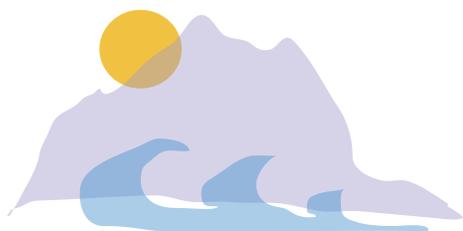


Introduction to the Big Island

The Big Island of Hawaii is a wonder of scenery and pan-Pacific culture, and while it feels mostly like the familiar USA, at times it can feel more like a developing country. In other words, it's different from any other part of the country you've visited. Even if you've been to Honolulu before, the Big Island will provide a new and delightful treat to the strip-mall and pavement-weary tourist.

The Big Island is basically a huge volcanic mountain mass that rises 33,000 feet from the Pacific Ocean floor. Level land is rare, and directions are mostly given using the terms mauka (upslope, up the mountain) and makai (downslope, toward the ocean). The usual compass points are just less handy. There is one main highway that encircles the entire island, called the Hawai'i Belt Road. It is Highway 19 from Kawaihae on the north Kohala coast to Hilo, on the opposite side of the island. From Hilo around the south end of the island back to Kawaihae it is Highway 11. A total circuit of the island without stops or any unusual traffic tie-ups takes about 6 hours. The belt road is not a freeway, but resembles a major two-lane road on the mainland. It is better not to be in a hurry.

Almost all of the human habitation is in a small circle around the edge of the island, with a few notable exceptions, like the areas around Waimea and Volcano. The territory inland and mauka is owned variously by a few large ranches, the state and federal governments, and the Bishop



Trust, a powerful agency set up to further the education of native Hawaiians. The relative unavailability of ground water and often electricity means that the few roads that travel at higher altitudes are not dotted with houses and convenience stores like on the mainland. There are no stands selling souvenirs and local honey. The landscape is sometimes barren, often isolated, and always beautiful. This same formula holds true for large stretches of the main belt road, as well.

Ethnically, Hawaii is a real mixture of cultures. The native Hawaiian culture has its origins elsewhere in the Pacific (no one knows exactly where). In the 19th century, many Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese workers arrived to labor on the sugar cane plantations. These were followed in the early 20th century by many Filipino immigrants. White Americans arrived and eventually took over things (like overthrowing the Hawaiian monarchy). Today they are generically known as **haoles** (currently meaning white-skinned people, in the past applicable to any foreigner). This term is widely used and can be simply descriptive or used as an epithet, depending on the context and the adjectives used with it. Imagine that. Although most native Hawaiians are easy-going, very polite, and far more forgiving of all this than they might be, it is possible to run into a little ethnic animosity if you visit certain beaches generally frequented by locals. There is also a fairly well-organized Hawaiian independence movement that has arisen in the last 20 years or so that entertains a fair amount of ambivalence toward haoles. The most likely brush with any animosity would be having your rental car broken into, which definitely can happen, but which is also not that common at well-attended public areas. The term locals, by the way, refers to people born into and raised in the current day Hawaiian



culture. They may be native Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, a mix of all of the above, or even haole (if truly born into the culture). Locals pride themselves on having the spirit of aloha (a live and let-live attitude that especially honors time spent with family, friends, and at the beach). It also means that most people you meet here will be quite nice to you, especially if you are to them. Well, that part's probably not too different from anywhere, but the spirit of aloha is definitely something different and very wonderful that you can feel. It also means that fairly often someone in a long line of oncoming traffic will actually pause to let you make a left turn, say. Definitely different from the mainland.

Most place names, street names, etc. are Hawaiian words, and take some getting used to. There are also some Hawaiian words that you may see on signs or hear used, like "kapu" (entry forbidden), "kokua" (assistance, often with connotations of patience), "keiki" (child or children), and "pau" (finished). It's important to know the terms "kane" (men) and "wahine" (women) to avoid restroom embarrassment. Many people greet and take leave of one another with "aloha" and often thank each other by saying "mahalo." Speaking of restrooms, they are not always available inside every restaurant or at every single gas station as they usually are on the mainland. Many restaurants, for example, are in small shopping centers that have restrooms at a central location.

