



# ALL YOU NEED IS *lava*

Skip Maui and Kauai in favour of the Big Island, writes ELIZABETH GRAHAM, and you'll find an experience that's both humbling and healing

**I**n front of me, the Pacific Ocean is boiling. Thick clouds of steam rise out of the water and menace the coastline. The landscape is equally threatening, devoid of any living thing except its human visitors. Black, jagged rocks spread out as far as the eye can see, glistening in the sun.

This apocalyptic scene is on the East Rift Zone on Hawaii's Big Island. To get here, I have hiked for 90 minutes through fields of lava rock, with only a few lights on the horizon for guidance. It was challenging, but the return trip will be worse as we'll be hiking back in the dark. I've come to this point to see the island's volcanic activity, best viewed after sunset. This is the closest you can get to the fiery red glow of lava as it rushes out of the earth and meets the ocean head-on, creating new land and making the Big Island even bigger.

While the Big Island doesn't have the cache of other main islands of Hawaii — the glamour of Maui and Kauai or the shopping and surf of Oahu — it's a Mecca for anyone interested in volcanoes. There are five of them on this island, including the most active one in the world: Kilauea. This volcano has been erupting non-stop since 1983 and, as a result, steadily increasing the island's landmass at the impressive rate of 16 hectares a year. At last estimate, the Big Island's area is roughly

10,500 square kilometres — bigger than all the other Hawaiian islands put together.

The Big Island's official name is actually Hawaii and, yes, it had it first. Hawaii was the birthplace of King Kamehameha the Great, whose rule began when each of the islands was still governed separately. Kamehameha was to change all that, conquering the other islands by 1810, then naming the newly expanded kingdom after his home. He set up a ruling dynasty that would last until 1893, when Hawaii was annexed by the US. To avoid confusion between the group and the island, the less-than-exotic nickname took hold.

Thankfully, the Big Island's name is the only uninspiring thing about the place. Its ecological diversity is such that if you traverse the island you'll see desert plains, lush rainforests, snow-capped mountains in winter, beaches, volcanoes, waterfalls, pasturelands and tropical waters all within a day's drive. The island is dotted with beautifully preserved ancient Hawaiian sites and there's also a heady mix of American, Asian and Polynesian cultures and a very visible colonial history. The Big Island is famous for its aromatic Kona coffee and also offers luscious regional cuisine and wellbeing treatments that have made greater Hawaii renowned.

But right now, as the sun is beginning to

Fiery streams of lava meet the Pacific Ocean in the Big Island's East Rift Zone.



Above: Floor-to-ceiling windows bring the rainforest to your bedroom at Volcano Village Lodge, a five-minute drive from the national park. Right: One of the many (illegal) offerings left by visitors for the volcano goddess Pele at the edge of Kilauea Crater.



set, I'm just thinking about the lava. Indeed, since flying onto the island, I've been thinking about little else. An easy 45-minute drive from Hilo Airport (on the east side of the island) takes you to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (US\$10 car permit for a week), where you're in a 134,000-hectare playground for the stuff.

In the park, you're also a guest of Pele, the Hawaiian volcano goddess, who is said to reside in the Halema'uma'u crater of Kilauea. Pele is still worshipped today by some and is certainly feared by thousands of visitors, thanks to the legend that if you take a piece of the volcano home with you, Pele will bring down her vengeance. It's well-documented that this story was made up and circulated by park rangers in the 1940s and 50s, but this hasn't seemed to stop people believing in it, if often belatedly. Each year, the park receives hundreds of parcels, each with a chunk of lava inside and a letter telling of recent personal woes and asking for Pele's forgiveness.

Pele's vengeance aside, it's illegal to remove anything from the park. And, once you've seen some of the ways lava manifests itself around here, you're so awestruck you feel



compelled to leave the area exactly the same.

When you first enter the park, take the 11-mile Crater Rim Drive, which skirts around the enormous Kilauea crater and two relatively smaller ones, Halema'uma'u and Kilauea Iki. It's worth driving around this road first, stopping at frequent viewing areas to appreciate the sheer magnitude of the eruptions that helped create these craters. As you drive from one side of the crater to the other, you can also see the landscape shift from thick rainforest to desolate moonscapes

of lava flows, where sulphur plumes escape from the ground. The Jagger Museum, perched on the edge of Kilauea crater, is worth a visit for the view and the live seismograph readings shown inside.

