

Preface:

I've spent a few years compiling this guide to Hawai'i. I've done my best to make sure that all the information in here is both accurate and up to date, including links... But obviously things change, and this guide will drift with time. This is updated as of January 2026.

There are 4 main islands:

O'ahu - Most populated, home to the capital city of Honolulu

Maui - Second most developed, a popular tourist destination

Kauai - sometimes called the garden island because it's so lush and green

Hawai'i (aka "The Big Island") - the largest of the bunch and home to Volcanoes National Park

Each island has its own character and feel, but it can generally be assumed that the Eastern side of the island are rainy and the western side is dry. Don't let this dissuade you from seeing both sides of any given island ... the rainforests are dense and beautiful on the rainy side and the sunsets on the dry side are absurd.

Hawaii was once a kingdom (they are the only state in the US to have ever been a kingdom) and they were technically "forcefully" annexed by the US. As a result, Hawaii, its people, the culture, and the land are sensitive and need to be treated with a certain respect -- not unlike the lingering effects of British colonialism in India, or the US taking the land from the Native Americans. This isn't to say that you won't feel welcome, rather to note that if you approach Hawaii, the people, and their land with kindness and respect you'll get a lot further. In fact, given some time, you'll start to understand the spirit of Aloha which is a cool spiritual journey in-and-of itself. I've met some incredible people who are very giving of their time and experiences in Hawaii.

One note of how I would travel the islands: many people are inclined to go island hopping. Hawai'i is "so far" and yes, it's expensive too. I would strongly advise against seeing all 4 islands in one go, especially if you're planning a 10 to 14 day vacation. Realistically you will want to spend 5-10 days on each island to truly get a feel for things. Plus, it's a vacation and spending lots of time in the airports picking up/dropping off rental cars, waiting around for your flight, taking the short flight, and checking into your next hotel or rental house chews up time you could be spending tasting coffee in Kona, or laying on the beach. Hawaiian Airlines (now part of the Alaska Air Group) runs flights every 30-60 minutes between the islands, so if you want to island hop, there's plenty of flights. My advice: pick and island or two and take your time. The island lifestyle is slower and is meant to be savored. If you're lucky, and slow it down, you might even feel some of that Aloha.

On to some of the things that I've really enjoyed in the islands.

O'ahu:

I've spent the least amount of time in Oahu. To me it always felt like a big city dropped onto a tropical island. That's not to say it's not beautiful (it is!) but it does tend to be quite busy, and parts of it are very commercialized. The north shore of Oahu is where all the big surfing happens. There's ATV rides through some of the valleys if you wanted something more rugged. If you want beaches, shopping, and a little adventure (but with creature comforts) O'ahu is the place.

We visited Pearl Harbor as a day trip from the Big Island (it just made the most logistical sense, and Pearl Harbor can be done reasonably in about 5 hours.) If you do decide to go, know that there's several official looking websites for Pearl Harbor... that aren't the real one – they're for tour companies (I'm sure they're legit) but I did almost get fooled into thinking they were reference material. The real site is run by the National Parks Service:

<https://www.nps.gov/perl/index.htm>. A few things to note about visiting Pearl Harbor: 1/ go early in the day – the afternoon tends to bring heat and thunderstorms. 2/ you need to make ferry reservations if you want to visit the USS Arizona Memorial ASAP; these are separate from your "Pearl Harbor Passport" which is your ticket to the park. 3/ They have a 'no bags' policy (like a concert venue) as it is an active military base, but you can bring water, camera, etc. and they allow clear bags. There is a bag check, but the line can be a pain in the ass; so, I suggest traveling ultralight. Don't forget to apply the sunscreen.

There's a shuttle bus to get you back and forth between Ford Island (where the aviation museum and Battleship Missouri are) and the welcome center/Arizona Ferry/Pacific Fleet Museum. Highly recommend taking one of the verbal tours on the Battleship Missouri that run every 15 minutes (and is free). There's food at the visitor center, the Missouri, and the Air Museum (which is air conditioned). We ran out of steam for the Pacific Fleet Museum, but we did do the submarine which was cool. We did it in an odd order (Missouri -> Arizona -> Air Museum (+Lunch) -> Submarine) that meant we were back-and-forth twice, but that ended up working out just fine.