The Hawaiian language is very beautiful, and you will probably hear it spoken at some time during your visit. Many locals also speak a dialect of English called pidgin. Your best chance of hearing it on a short visit may be on a morning radio show with people calling in. It tends to be fairly easy to understand, and dispenses with a lot of articles and other words not entirely necessary to convey meaning.

Weather

The weather in March can be summed up as spring. Because Hawaii is way out in the middle of a huge body of water — the North Pacific Ocean — seasons tend to lag a bit. In April Hilo-side can be very changeable and unpredictable. It can be clear and breezy all day, or lowering skies and damp. Because of the high annual rainfall (130–180 inches along the Hilo side), statistically you can expect to be drenched several times during your stay. April mornings on the Kona side of the island are almost always sunny and cool. Later in the day, a shelf of clouds builds out from the slopes of Hualalai (the local volcano at 8271 feet altitude) so that the mountain may be dark and rainy while the coast is still sunny or at most “half-cloudy,” giving rise to dramatic light. Some days a few sprinkles reach the coast, most days they do not.

The term microclimate really gets a workout on the Big Island. Weather (and annual rainfall) is often dramatically different in locations just a few miles from each other. A short drive to Waimea from anyplace else is likely to convince you of the truth of this statement. In fact, going a short distance mauka anytime results in a temperature drop of a few degrees, although you may be only 3 or 4 miles from the coast. March evenings near sea level are likely to be warm (70°), but sometimes breezy enough to make a light long-sleeved garment feel good. With the morning sun, things begin to heat up almost immediately. But again, temperatures never reach the discomfort level of the hottest or coldest days on most of the mainland.



What to Wear

Given the weather and the island traditions and expectations, what does one wear? For men, suits, jackets, and ties are **extremely** rare in Hawaii. Even at formal occasions, a nice aloha (Hawaiian print) shirt and slacks are the norm. Shorts are often seen, especially in the warmer months. In the same vein, suits and formal dresses are rarely worn by women. A loose-fitting colorful tropical print is more likely the norm. As in other warm-climate locations like Bermuda and Australia, it should be noted that women are less likely to wear shorts in formal settings than are men. Dressing island-style could be both more comfortable and an interesting way to partake of the island way of doing things.

The same dress rules apply to most public gatherings. Even in the fanciest restaurants, the norm runs to the type of clothing mentioned above.

Hilo

Hilo is a wonderful old tropical harbor town, and is the seat of government and the biggest town on the Big Island. It has a very different flavor from the Kona side of the island, a mixture of very traditional Japanese/Hawaiian culture, Hawaiian culture, and the leftovers of the counterculture that started in the

'60s and '70s. It is the rainiest city in the USA, averaging 130 inches per year at the airport. Locations a few miles mauka (upslope) average 200 inches per year. Bring a raincoat or umbrella for a visit to Hilo. On many average days, there will be a string of brief showers that visit every hour or two, with sunshine in between. Given the weather pattern at the time, the day can also be brilliantly sunny with a transparent liquid quality (and, no, that's not a euphemism for rain) to the air and beautiful white puffy clouds above. This same quality is also often evident between showers on showery days.

On Wednesday and Saturday mornings, there is a farmers' market downtown that has an exotic mix of both familiar and strangely alien fruits, flowers, and vegetables. Local-style trash and treasures both are available across the street (a great place for souvenirs you won't find in the shops along with some that you will).

There are interesting shops for browsing, the Lyman Museum highlighting Hawaiian culture and the Tsunami Museum highlighting scary water (Hilo's waterfront has been devastated in the past by tsunamis), the new 'Imiloa Museum highlighting astronomy and Hawaiian culture, and even a small zoo, with a few interesting animals and great landscaping.

Just north of Hilo is a fabulous tropical botanical garden (after a visit you'll be able to explain what a rain forest is) and a scenic drive that winds along an old highway through the essence of "Old Hawaii." If you absolutely need to visit a mall, Hilo has the only one on the Big Island, but it's probably not as good as the mall in your hometown. The Walmart beside it, however, is unfortunately exactly the same, except that it sells rice in very large bags in recognition of its location.

Best of all, Hilo has a "feel" about it that you just won't find on the mainland — the crosscurrents of Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, and haole cultures set in a relaxed and comfortably frayed tropical surround.

