

Travel Guide: Big Island, Hawaii

Visiting the Hawaii Islands is a dream many of us share. It is a popular destination for golfers, honeymooners, surfers and anyone looking for a relaxing tropical vacation. Whether you are camping beachside, staying with friends or kicking back at a condo, be sure to venture out across the island and see all that it has to offer.

The town of Kona on the west side of the Big Island, Hawaii, has an international airport and is likely where you'll start your Big Island adventure. Kona is a great town to stroll through, check out shops and take in the sea air scented by plumeria flowers.

If you are looking for a laid back spot for a cool beverage, try the [Kona Brewing Company's](#). It's tucked away on a private lot near downtown, the restaurant and bar offers specialty beers and a great menu made with fresh local ingredients. The brew house has a 2,000 square foot lanai (patio) and a beautiful interior made with locally found materials including ohia wood and an enormous mahogany driftwood log.

Open markets or farmer's markets are held regularly in Kona and are a great place to find local flavors and flowers. Pineapples on the Big Island are sweeter than anywhere else. You'll also find tangy apple bananas, fresh mangos and avocados the size of grapefruit. Orchids, birds-of-paradise and plumeria are just some of the tropical flowers you'll find for sale and some, like plumeria, are often packaged and certified for export. You can't miss the delight of a hot malasada. Malasadas are sweet, fried dough treats that came to the Hawaii Islands with Portuguese immigrants and are now a favorite island snack. As you peruse the markets keep in mind that the farmers and artists appreciate the local art of "talking story", sharing ideas, recipes and a glimpse into local life.

Kona is known for its coffee and throughout the adjacent hills you'll find many places to buy and taste an assortment of tasty brews. Macadamia nuts on the Big Island are also a local treat unlike anything you'll find on the mainland. In Kona, the nuts are twice the size of exports, 100% fresh and available in a multitude of varieties including chocolate covered.

The Kona-Kohala coast is a 40 mile stretch of lava flows, pristine beaches, sparkling bays and historical sites. Kealahou Bay Historical Park is one of the famous Big Island spots along this route. The bay's waters are nearly pristine and host to a wide array of marine life. The coast is bordered by a sheer cliff where lava tubes and ancient Hawaiian burial caves remain. On the bay's lava flats are the ruins of the ancient village of Ka'awaloa and the Pacific lashes the lava in spectacular shows here. In addition to Hawaiian history, the bay is known as the site where British explorer Captain James Cook met his demise and a monument was erected by Cook's crew near the site where he was killed. Snorkeling, diving and kayaking are all permitted here and dolphins often swim through the bay to rest from the open ocean.

Heading south from Kealahou will bring you to Pu'uhonua O Honaunau or "Place of Refuge" a beautiful National Historic Park and one of the most serene locations on the Big Island. The park covers 182 acres and includes temple platforms and royal fishponds. It is one of the best places to learn about Hawaiian culture as the land holds a long cultural history and was home to several generations of Hawaiian chiefs. The bay adjacent to the park is open to the public and filled with green sea turtles, moray eels and a variety of tropical fish. Local boat clubs paddle canoes out from the shores and dolphins and sharks are frequent visitors.

Continuing south from Kona the island becomes less touristy and starts to reveal more natural beauty. Traveling along the Mamalahou Highway you'll pass through cooled lava flows and expansive pasture land filled with horses. The route will take you to the southernmost part of the island and another can't miss spot, Green Sand Beach. To get to Green Sand Beach involves parking and hiking along the windy tip of the Big Island. As the sun gleams off the Pacific, it's easy to imagine how ancient travelers launched their boats and rode the trades to distant lands.

Green Sand Beach is an extraordinary geological formation of olivine that shines green in the tropical sun. The small bay is approached from above through wind eroded lava and sand. The hike into Green Sand Beach gives a vantage into the blue green water where sea turtles float and surf alongside other travelers to crash against the olive shore.

The next stop around the island is [Hawaii Volcanoes National Park](#), one of the most extraordinary natural landscapes in the world. The park covers 377 square miles of dynamic volcano landscape that attracts tourists, geologists and anyone with a sense of wonder. Inside the gates, the visitor can hike or drive around the amazing volcano landscape to witness cooled calderas or live lava flows. The park features an observatory where visitors can view the Kilauea Caldera from above and decide if they want to hike across the steaming cooled lava.

According to legend, Hawaii's Big Island is the home of Pele, the Hawaiian volcano goddess. Over eons, Pele shaped and formed her new abode with red-hot lava to create her unique fortress. Early Hawaiians respected and honored Pele, and made offerings to please her or placate her wrath.

Today, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HVNP) is the state's #1 visitor attraction. It was created to preserve the region's unique volcanic features, its early human history and the plant and animal life that is part of this special region. The park is 96 miles southeast of Kona, open year round, 24 hours a day. (For more in depth on the Big Island's Hawaii Volcanoes National Park see *Travel Guide: Hawaii Volcanoes National Park: Natural beauty on the Big Island* by the author).

Just north of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is the town of Hilo. Hilo is an old sugar town and home to the Big Island's largest collection of historic buildings dating back to the turn of the century. Located on the eastern slopes of Mauna Kea, Hilo is on the "wet" side of the Big Island and the town is filled with lush vegetation and waterfalls. Onomea Bay Drive is a great way to see the jungle, waterfalls, cliffs and old Hawaiian homes that make Hilo unique and the drive leads to Akaka Falls. Both Akaka Falls and

Rainbow Falls are located near Hilo, two must see spots. Along the waterfall's bamboo, palms, orchids and philodendrons all grow wild, lush and colorful. The two falls are intertwined with legends of local gods, goddesses and demons so in addition to natural beauty they are famous to Hawaiian mythology.