Passport (\$100 p/p): <https://www.recreation.gov/ticket/10088721/ticket/10088722>

Arizona Reservations (\$1 p/p): <https://www.recreation.gov/ticket/233338/ticket/16>

Kauai:

I've been to Kauai a few times (including getting engaged there back in 2014). It's a tiny rock. You really need to get outside on Kauai. There's a few Zipline experiences here that are pretty neat (<https://koloazipline.com/>). Highly recommend you see the Na pali coast - sometimes called "the grand canyon of the Pacific" it's absolutely magnificent - downright breathtaking. Seeing it from the air (helicopter) or via a boat cruise would be the easiest ways to see it, but you can certainly hike parts of it too. Boat option:

<https://www.napalicitamaran.com/>. If you're going to do a helicopter tour, I'd recommend it here or on the Big Island. Blue Hawaiian is the only operator worth using:

<https://www.bluehawaiian.com/en/kauai/tours/discover-kauai>. NOTE: you shouldn't go scuba diving and then go up in a helicopter on the same day due to the pressure changes... Just something to be aware of. We also went snorkeling here (it was a "drive to a beach and snorkel" experience) -- Not sure I could find the operator now, but it was a cool experience. The water out there is a lot colder than you might think, and unlike the reefs you see in the Caribbean these ones tend to be deeper and somewhat less spectacular... still fun though.

Kauai, nicknamed the Garden Isle, is also home to the雨iest spot on earth... so bring your rain gear.

Maui:

Maui is a little bit of a paradox. It's not nearly as developed as O'ahu, but it's certainly still somewhat busy. While upscale, it's also still rustic (think places in Vermont). Sadly, one of my top spots to visit, Lahaina <https://lahainatown.com/> burnt to the ground in 2023. One "famous" drive is going to Hana via "the Road to Hana" which has 46 of one lane bridges. I have *never* done this trip, mostly because you hear horror stories about bumper-to-bumper traffic for 60+ miles one way and trips that basically last all day to get there and back. There might be some tricks to getting to Hana and back, and I'm sure the drive is beautiful since it's through the rainforest, but I'd advise planning a trip to Hana carefully. The big volcano on Maui is Haleakala (pronounced Hall-le-aah-ka-la) and is well known for giving some incredible sunrises. <https://www.recreation.gov/ticket/facility/253731>

You need National Park tickets for Haleakala (as you do with Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island). If you happen to be doing both Maui and the Big Island the tickets are valid for 7 days/multi entry... or you can buy the \$55 tri-park yearly which covers both parks.

Maui has some good beaches, but for that matter, all of the islands have a few good beaches...

Hawai'i Island (the Big Island):

I've spent the most time here - like weeks - and it's arguably one of my favorite places on earth. It's much less developed than O'ahu or Maui - and there are places that still have the "old Hawaii" feel to them. It's also, as its nickname suggest, BIG. You can actually fit all the other islands inside of the Big Island and still have some room left over. This does mean that getting around it can take some additional time. There are two main "cities" on the Big Island - Hilo on the rainy (windward) side and Kona on the leeward (dry). Hilo used to be an old fishing town and is overall very modest. It sadly doesn't have the best reputation of being "the safest" but I've never had any problems. Its proximity to the volcanoes and botanical gardens makes it a much better landing spot than Kona for those activities, not to say you can't get there from Kona, rather it just takes longer. Here's a breakdown of things I've done on the Big Island divided by "side":

Hilo side:

Places to stay – We like to stay at the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel as it has more of the old Hawaii charm. There's also the Grand Naniloa (Hilton/Doubletree). If you want a real rustic feel, the SCP Hilo still has the 1950's open-air hotel charm.

Volcanoes National Park - I consider this a "must do" even if Kilauea isn't erupting - in fact it's even better when it's not because the whole park is open. The Chain of Craters Road in the park is worth driving - just make sure to use a low gear going downhill so you don't smoke your brakes. Check the park status before going... <https://www.nps.gov/havo/index.htm>... And don't forget to buy your parks pass. Make sure you add it to your Apple Wallet or download or print it before you leave... Cell service can be spotty. And bring food and water and (importantly) sunscreen, with you – there's no real services here.

Volcanoes can get quite busy during the afternoon and evening, regardless of eruption status. There's a playbook for each.