On the down side, Hilo-side has been invaded by a noxious and noisy pest — the coqui frog. These tiny frogs originally hail from Puerto Rico, and have been introduced into Hawaii mainly in the last 4 years or so. They sound much like spring peepers on the Eastern mainland. Unlike the latter, they are not heralding the end to a dreary winter, they call year-round, and they don't shut up all night long! And, on top of that, they are not in some swampy area down the road; they are going to be right outside your open window. Yet another dent in paradise, as quiet tropical evenings are a thing of the past on the Hilo side.

Volcano

Volcano National Park is about 4000 feet above sea level, and has lots of great sights related to the eruption of Kilauea, Hawaii's currently erupting volcano. It's important to know that the lava from the current eruption is flowing into the sea about 20 miles away from the visitor center and the main entrance to the park. The exact circumstances and location of the lava flow change somewhat over time, but mostly these days getting close to the lava requires a fairly long hike (maybe 3-6 miles roundtrip). This hike is always over recently deposited lava, so the footing is

very uneven, and has lots of sharp edges. That means it is likely to take twice as long as the same distance with better footing; it can easily turn into a 3-4 hour walk. For nighttime viewing, it means a long walk back to your car in the dark (bring your flashlight and everlasting Bunny batteries!) and a late-night 20-mile drive back to the nearest lodging (or a really, really long and tiring drive back to the Kona or Hilo areas). Depending on the flow of the day, it may be possible to get some interesting views and nighttime glow from the flowing lava closer to where you can park your car. The park service does a good job of trying to protect its visitors, but many people try to get closer to the lava than they should, leave the carefully-chosen trails, and so on. Bad ideas. It is possible to break through encrusted lava into lava that will burn your shoes (and worse!), get lost, or find yourself on a lava shelf that suddenly collapses into the sea. What a drowner.

There are lots of great sights and hikes around the park headquarters. Halema'uma'u Crater was a lake of molten lava during most of the 19th century. Today you can walk across the bottom and marvel at the sulfurous steam vents that hint at this past. The crater is about 3000 feet across, and trails that wander along the bottom can make for a hike of a few miles. Bring sturdy shoes — lava rock even on good trails takes a toll on lightweights — and plenty of water. The crater is also home to Madame Pele, the Hawaiian volcano goddess. You can see many interesting offerings to her, which Hawaiian people make even today, dotting the crater area.

There are wonderful hikes around the rim of the crater, which is around 300-500 feet deep, with sheer walls. Guided nature walks with national park employees and volunteers near the park headquarters are usually very informative and a lot of fun.

The village of Volcano is an interesting collection of a few stores, restaurants, and quite a few houses, set in the high-altitude tropical rain forest. There is even a winery which can be visited, and whose products are, shall we say, interesting.

Place of Refuge

About 19 miles south of Kona, and officially known as Pu'uhonua o Honaunau, the Place of Refuge offers beautiful scenery and native Hawaiian history in one place. The name Place of Refuge has its origins in the "kapu" system of laws that governed Hawaiian culture. In fact, the word "kapu" is still used on many signs in modern Hawaii — it means "No Trespassing — Entry Forbidden." Many of the traditional laws were based on forbidding individuals of lower class from trespassing against the priests and ali'i (the noble classes). So what else is new? Punishment for breaking these laws was a swift death. But, if the accused could somehow make it to a "place of refuge," it was possible to take part in rituals that would remove the death sentence, and, in fact, remove the criminal record completely. It was also an important destination for the warriors of defeated armies, who could avoid being killed by the victors if they reached this place.

The beauty and serenity of this place shows why it was selected to serve as such a place of asylum. It still seems to have a calming influence and serves as a good setting to meditate or ponder a difficult decision. Late afternoon is an especially nice time to visit. In addition to the setting and the atmosphere it seems to promote, there are many interesting exhibits to see.

