



Hawai‘i the Big Island

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Best Beaches

- Hapuna Beach (p233)
- Mau‘umae Beach (p233)
- Waipi‘o Valley (p256)
- Manini‘owali Beach (p221)
- Makalawena Beach (p221)

Best Snorkeling

- Two-Step (p215)
- Mau‘umae Beach (p233)
- Kapoho Tide Pools (p287)
- Hapuna Beach (p233)

Why Go?

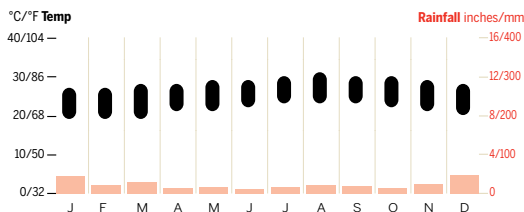
Hawai‘i the Big Island is twice as big as the other islands combined and, thanks to a rambunctiously active volcano that periodically bleeds lava into the ocean, it’s growing.

But the Big Island isn’t just where raw creation occurs. It’s where the fruits of that process are presented in dizzying diversity. Eight of the world’s 13 climate zones exist here, encompassing Martian lava deserts, emerald jungle, paradisaical valleys that front black-, white- and even *green*-sand beaches, snowcapped mountains, coral forests and an enchantingly unique population of locals, hippies, transplants, eccentrics, neighbors, bartenders, teachers and more.

You can easily be lazy here, but the Big Island really shines for adventurers. Some of the best beaches, reefs and valleys require a short hike, swim or drive over rutted roads. The beauty is astounding, and for a little effort, you get enormous rewards on your travel investment.

When to Go

Kailua-Kona



Jan Surf’s up and summits are snowcapped during the Big Island ‘winter.’

Late Mar–early Apr Catch the world’s greatest hula at Hilo’s Merrie Monarch Festival.

Oct Tenacious tri-athletes compete in the legendary swim-bike-run race born in Kailua-Kona.

History

The modern history of the Big Island is a tale of two cities – Kailua-Kona and Hilo – which represent the island's split personality: West Hawai'i and East Hawai'i. Kamehameha the Great, born in West Hawai'i, lived out the end of his life in Kailua, and throughout the 19th century, Hawaiian royalty enjoyed the town as a leisure retreat, using Hulihe'e Palace as a crash pad.

Yet, during the same period, Hilo emerged as the more important commercial harbor. The Hamakua Coast railroad connected Hilo to the island's sugar plantations, and its thriving wharves became a hub for agricultural goods and immigrant workers. By the 20th century the city was the Big Island's economic and political center, and Hilo remains the official seat of island government.

On April 1, 1946 the Hamakua Coast was hit by an enormous tsunami that crumpled the railroad and devastated coastal communities (such as Laupahoehoe). Hilo got the worst of it: its waterfront was completely destroyed, and 96 people were killed. The city was rebuilt, but 14 years later, in 1960, it happened again: another deadly tsunami splintered the waterfront. This time Hilo did not rebuild, but left a quiet expanse of parks separating the downtown area from the bay.

After that the sugar industry steadily declined (sputtering out in the 1990s), and the Big Island's newest income source – tourism – focused quite naturally on the sun-drenched, sandy western shores where Hawaiian monarchs once gamboled. Since the 1970s, resorts and real-estate barons have jockeyed for position and profit along the leeward coast, turning West Hawai'i into the de facto seat of power.

Today, despite escalating home prices, the Big Island is considered the most affordable island to live on (and travel around), attracting young people from across the state; and it is diversifying its economy with small farm-based agriculture and renewable energy.

National, State & County Parks

The Big Island's main attraction, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park (p289), is one of the USA's most interesting and varied national parks. More than a million visitors come annually to drive and hike this lava and rain-forest wonderland.

The Big Island is also notable for its wealth of ancient Hawaiian sights, which are

preserved in several national and state historical parks. The most famous is Pu'uhonua o Honaunau (p214), an ancient place of refuge in South Kona. But Native Hawaiian history and moody landscapes can also be found at remote Mo'okini Luakini Heiau (p239) in North Kohala; snorkeling mecca Kealakekua Bay (p211), where Captain Cook met his demise; the restored fishponds of Kaloko-Honokohau (p217) near Kailua-Kona; and the imposing, majestic Pu'ukohola Heiau (p235) just south of Kawaihae.

Many of the Big Island's finest beaches lie within parkland, such as the world-renowned Hapuna Beach (p233). The beaches within Kekaha Kai State Park (p220) are also idyllic, though only Manini'owali is accessible by paved road.

Other parks worth seeking out on the Windward Coast are Kalopa State Recreation Area (p264), preserving a native forest; Laupahoehoe (p264), site of a tsunami disaster; and Akaka Falls (p266), the prettiest 'drive-up' waterfalls in Hawai'i. Though not a designated park, Waipi'o Valley shouldn't be missed.

Camping

Hawai'i has enough good campgrounds that you can enjoyably circumnavigate the island in a tent, plus there are several highly memorable backcountry camping opportunities. Some parks also offer simple cabins and DIYers can rent camper vans.

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park has two drive-up campgrounds (one fee-paying with cabins, the other free) and several great backcountry sites. Only backcountry sites require permits (available at Visitor Emergency Operations Center).

State parks require camping permits for tent sites (\$12/18 residents/non-residents)

BORED WAITING TO BOARD?

They were clever, whoever located the **Astronaut Ellison S Onizuka Space Center** (Map p218; ☎ 329-3441; adult/child under 12yr \$3/1; 🕒 8:30am-4:30pm) at the Kona International Airport. This little museum paying tribute to the Big Island native who perished in the 1986 *Challenger* space-shuttle disaster collects celestial ephemera like moon rocks and space suits; it makes an interesting way to spend some time before takeoff.