If Kilauea is erupting: rule #1- GO. GO NOW. Eruptions, like so many other cool things, are a geological phenomenon that can stop at any moment. I've made the 'mistake' once of waiting and ended up missing the eruption, which I can only describe (as also having seen it once) as a truly awesome and almost spiritual experience. There are possible hazards when the volcano is erupting that you should take care with: 1/ VOG, 2/ Pele's Hair. VOG is mostly water vapor, carbon dioxide, and sulfur dioxide, but it's got other bad stuff that you don't really want to breathe in. The USGS has a pretty good article on the subject:

<https://www.usgs.gov/observatories/hawaiian-volcano-observatory/frequently-asked-questions-about-volcanic-smog-vog>. The important thing to note here is the wind direction. I use windy.com to check the forecast to establish which side of the volcano I want to approach. Pele's hair, or strands of volcanic glass, usually only occurs downwind of an eruption that's fountaining. I think the risk is generally overblown... Don't be a moron, and you'll be OK.

You used to be able to get all the way around the summit crater, but back in 2018 after the Leilani Estates eruption the summit caldera had several collapse events that resulted in part of the road around the caldera being damaged, and another part falling into the crater. This means you can only get somewhere between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way around the caldera, so if the wind is blowing some vector of north/northeast you'll be socked in VOG at all the good viewing areas. The closest you can get to the most recent eruptions is the Keanakako'i Overlook which is about a mile walk from the Devastation trailhead parking area. Before taking the walk out there, you can stop at the steam vents or Kilauea Overlook on the northern side of the crater. Going out at night, especially if there's glow, is worth it. Bring flashlights, water, but most of all cold weather gear. The summit is 4000 feet above sea level and with a strong wind (which is good to help blow out the VOG) it can feel like it's in the 30's at night. Sunrise at the volcano is incredible too. I suggest going to the Steaming Bluff or the Kilauea Overlook off of Crater Rim Drive.

If Kilauea is not erupting: It's still worth spending a lot of time in the park. I still recommend getting up there early in the day. My usual plan – pack a lunch (there's nowhere to eat in the park) and grab a quick breakfast (or eat on the road). Try to get there by 8 or 8:30. We usually start at the Kilauea Overlook, then backtrack to the steam vents. We'll stop at the Thurston Lava Tube (parking can get insane here), if the lot is full, I suggest skipping it and coming back later. Then drive down Chain of Craters Road, taking time to stop at the various parking areas and pull-offs. About 2/3 of the way to the ocean there's a picnic area called Kealakomo. There's no shade, and it's usually windy, but it's worth stopping at to eat and enjoy the views – depending on timing you can stop here on your way down, or your way back up. At the end of Chain of Craters Road there's latrines (the only ones since the Devastation trail head) and it's a short walk to see the Hōlei Sea Arch.

Botanical Gardens - There's several of these, but I'd recommend this one: <https://htbg.com/> - it's a 2 mile walk or so (and parts of it are steep despite being paved or a boardwalk) but it's absolutely stunning. There's a nice spot at the ocean to sit and eat a picnic lunch. Bring bug spray. We've recently become fond of the DEET or picaridin wipes that are individually wrapped. We recently went to the Hilo Zoo <https://www.hilozoo.org/> which also has gardens. It's a much less rugged experience, and has animals, but can be done in about an hour.

Stargazing on Mauna Kea - <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/maunakea/visitor-information/station> - truly incredible experience. If you don't go stargazing on Haleakala on Maui, I'd recommend going here. It's off the saddle road and up to about 8000 feet of elevation, so you could get lightheaded. Drink water and dress warmly because it will get below freezing at that altitude at night even in July. You can't go to the top (13k feet) nor would I really recommend going to the top anyways, since you can actually see the stars better and can stay later at the visitor center. The used to run a free star gazing program which was amazing, but I think Covid killed it. Regardless, download a star finder app, bring your camera and tripod, and enjoy. It will be stuck in the cloud until 9 or 9:30 but eventually those clouds will blow out and give you the humbling experience of a lifetime. When driving down watch for ghost cows - the access road is across a ranch... it's dark, usually foggy, and yes, there's cows. Use a low gear here too otherwise you will light your brakes on fire.