While you can book hotel accommodation within the national park, it's refreshingly different to stay in Volcano Village, just a few hundred metres from the park's entrance. Tucked away in a misty rainforest, the town is a favourite among artists and travellers. Volcano Village Lodge is a new addition. Originally built as an artist's retreat, it opened as a lodge last year. The new owner, Kay Lee, left the main building intact and added a system of boardwalks and cottages to create a gorgeous rainforest retreat. The rooms (from US\$175 per night) have all the modern amenities, including wireless internet connection, but Lee jokes that even if people bring laptops, they rarely use them. And looking at the serene views from my floor-to-ceiling windows, I can understand why.

A strip of restaurants along the village's main road offers a good selection of food. During my stay, I dine at the casual restaurants, enjoying yellow chicken curry at Thai Thai and a margarita pizza and the beer known as Big Island microbrew at Kiawe Kitchen.

When it comes to appreciating the subtler nuances of a volcanic ecosystem, a hike with an accredited guide is worth the extra cost.

**This is the closest you can get to the fiery red glow of lava as it rushes out of the earth and meets the ocean head-on.**

Ka'ai Jensen is a geologist, born and bred on the Big Island and also a guide with tour outfit Hawaiian Walkways. For US \$135 per person, a small group of us hiked for a day in and around Kilauea Iki crater. Today, it's a stadium of hardened lava, but only 40-odd years ago it was a bubbling lava lake and the steam vents prove that molten lava is still languishing there, 100 metres or so underground.

In this crater, I learnt about the two distinct types of lava found on the island — the rough, angular a'a (pronounced ahah) and the ropey, molasses-like pahoehoe (pronounced pehoyhoy) lava — and was also shown the rainbow of minerals found in these black rocks that you might otherwise miss.

Walking in the rainforest surrounding Kilauea Iki, Jensen introduces me to its characters. I learn about the chirrup of the apanane bird, whose red feathers were once plucked for royalty's cloak; I feel pulu, the brown, silky hair from tree ferns, once used to embalm the dead. We walk through the Thurston lava tube, a five-metre-wide lava-encrusted tunnel through which lava once rushed.

You can't miss the ohia tree, a distant relative of the Australian bottlebrush, as it is in plentiful supply, always the first plant to grow after a volcanic eruption. Another hardy plant in the rainforest, though not a welcome one, is the kahili ginger. Introduced plant species such as ginger, along with feral animals including pigs and cats, are threatening an ecosystem in which 90 per cent of species are not found anywhere else.

For the sheer sense of accomplishment, though, I'm glad I leave the hike to the East Rift Zone until my last night.

As the sun slips away, the coast begins to light up and there are murmurs of excitement in the group. Tonight, there are three points where lava is pouring out. There are no dramatic explosions, mind you, and, from a safe 500 metres, the scene seems more calm than angry. But knowing the lava is about 1000 degrees and has unexpectedly caused huge blocks of coast to collapse and spray lava bombs, we don't tempt Pele by getting any closer. Satisfied, we head back to our cars and soft beds. The trip back is not as treacherous as I expected, either, as I've met up with others here for the view. Our line of torches and thousands of twinkling stars guide the way.

## West coast wonders

The Big Island's west coast has the perfect balance of culture, nature, relaxation and indulgence — and the views from the drive are spectacular. Starting at the top and heading south, try these experiences.

Meet a kahuna at an ancient temple ground

Set on the windswept north-west tip of the island, the Mo'okini Heiau was once used by chiefs to fast, pray and offer human sacrifices. Just visiting the ruins of the temple is amazing (they're the size of a rugby field), but on the third Saturday of the month you can

meet Kahuna Nui Leimomi Mo'okini Lum, whose lineage and connection to the temple can be traced back to the first high priest. Guests are asked to help weed the grounds and it's wise to bring a lei as an offering.

Swim in the beautiful Kauna'oa Bay Also called Mauna Kai Beach, this petite cove is much more stunning than its famous neighbour, Hapuna Beach. White sand, crystal-clear water, palm trees and great snorkelling make it hard to leave. Arrive early though, as parking spots are snapped up quickly.

Have a lomi lomi massage at the Fairmont Orchid

The grandeur of this resort alone makes it worth the stay, but the gem in its crown is the Spa Without Walls. You can enjoy this traditional Hawaiian style of massage (using long, rhythmic strokes, sometimes accompanied by chanting and hot stones) in the resort's gardens or on a secluded beach. Drink kava in Kailua-Kona

The place for this is Kanaka Kava, a cheery bar in town where you can sit with locals and try to drink a cup of the mild relaxant — the taste can be ...an acquired one, so try the fruit-juice-flavoured options first. Taste Kona coffee and learn its history



Captain Cook's memorial stone on the shore of Kealakekua Bay.

