areas to observe these gentle creatures. The waters here, while fine for hard-shelled swimmers, aren't ideal. Rip currents are common and even on calm days it can still be treacherous.

### [Chain of Craters Road](#)

Chain of Craters Road may be one of the most unique experiences you have on the Big Island. Stretching 18 miles and going from 4,000 ft. elevation to sea level, this scenic drive along the East Rift Zone of the volcano in [HVNP](#) is pock marked with craters of varying shapes and sizes, lava flows, petroglyphs, and, possibly, active lava. Along this road you will also find many interesting hikes, breathtaking vistas, and the opportunity to see Madame Pele do what she does best.



### [World Botanical Gardens](#)

Near mile marker 16 turn mauka onto Leopolino Road, there will be large sign marking the World Botanical Gardens. In a few more years this will be a truly spectacular garden, but now it is still too young to offer the same variety of mature plants that other gardens have to offer. Admission is a steep \$11, but it does include an exclusive view of the triple-tiered [Uma Uma Falls](#).



The drive to the falls begins across the street from the ticket booth and is a bit bumpy as it passes through marked native trees. You will reach a small parking lot and the lookout for Uma Uma Falls. The three levels which Uma Uma Falls flows down resemble great lava stone steps with recesses that create tranquil little pools surrounded by tropical plants and trees.

### [Puuhonua o Honaunau Historical Park](#)

Pu'uhonua o Honaunau (poo-oo-ho-noo-ah o hoe-now-now), formerly known as Place of Refuge at Honaunau, is an incredibly beautiful and educational experience that no trip to the Big Island should be without. After you pay your \$5 per vehicle fee and walk past the educational displays, you round a corner and are transplanted into the world of the ancient Hawaiians. You are walking on the grounds where generations of ali'i (ruling class) Hawaiians lived and worked. In the Hawaiian culture, the Place of Refuge was where lawbreakers could find asylum and forgiveness. The Pu'uhonua o Honaunau is a national park featuring reconstructed Hawaiian houses, temples and petro glyphs. But the most remarkable site in this national park is the 1,000 foot long, 10 feet high, 17 feet thick wall that separates the Place of Refuge from the palace, built in the 1500s.



### [Kilauea Caldera Overlook](#)

The parking lot for the Kilauea Caldera Overlook is on the left side of [Crater Rim Drive](#) about .7 miles past the Steam Vents. From this vantage point you can truly appreciate the magnitude of the Kilauea Caldera which spans two miles and drops 400 feet. Imagine this vast space oozing with molten rock. A frightening and awe-inspiring thought for sure. Geologists now believe that the bubbling lake of lava exists 2 miles below the floor. They also think the caldera was formed during the 1790 explosion which provided the ash that paves the walkway.



In the distance to the right is a large depression. This is the famous Halema'uma'u Crater or firepit. ...

### [Pololu Valley Beach](#)

This black sand beach which separates the beautiful Pololu Valley from the ocean is a lovely stretch of fine black sand rimmed with black lava rock and shockingly emerald green beach ground cover. However, rough surf and the occasional appearance of Portuguese Man-o-wars make it not the ideal beach for swimming.

[Awini Trail](#) leads down to the black sand beach takes approximately half an hour to hike. The dirt and root trail can be steep in places, but the various views of the valley along the way make even part of the walk worth it. You will find the trailhead near the parking lot. Look mauka and you should see a brown sign guiding you to the trail. It is smooth sailing going down, but getting back up can be a real workout. Once you reach the valley, you'll pass through a small picnic area and can either continue on the path above the beach or go down and wiggle your toes in some black sand.



### [Kona Coast Kekaha Kai State Park](#)

Kona Coast or Kekaha Kai State Park is 1,600 acres of beautiful sand and pristine blue waters. There are actually several beaches in the park which is accessed via a partially paved 1.5 mile road (caution: driving on unpaved roads may be in violation of your car rental agreement) located between the 91 and 90 mile markers on Highway 19 north of Kona. There are two beaches here and access to a third much more secluded one called Makalawena.



Once you reach the first parking area you can take the path to your right and north to Mahai'ula Bay a lovely crescent of white sand and clear waters. This is a popular beach with people and honu who choose nice warm spots to sun bathe. (Remember: do not touch or get too close to the honu). Many freshwater springs bubble up through the sand and sometimes form small pools. The mixture of salt and freshwater can sometimes make the water cloudy and therefore undesirable for snorkeling. The swimming however is fine and there are plenty of shady spots to spread out a beach blanket. Just be mindful of strong currents and monitor ocean conditions.

### [Kilauea Iki Overlook](#)

Half a mile past Thurston Lava Tube on the left on Crater Rim Drive. in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is the parking lot for Kilauea Iki Crater which is home to one of the most amazing lava eruptions in the park's history. In November 1959 Kilauea Iki began gushing streams of incandescent orange lava. The glowing fountains of molten earth reached heights of 1,900 feet. At one point Kilauea Iki was a 414 ft. deep lake of bubbling lava.



### [Puukohola Heiau](#)

As you approach the junction of Highway 19 and 270 heading north, look makai and you should see a majestic stone structure atop a hill. This is Pu'ukohola Heiau. When you reach the junction with 270 you will go left. This heiau, a sacred place of worship, has a particularly interesting history. Built between 1790-91, Pu'ukohola was the project of the great King Kamehameha. Legend says that King Kamehameha was unable to fully complete his mission to conquer and unite all the islands. In search of an answer, he sent his mother to speak with the prophet Kapoukahi who told her that Kamehameha would rule the islands if he built a large heiau in honor of his family god, Ku, on Pu'ukohola (Whale Hill). Taking these words to heart, Kamehameha enlisted the help of many "volunteer" workers to complete the 224 by 100 foot structure that reaches 16-20 feet into the sky.