The Hawaiian Vanilla Company - <https://hawaiianvanilla.com/> - this is neat little experience. They do tours or lunch + tours. It's not inexpensive – but then again Vanilla is one of the most expensive spices on earth. If you're driving north around the Big Island, they're worth a stop to get some ice cream. If you don't go to the vanilla farm, you can get the ice cream at a KTA. Look for the Roselani Hawaiian Vanilla Bean. It's not to be missed.

Lavaloha Chocolates- <https://lavaloha.com/> - there's a chocolate tour (reservations needed) and a shop. It's off the beaten path. It's also nearby Kulaniapia Falls , which you can get day passes for to swim in the pond at the base of the waterfall. They also have a chef's tasting menu for dinner some nights. <https://www.waterfall.net/>

Boiling Pots and Rainbow Falls - <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/hawaii/wailuku-river-state-park/> it's a neat place to visit, not far out of Hilo, so it makes for a quick trip en-route to something else. Rainbow falls can get busy with tour busses, so you can always pass by, go to the boiling pots, and circle back to rainbow falls. If you wanted a bigger waterfall checkout 'Akaka State Park <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/hawaii/akaka-falls-state-park/>

Waipi'o Valley Lookout - <https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/hawaii-big-island/regions/hamakua-coast/waipio-valley-lookout> the birthplace of King Kamehameha on the Hamakua Coast is worth seeing if you happen to be driving north around the island. You can't go down into the valley, but it's amazing to see.

Shopping in Hilo - little shops and boutiques dot Main Street, if you wanted to go for a stroll, it's a nice walk. Check out the Extreme exposure gallery, and maybe the Pacific Tsunami Museum. Rainbow Jo has designed-in-Hawaii clothing that's super comfortable. Outside of downtown is Big Island Candies which has great chocolates. <https://www.bigislandcandies.com/>. Across the street there's a Japanese place with to-die-for poke <https://miyosrestaurant.com/menu/>.

Food in Hilo - There's an open-air place called Pineapples downtown that's pretty good - <https://www.pineappleshilo.net/>. There's also WSW Steakhouse which is in the Hilo Hawaiian <https://wssteakhouse.com/>. Ponds Hilo is a old-timey eatery on the water: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Restaurant_Review-g60583-d1647837-Reviews-Ponds-Hilo_Island_of_Hawaii_Hawaii.html. Downtown there's Jacky Rey's (great for dinner) <https://www.jackiereyshilo.com/> and a cocktail bar Hidden Nene <https://thehiddenne.com/>

Kona Side:

Places to stay- We usually rent a house through Kona Coast vacations: <https://www.konacoastvacations.com/> -- Highly recommend them. We like staying in the houses in Holua Kai. There's the Outrigger which is nearby Holua Kai, and is in a great spot. Downtown Kona has the Courtyard Marriott which is also well situated. Most of the resorts on this side are in Waikoloa – but it's basically in the middle of nowhere. It's beautiful, but it's designed as a "go here and stay here" spot.

Kona Downtown – is reminiscent of Lahaina on Maui it's a walking town with shops and restaurants. Papa Kona is one of our favorite spots for lunch: <https://papakonarestaurant.com/> -- make sure you get the Avocado Fries.

Ocean Rider Seahorse Farm - <https://seahorse.com/> this is the one of the only seahorse farms in the world and it's a pretty interesting experience. You'll need reservations to go in, so plan in advance. You actually get to hold a seahorse at the end of the tour. Note that because of the sensitive nature of the seahorse farm, if you've visited anywhere that they have livestock (like a backcountry farm or something) you can't go here... They "recommend you stop here first" if you're going to do any ranching. There are some minimum ages on holding a seahorse, so I do suggest emailing regardless of the "children must be 5" statement on their website.

Boat tours in Kona - I've taken a dinner cruise on the Body Glove boat which was a fun experience (you're not going for the food)

<https://www.bodyglovehawaii.com/cruises/historical-dinner-cruise/>. We've done and highly recommend this sailing/snorkel tour to Capitan Cook: <https://www.seaparadise.com/>. After you're done they give you snacks and you can buy drinks. Totally worth it. They also do a "Night swim with the Mantas" – which we did and it was incredible. The ocean can be rough at night, so it's not for the faint of heart. They provide wet suits for this experience. Worth calling out the Sea Paradise boat is walking distance from Holua Kai/Outrigger

Helicopter Tour - I'd recommend doing the north shore tour (Kohala coast) on Blue Hawaiian - it's amazing, and you do get to see Waipi'o Valley from the air. They also have a tour that stops at a waterfall. <https://www.bluehawaiian.com/en/bigisland/tours/kohala-coast-adventure>. The airfield is by the resort town Waikoloa which has shopping, golf, resorts, etc. so it makes a good day-trip with a helicopter ride in the middle.