At the Kona Coffee Living History Farm you can take a guided tour through the 1913 property and gain an understanding of immigrant life working on the farm as well as sample the beautifully aromatic brew. Snorkel in Kealakekua Bay

It was on the shores of Kealakekua Bay that Captain James Cook's life ended, but this area is more famous its stunning snorkelling conditions — the water is protected from waves and is filled with coral, tropical fish, spinner dolphins and the odd sea turtle.

The area isn't accessible by car, so the best option is to take one of the many half-day snorkelling cruises.

Enjoy seafood with a view

The Ke'ei Cafe is popular with locals and tourists alike, and for good reason. It serves terrific Hawaiian fusion cuisine with water views, but be prepared to wait for a table. Try the herb-rubbed rib-eye steak or the catch of the day with miso salad.

Visit ancient royal grounds and place of refuge

The Pu'uhonua o Honaunau National Historic Park is a mix of ruins and re-created ancient sites, done extremely well, meaning no tacky gift shop, just informed, helpful guides and a walking tour that explains the ancient kapu (taboo) system and daily life.



# 10 reasons to stop over in *Oahu*

**Y**es, the main island of Hawaii does attract the tourist hordes, but here are 10 good reasons to join the crowd rather than just wait in the terminal for your connecting flight.

**1** Pearl Harbor. A respectful and moving memorial to the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour. Visitors watch a 20-minute documentary and then visit the watery grave of the *USS Arizona*.

**2** The North Shore. Cruise along Highway 83 and take your pick of Oahu's beautiful beaches and laid-back towns. Come winter, the ocean swells reach an impressive 10 metres and attract the best surfers around.

**3** Mandara Spa at Hilton Hawaiian Village. With a stunning view of Waikiki beach and a menu of massages to match, this spa is the best in town.

**4** Outlet shopping. Just 15 minutes out of Honolulu is Waikēle Premium Outlets, with 50 outlet stores offering 25-50 per cent off designer brands such as Gucci, Coach, Kenneth Cole and Hugo Boss.

**5** Diamond Head. This extinct volcanic crater is the most recognised landmark

on the island. Stunning views await those who make the 45-minute climb to the top.

**6** Chef Mavro. There's no better place to get your taste-buds around Hawaiian Regional Cuisine than at this restaurant, with mouth-watering food and impeccable service.

**7** Windward Coast. Follow the Ko'olau Ranges up the eastern side of the island, with many a shrimp shack and secluded beach to divert you from the drive.

**8** The Polynesian Cultural Centre. Alright, so this place might be kitsch, but it's quite fun, too. Learn about Polynesian customs, music and dance, and then enjoy a night-time luau and slick dance performance.

**9** Turtle Canyon at Waikiki Beach. About one kilometre from the shore is a favourite hang-out for the majestic green sea turtles. Outrigger Catamaran tours offers two-hour snorkel tours there.

**10** Mai Tai Bar. Part of the Royal Hawaiian hotel, this is the bar that invented the famous cocktail. Sit out under the Banyan trees and enjoy the live music. ■

The writer travelled as a guest of Hawaiian Tourism and Hawaiian Airlines.

## Getting there

Hawaiian Airlines and Jetstar fly from Sydney to Honolulu three times a week. Jetstar flies twice a week from Melbourne. Hawaiian Airlines and Aloha Airlines each have about 10 flights daily between Honolulu and the Big Island's two airports, Hilo and Kona. Contact Hawaiian Airlines on 02 9244 2377, Jetstar on 131 538, or visit [www.alohaairlines.com](http://www.alohaairlines.com).

### When to go

Hawaiian weather is pleasant year-round. In January, the average daily high temperature in the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (HAVO) is 18 degrees, but expect an average of 27 degrees in Kona and 22 in Honolulu. Temperatures rise only a few degrees during summer. The busiest season is December-February.

### Getting around

It's essential to hire a car to get around the Big Island and Oahu. Avis, Hertz, Alamo, Thrifty, Budget and other US agencies rent cars for about US\$50 a day. The mostly two-lane Hawaii Belt Road circles the Big Island. The drive from Kona airport to HAVO takes at least three hours, from Hilo 45 minutes.