

Chasing Creation

on the

BIG ISLAND



Hawaii is not a state of mind, but a state of grace.

Paul Theroux

Lie around all you like on a poolside chaise, let the hula girls in grass skirts serve you rum with an umbrella and the tropical sun, the turquoise sea, lull you to snoozy bliss in this isle of paradise. Maybe, a ukulele plays. I, Pilot Michael, have another Hawaii in mind. This Hawaii is a fire-spitting, spirit-driven place – the youngest on earth and still growing – where primordial displays of creation erupt before your eyes, and molten awe makes you wonder: Are these black- and green-sand beaches, these placid azure waters home to dolphins, turtles, morays, whales, these secluded valleys of mango and orchids, green crater lakes and wild-dropping falls – is this tropical wonderland safe from the ire of fiery Pele, the goddess of volcanoes whose power here is absolute? Am I?



Active for 100 years, Mauna Loa's Kilauea Caldera spews molten magnificence through the Pu'u O'O vent, the lava zone named for the O'O, the rarest of all island rainforest birds (above); above the Big Island clouds (top right); great golf along the "gold" Kohala Coast (lower right)

The Hawaii I mean is the Big Island. The Orchid Isle. Volcano Island. Five volcanoes fused together with mighty Mauna Kea, the world's largest island-based mountain (from the ocean floor taller than Everest) and feisty Mauna Loa, the world's largest active fire-spewer, reigning supreme, and temperamental Kilauea subject to frequent meltdowns – like in 1990 when it completely lava-shrouded the town of Kalapana, and in 1992 when it paved under the ancient village of Kamoamoa.

This Hawaii, 4030 square miles of so many different microclimates you can drive from desert to jungle to permafrost in a day, is to my mind the adventurer's isle. From remote, windswept South Point, where the Hawaiian archipelago's original Polynesian settlers landed (and the southernmost tip of the US), to the gorgeous "gold" Kohala Coast, where luxury resorts and glittering golf courses impart their own brand of *aloha* spirit, the Big Island is such a vast array of different – and exciting – discoveries that hula girls or no, a snooze on a poolside chaise seems oh-so in comparison.

Landing at Keahole-Kona airport (KOA) I get "lei'd" in delightful Hawaiian tradition (you can get "lei'd" at Hilo (ITO) airport too). And no sooner is my necklace of fragrant blossoms making me woozy with their perfume than I get word of the Big Island's best diversions. I can dive in Kailua Bay and, serenaded by whalesong, swim with luminous manta rays, playful spinner dolphins and green sea turtles. I can fish off the Kona Coast, home to more "grander" (over 1000 lbs) marlin than perhaps anywhere in the world. In Hawaii Volcanoes Nat'l Park, there's hiking to the rim of 13,679-ft Moana Loa and through the steaming East Rift Zone, where molten lava actively flows. Soaking in the thermal hot springs of Hot Pond; dining on seafood sublime in the island's culture capital, busy Hilo; savoring the unique and potent coffee of Kona; even contemplating the legends of spirits Hawaiians believe dwell in the sacred Waipi'o Valley...these and other Big Island





The wonderworld of the North Kohala Coast, the northern-most tip of the Big Island

delights beckon me, *welcome*. Still, it's the invite of mythical Pele to which I RSVP. She, the volcano goddess who is said to make her home in the boiling magma of Kilauea's Halemaumau Pit, summons me to revel in her power as daily she conjures creation. By seeking the sites of live volcanic action I will know her – and the Big Island – in all their astonishment.

As an aside, the history here is pretty interesting. Around 500-700 AD the first Marquesans alit on the island via double-hull canoe, only to be enslaved by the Tahitians who came later, 1000 AD. Since then it has been a story of superstition, human sacrifices, Christian missionaries, Kamehameha the Great as king and Pacific map-maker Captain Cook, who mistaken for the great god Lono in some ensuing confusing was speared to death. Today there linger reminders of the island's colorful past, whether it's the pair

of ancient *heiau* temples on the Kohala Coast, the curious burial caves and petroglyphs (prehistoric drawings) in Holoholokai Beach Park, or Kamehameha the Great's war spears on display at Kona's Hulit'e Palace museum. Sugar, cattle, coffee, macadamia nuts, orchids and anthurium all have been big island business, and spots abound where it's fun to connect with island industry: Attend a rodeo at 225,000-acre Parker (cattle) Ranch in Waimea; see sugar plantations of the Hamakua Plateau, a vision to behold as they unfurl from mountains to the sea; fall in love with floral exotica at the Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden on the Hamakua Coast.

Pilot Michael, your intrepid tropical Marco Polo, thinks all that's hot – hot as the works of Renoir, Degas and Pissarro hung in beautiful pale-yellow Puopelu, a historic home in Waimea, and hot as the

museums of Hilo, where one, the Pacific Tsunami Museum, explores cause and effect of the Big Island's worrisome source of catastrophe second to volcanic eruption.

But enough of simply hot. Pele would insist: I seek *spectacular*. This means I'm taking the wheel of a 4WD and, because on the Big Island there are no snakes, no poison oak or ivy, and except for a possible wayward boar, no wild things to fear, my hiking feet are giddy. I'm hitting the road. While helicopter and hot air balloon tours offer buzz- and float-by good times, drives in the Big Island promise serious spectacle. Take the twin adventures in Hawaii Volcanoes Nat'l Park. The 11-mile Crater Rim Drive loops around the mesmerizing moonscape of Kilauea Caldera, the volcano's incredible "collapse" of draining magma. 20-mile Chain of Craters Road is the route to actual live lava flow. Here, in 2100-degree molten mag-

nificence, fiery magma meets the sea in a scalding, explosive display of new Planet Earth hot in the act of creation. Hiking this East Rift Zone can be dangerous (i.e., unbearably exciting); step right up to the spew and get a "sun-burn" if you dare. Elsewhere on the island, the coastal Red Road (hwy 137) near Puna is a ribbon of wonder: it's paved with the red cinder from the 1960 Kapoho lava flow. (A skinny dip is recommended as you pass placid – and private – Green Lake, hidden among bamboo, guava and avocado trees.) Highway 130 is another live lava-gawkers thrill; it bears witness to a flow that hits the sea in an amazing geyser of steam.

Should all this hot, sweaty tracking of volcanic action work up a need for taking it easy, there's lots of that, too, on the Big Island. Play 18 holes at the super posh Four Seasons Resort Hualalai. Luau on Tuesday and clambake on Saturday at the lush Mauna Kea Resort. Even swim with

the dolphins at the tropical fantasyland that is the Hilton Waikoloa Beach Resort. Me? I've saving such pampering in paradise for another day – soon. I'll be back for the hula girls with their run and umbrellas; I'll absolutely pencil-in the pool-side snooze. This trip, though, my Hawaii is a date with that hot-tempered temptress Pele: I plan to involve myself entirely in her bewitching ways with hot lava. And even off-hours when I snorkel to whalesong in waters brilliant with fish of almost otherworldly description, even when I awe to black- and green-sand beaches whose beauty is elevated to the poetic, I plan to stay beholden to the wild. The untamable. The wonder of Earth in spellbinding creation before my very eyes. In a word, all that is her beloved home, the Big Island.

For further information on Hawaii visit <http://bigisland.gohawaii.com>, 808.886.1655



KONA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AT KEAHOLE (KOA)

AIRPORT DATA

Elevation: 47'
 Runways: 17/35 11,000'
 Approaches: GPS, RNAV, ILS/DME, LOC, LOC BC, VOR(TAC), VOR/DME
 ATIS / ASOS: 808.329.0412

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