If you are visiting the island around Easter time, put Hilo's Merry Monarch Festival on your list of things to see. The festival is a week-long cultural event that celebrates the coronation of the last king of the Hawaiian Islands, David Kalakua. The event boasts a prestigious hula competition in memory of the "merrie monarch." There are also many one of a kind shop in Hilo with antiques, local artwork and distinctive clothing. Hilo is also famous for its farmers market every Wednesday and Saturday filled with tropical fruits, flowers and unique treasure.

For some island style relaxation head to Punalu'u Black Sand Beach located just south of Hilo. This quiet beach is perfect to sit under coconut trees, watch Green Sea Turtles or the park's freshwater fish pond. The beach is the perfect place for swimming, snorkeling and picnicking on all the goodies from the Hilo Farmers Market.

After Hilo's hula, waterfalls, beaches and shopping it's hard to imagine the Big Island could get any better. But it does. On the north coast is Waipi'o Valley, the Valley of Kings. Waipi'o Valley is a mile wide at its black sand beach coast and near six miles deep. Both sides are sharp cliffs almost 2000 feet high with cascading waterfalls including one of the most famous waterfalls Hi'ilawe.

The valley can be enjoyed from an overlook where its immensity can be taken in full. Or you can brave the 25% grade, brake-testing road down to the valley floor by car, foot or horseback. Once in the valley you might notice a few demolished car wrecks at the cliffs foot and give thanks for your safe arrival.

Waipi'o Valley, like Pu'u honua O Honaunau, is a sacred place of refuge and was once home to many of Hawaii's rulers. Waipi'o Valley has significant historical and cultural importance to the Hawaiian people. It was here that Kamehameha the Great was proclaimed future king by his war god Kukailimoku. It is also the site of many heiaus or temples including the most sacred Pakaalana. Ancient burial caves exist in the steep cliffs along the valley where many kings have their final resting place. The mana or divine power of the kings protects all those who live in the valley.

It was once the most fertile and productive places on the Big Island and today fields across its expansive floor still yield taro for poi, a staple starch food of the Hawaiian diet. Near the turn of the century, Waipi'o had a large settlement with churches, restaurants, schools, hotels, post office and jail. A tsunami in 1946 engulfed the valley and caused most of the settlement to relocate. Another flood in 1979 covered the valley in four feet of water. True to legend, no one actually died in either disaster. Today, about fifty people live in Waipi'o including fisherman and taro farmers who grow the crop in the delta of the winding Waipi'o River. It is possible for visitors to camp at the black sand beach for extended stays but a permit is required well in advance and reservations are hard to get without advanced planning.

From Waipi'o Valley it is time to head to the island's interior and traverse the saddle created by the Big

Island's two large volcanoes, Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa. As you head south down the middle of the island you enter Parker Ranch, home to the Hawaiian cowboy or ka'aina o ka paniolo. Parker Ranch is one of the longest running ranches in existence and one of the most expansive covering 150,000 acres. The story behind the ranch is filled with a mix of cultures, royalty, love and cowboys. A drive through the ranch's pastures will reveal long landscapes and sometimes awesome birds of prey. The Parker Ranch also has historic homes, a visitor center and museum and offers guided tours on horseback or ATV.

At mile 28 along Saddle Road it's possible to wind up slopes of Mauna Kea to the 14,000 foot summit. Before you head up Mauna Kea keep in mind that the summit is high and dry. It's arid but can experience severe weather, including snow storms. The altitude can bring on acute altitude sickness (headache, nausea, shortness or breath). Be hydrated, dress for severe weather, wear sunscreen and sunglasses and only attempt the steep switchback road in a well maintained four wheel drive vehicle. Mauna Kea is a very remote location with no public accommodations, food or gasoline.

Spending a little time at the visitor information station at 9,200 feet will help you acclimatize, that's what the scientists and technicians do. Here you can learn about the volcano, the telescopes and the research. The Mauna Kea Observatories are used for private research and in general closed to the public. However, one telescope is mounted so that visitors may view sunspots and stellar spectra during the day. You can also view the Keck and the UH2.2m telescopes or borrow a high quality portable telescope to view the night sky. Star gazing programs are held every night from 6:00 – 10:00 PM and summit tours happen every Saturday afternoon. The summit offers view across an amazing volcano landscape and one of the best vantage points to see all of Mauna Loa, the long mountain.

After conquering Mauna Kea you can head back to the northern shores and continue around the island's northernmost tip, past Upolu Point. Upolu Point offers views to the Big Island's neighbor Maui and is home to two sacred sites. The first is Mo'okini Heiau, a sacred place of worship dated back to 480 A.C.E and the second is the birthplace of King Kamehameha I.

Heading south you begin to approach where you started, Kona Coast. From Upolu to Kona, the highway cuts through lava flows dotted with Hawaiian graffiti, white coral arrangements on black lava. Many resorts and golf courses line the shore here with impressive landscaped entries. About half way from Upolu Point to Kona is Hapuna Beach State Park, a beautiful white sand beach which also boasts a view of Maui. Kicking back on the soft sand of Hapuna or in the warm waters, you can look up at the 14,000 foot summit of Mauna Kea where you just stood.

As you approach Kona from the north, you've completed a journey around the entire Big Island, Hawaii. Now the only question is if you have time to do it all again.