Kailua Kona

Kailua Kona is the main town on the western side (Kona side) of the Big Island. The added name Kona refers to the Kona Coast of the Big Island and differentiates this Kailua from the larger Kailua on Oahu and the smaller Kailua on Maui. It is not an old town, with a town center, but is instead a fairly loose collection of tourist shops, hotels, small shopping centers, houses, condos, and support businesses. It's somewhat difficult to locate the downtown center of it all. It has supermarkets (Safeway, KTA, and Sack 'N' Save), one real drugstore (Long's),

along with K-Mart, Walmart, Borders Books, and a Lowe's Home Center. There is a nice street (Ali'i Drive) that winds along the waterfront, and which is flanked by an array of tourist temptations — various shops, stalls hawking volcano, scuba diving, and helicopter tours, restaurants, and a few older hotels. It can be an interesting and scenic place for an afternoon walk or drive.

Other parts of Kona, as it's usually called, are not that pedestrian-friendly. In a particular twist of planned development, there are two distinct retail areas that constitute the places where residents mostly go if they need anything, really. The older is called, oddly enough, the Old Industrial Area, and is located just north of the main part of Kona. It is several square blocks of tire dealers, out-of-the way restaurants and bars, auto parts dealers, industrial and business supply places, and even hairdressers and furniture stores. It's where you go for teak furniture, office supplies, pad thai, fish tacos, lighting fixtures, or a new set of Michelins. Adjacent is the International Marketplace, a new collection of shops with interesting Hawaiian goods, souvenirs, and tropical flowers.

The newer retail area is called the Kaloko Industrial Area, or informally, the "New Industrial Area." These retail areas were not named by the creative people who come up with names for paint colors or for T-shirt colors in the Land's End catalogue. The New Industrial Area is about 4 miles north of Kona, about halfway between town and the airport. This area has the Costco, where almost all of the Big Island shops at one time or another, along with another assortment of the stores and services found in the Old Industrial Area. Come to the New for roofing, powdercoating, exotic auto and marine paint, handmade chocolate honus (divine chocolate and macadamia nut

treats), Subway sandwiches, kitchen design, more teak furniture, irrigation supplies, nursery plants, and, of course, Costco and Home Depot.

The Kona International Airport is built on a lava flow that erupted from Hualalai volcano in 1801, and is right on the ocean. It is 8 miles north of Kailua Kona town, and 6 miles south of the Hualalai Resort. The drive from the airport into Kailua Kona can take 45 minutes to an hour between about 3:00 and 5:00 pm on weekdays. Friday is generally worst of all. Try to avoid this introduction to Hawaii if possible.

Waimea

Although Waimea is a small town of 2500 residents, it is a major center for the northern end of the Big Island. At a cool green elevation of 2700 feet, the landscape surrounding the town is pastoral (it's surrounded by Parker Ranch) and resembles variously parts of coastal California and the British Isles. The town is known for having a wet (green, in realtor-speak) side and a dry side. Within the space of a few miles, the natural vegetation goes from lush upland tropical to parched grass and cactus. The usual weather is, naturally, quite different on the two sides. The green side is often covered by low clouds racing across on the trade winds, dropping a shower of drizzle and mist. As the clouds approach the dry side, they start to descend the slope down to the Kohala coast, and you can often see the clouds disappearing before your eyes at a particular place in their downward journey. As you might expect, you may see stunning rainbows, given that one side is sunny and

the other often provides heavy drizzle for the sun to shine into. For a visit to Waimea, be prepared for damp, windy weather with temperatures at least 10 degrees cooler than on the coast (which you might have left a mere 20 minutes before). The difference is noticeable, to say the least.

The town itself is home to several galleries, the Isaacs Art Center, and a couple of the observatories on Mauna Kea are headquartered here. It's also known for its "paniolo" (cowboy) flavor from a ranching history that continues to some degree even today. The large pickup trucks are reminiscent of farming country anywhere on the mainland.

Mauna Kea, the highest mountain in Hawaii at 13,796 feet, towers over the town. Because the mountain slope is fairly gentle, it doesn't seem like it's 11,000 feet higher than the town, because the summit is still 20 miles away. Several observatories are visible atop the mountain; on most mornings the summit is visible from Waimea, and by afternoon the clouds have moved in. In late afternoon, they often clear for a spectacular finish to the day.