Luau - This is dinner and a show. All islands will have Luau's available, so I can't vouch which one is better. We've been to this one twice: <https://activityauthority.com/hawaii/big-island/kona/island-breeze-luau/> - again, reservations needed... We did the Luau at the Outrigger which was also interesting, perhaps less authentic, but a fun time.

The *one* beach I've been to in Hawaii is here:

<https://www.nps.gov/kaho/planyourvisit/honokohau-beach.htm> - best place to park here is at the Kona sailing club and take a short walk towards "the fish trap". This beach reliably has green sea turtles. Magic Sands Beach is also highly recommended:

<https://bigislandguide.com/white-sands-beach-park-magic-sands>

Parrots in Paradise: <https://www.airbnb.com/experiences/139523> -- Super cool experience. You get to interact with the parrots directly, and learn a lot along the way. Every bird here has a story and Gerald knows them all.

Kona Cloud Forrest / Coffee: Hawai'i is known for its Kona Coffee. There are lots of places you can visit in the Cloud Forrest. One we've been to that has a free tour every 30 minutes is Mountain Thunder Coffee <https://mountainthunder.com/>. Not to be ignored is some of the Hilo side coffee too (my father found it smoother). The chocolate farm is near O.K. Farms: <https://www.okfarmshawaii.com/> and has "Rainbow Falls Coffee".

Maui Divers Jewelry – my wife loves pearls, this is the place. The Pick-a-Pearl experience is unique and memorable. They have a location in Waikoloa.

Outrigger Farmer's Market - <https://bigislandmkt.com/> -- local food, arts, and music. It's a small market, but the Hawaiian Vanilla Company is also usually here! There's usually a guy cooking sourdough crust pizza... and it's tasty.

Other Food on the Kona Side:

Waikoloa - <https://www.fosterskitchen.com/>

Keauhou area - Sunset Kai Lani - <https://sunsetkailanai.com/>

One of the best meals I've ever had was at Kenichi Pacific: <https://www.kenichipacific.com/>

Waimea:

Up north, on the extinct volcano of Kohala, is Waimea. It's considered "cowboy country" and has more cows than people wandering wide open fields. Downtown Waimea and the surrounding towns are quaint. There's not great shopping in the area, but there are a few farmers markets that are worth going to: (Food on Saturday) <https://waimeatownmarket.com/> (Goods and Local Items on Saturday): <https://kamuelafarmersmarket.com/map-and-directions/>

Unique:

Issac Hale Beach Park - <https://bigislandguide.com/isaac-hale-beach-park> - this place feels like it's at the end of the earth, and since the 2018 Leilani eruption, it kind of is. There are very little services (including no running water), and virtually no cell service, but it's another picnic spot and you can sit in little pools that were created by the lava flow (that destroyed half the park) and are filled with rain or seawater. It's pretty cool.

Southernmost point in the US – There's a beach that's all old corals that have been tossed up on the shore. It's also very remote. Decent spot for a picnic lunch, but it is very windy.

Two Step Beach and Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park – <https://bigislandguide.com/honaunau-bay-two-step>. We only did the park here and not the beach. It's a fun drive down here – there's a few places to stop along the way like Big Island Bees. <https://bigislandbees.com/>. Note that parking for the beach and for the national park are NOT the same thing. You need to park on the road to go to the beach but there's a parking lot for the national park. The National Park also has a nice picnic area down the end for a lunch.

Other Info:

There are 2 Targets and 2 Walmarts on the Big Island. One in Hilo, one in Kona. I do suggest doing your grocery shopping at a KTA which is a local grocery chain that has a great selection of foods.

There are 2 that we went to last time -- <https://www.hilourgentcare.com/> in Hilo and <https://www.kalokourgentcare.com/> in Kona. Had good experiences at both. They didn't take our insurance, but were affordable.