The Mountain Road

Highway 250, known as the Mountain Road locally, runs from Waimea to Hawi, located on the very northern tip of the Big Island. Much of the road runs through beautiful ranch pasture, at an altitude of 2000 to 3500 feet. The pine-like trees often seen along the immediate roadside are Casuarina, or Ironwood trees, originally from Australia. They are common in warmer parts of Florida, as well.

On a clear day traveling from Waimea to Hawi, there are spectacular views of Maui more or less ahead of you. Haleakala, at 10,023 feet, is the top of Maui, and it's still about 40 or 50 miles away depending on your proximity to Waimea or Hawi. The views in general are great, and on a day when the trade winds are bringing lots of moisture across Waimea, the rainbows



can be unbelievable (probably best appreciated driving in the Hawi to Waimea direction). Very different from the usual picture of palm-lined beaches in Hawaii. As everywhere on the Big Island, driving requires a great deal of concentration — this particular road is curvy and some local residents tend to want to cut the curves out.

Hawi itself has a few galleries and restaurants, and has a much different feel from most of the Hilo, Kona and Waimea areas — much more traditional Hawaii. A short drive east takes you through Kapa'au, birthplace of Hawaii's legendary King Kamehameha and also the location of a wonderful bookstore. The Kohala Bookshop specializes in new and used books about everything Hawaiian, and is a great source of used books on many other topics.

All the way at the end of this road is the Pololu Valley Overlook, where you can look straight down to the frothy Pacific several hundred feet below. For the hardy hiker, it's a relatively short but steep descent down to a remote beach area (no facilities) that gives a nice flavor of Hawaii off-the-beaten-track. The ascent back to the parking area, although the same distance, seems longer and steeper for some reason.

Waipi'o Valley

The Waipi'o Valley is reached by a small spur road, Highway 240, which runs about 8 miles from the picturesque town of Honoka'a on the Hamakua coast. Honoka'a is about 15 miles past Waimea on the way to Hilo.

Without a 4WD vehicle or taking one of the tours, you can't drive down into the valley. The somewhat rough paved road down into the valley is very steep, and requires both the traction and extra engine braking power of a 4WD vehicle to make the trip. A spectacular view of the valley makes it

a very worthwhile destination, even if you don't go down into it. A lookout at the end of Highway 240 sits 900 feet above the beach and the valley floor, which is almost straight down below. The valley itself is quite lush, and has a few residents who mostly like to live away from the mainstream. Until 1946, there were more residents and more organized farming, especially taro farming. A giant tsunami that year pretty much wiped out the valley, and it wasn't until 20 or so years later that a small trickle of people seeking an alternative and somewhat remote lifestyle began to recolonize the valley.

For the sturdy hiker, the walk down into and out of the valley is great fun. Plan on about 30 minutes down and an hour back up. Down in the valley, there is a short half-mile or so of unpaved road; it has very large puddles and requires some 4WD experience to negotiate. As a hiker, you can enjoy watching the different ways drivers approach the watery obstacles. At the end of this short stretch is a wild and beautiful beach, with boulders, black sand, portable toilets, and Casuarina trees. The valley sides are incredibly steep, and a river flows into the ocean at the beach. The road down, although paved, is so steep that the hike is best done when it's not wet and slippery.

But it is definitely a memorable trip, should you find time to do it.

General Shopping Needs

As noted above, supermarkets, health foods, and drugstores are located in Kailua village & Hilo. Costco in Kailua village, Walmart, and K-Mart also have pharmacy sections that fill prescriptions. Macy's Department Store has locations in both towns. One can also find a supermarket and health food store in Pahoa, Waikoloa Village, about 24 miles north of the Kona airport, and two supermarkets in Waimea.

Gasoline tends to be available at discrete shopping areas, and not all along the highway, as on the mainland. Fill 'er up in Hilo, Kailua, Pahoa, Waikoloa Beach, Waikoloa Village, Waimea, etc. Many locals fill up at Costco, which tends to be about 20 cents per gallon cheaper than the other stations (Costco membership required).

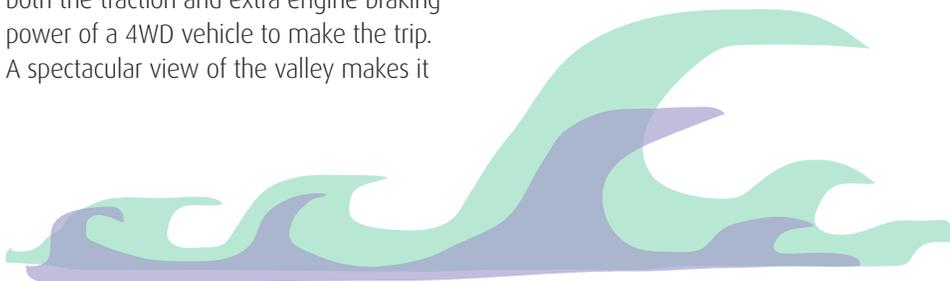
Check out Hilo Hattie's in Hilo for Hawaiian souvenirs, although even Walmart has a section devoted exclusively to them. (Don't worry, you will find souvenirs.) Hattie's has a nice selection of colorful Hawaiian aloha clothing; Macy's offers a pricier and sometimes higher-quality alternative.

The larger stores are open late, as on the mainland. Smaller, local businesses tend to have old-fashioned daylight-only opening hours. In general, the Big Island winds down fairly early, about 9 PM or so on weeknights. Activities go on much later at the resorts and a few bars.

Liquor is sold in supermarkets, Long's Drugstore, K-Mart, Costco, and most smaller convenience markets.

Beaches

Beaches on the Big Island are somewhat different from beaches on the East Coast of the mainland (in North Carolina, for example). Here the beaches are limited in size, usually crescents of sand from a



hundred yards to a quarter of a mile long, flanked by lava flows on both ends (and often farther onshore behind them, too). Long ambles along the beach that go on for miles are just not possible. There are almost always outcrops of lava rock interspersed even in the friendliest sandy bottoms where you might be in the water. Surf shoes are recommended. Many beaches here tend to be relatively undeveloped and require a 4-wheel drive vehicle or a hike to reach them. They also tend to have a tropical fringe of coconut palms, beautiful clear water, and strong waves that should be respected at all times. Without suggesting too much worry, it's probably a good idea not to turn your back on the waves at any beach. An occasional big one, although rare, can sweep through. Not all the beaches mentioned below have facilities, like restrooms and picnic tables, although all are accessible without special modes of transportation or trekking across the lava in the hot sun.

On the Hilo side, **Kehena Beach** is small, and, unlike Gaul, divided into two parts, but it is a lovely black sand beach with some natural shade, good whale & dolphin watching, and a clothing-optional possibility. A few miles north are the Kapoho tidepools, where the surf is not as rugged. The snorkeling here is marvelous.

On the Kona side, **Kahalu'u Beach** is one of the best places to do some snorkeling on the Big Island. It has lots of fish and has a large shallow area protected from the larger ocean waves by a reef a hundred yards or so offshore. Morning tends to be best for snorkeling — fewer people, clearer water and better light for seeing underwater. This beach even has a few vendors that sell food and rent snorkeling equipment — very developed by Big Island standards, and it becomes fairly crowded most afternoons. Here, as at other snorkeling or swimming beach locations, it is important not to step on the coral (damages the coral, and can result in nasty slow-to-heal cuts for you). Also avoid touching the easily recognizable spiny sea urchins, whose spines can break off and stay in well past the end of your time in the islands.

Kua Bay is located about a mile toward Kona from the Hualalai Resort, with the turn being just opposite the turn to the West Hawaii Veterans Cemetery. It is a beautiful beach with good access, nice facilities, and is a local favorite.

Hapuna Beach and **Mauna Kea Beach** are two especially beautiful beaches with facilities and even lifeguards, located near the Mauna Kea Resort about 30 miles north of Kona. They have some of the nicest stretches of sand and best ocean swimming in the entire state of Hawaii — in fact, they're often voted some of the nicest beaches in the entire country by magazines that concern themselves with such matters. Public parking is fairly limited at these beaches, and arriving on a weekend afternoon may not yield an actual parking space.

More Information

This guide is intended to give a brief introduction to the wonders and flavor of the Big Island. For pre-trip planning, many good guidebooks are available. One of our favorites is **Hawaii: The Big Island Revealed**, by Andrew Doughty and Harriett Friedman (4th Edition).

Tom Blackburn
Kailua Kona, Hawaii
March, 2007

