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The Best of Hawaii

From six islands, hundreds of beaches, and hundreds of sights—how do you choose?

by David Thompson

IT'S A QUANDARY, YOU MIGHT THINK. ARE THE ISLANDS DISTINCTIVE, OR are they alike? Don't they all have giant surf, pineapple fields, and big fancy hotels? And which one has the active volcano?

Actually, there are answers: yes, no, maybe, and the Big Island.

A map of Hawaii is like a portrait of siblings lined up in order of birth. Of the six main inhabited islands—Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, Lanai, Maui, and the Big Island—Kauai, on the far left, is the oldest, at close to 6 million years. Just under a million years old and posing on the far right is the Big Island, the baby of the bunch—though not forever. About 20 miles off the Big Island, in 3,000 feet of water, a volcanic seamount is rising. It's been dubbed Loihi, and scientists say it will become the next Hawaiian island, but it won't reach the surface for about another 150,000 years.

Ruling out Loihi, which island—or islands—would best suit you? Here are snapshots of each place to help you decide.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE ISLANDS

KAUAI

The picture of Hawaii in the minds of people who've never been there is often one of Kauai—with rainbows appearing over waterfalls, sunny beaches, and dark, misty mountains. Kauai is the wettest and most weathered island, showcasing heavily sculpted mountains, as well as rivers and streams radiating from its center like spokes. Largely rural and overwhelmingly green, Kauai has a mountain peak in its middle where it almost never stops raining, and beaches around its edges where it almost always feels like summer. The laid-back towns have no big shopping malls, no nightlife to speak of, and no building taller than the coconut trees.

OAHU

Home to Honolulu and 75% of Hawaii's population, Oahu is the island with the action. Stretching for about 30 miles between iconic Diamond Head and historic Pearl Harbor, Honolulu's got glittering lights, an arts scene, nightlife, shopping, the high-rise canyons of Waikiki, and the Pacific's major military presence, not to mention LA-style freeways and gridlock. In addition to "town," as people call the

city, Oahu's got "country"—which includes the North Shore, where the monster winter waves break and the best surfers in the world push the limits of the sport a little further each year.

MOLOKAI

Molokai is the most Hawaiian of the main islands, with native Hawaiians making up the majority of its population of 7,000. It's also the most rural and the least oriented toward tourism. If you want to get the authentic, undiluted flavor of the Hawaiian Islands, go to Molokai. The accommodations are rustic and affordable, the eateries are geared toward local tastes, and the visitor activities tend toward simple country pleasures, like horseback riding and fishing. Remote beaches are the rule. The north side of the island, lined with the tallest sea cliffs on the planet, is largely inaccessible, though you can ride a mule down to Kalaupapa Peninsula, once a leper colony and still home to some old-timers with Hansen's disease who have chosen to stay on. A lot of day-trippers staying on Maui take the ferry or catch a flight for short visits to the island.

LANAI

Lanai is a small, dome-shaped island with no stop lights and nobody worried about leaving the car keys in their ignitions. Its single town, Lanai City, has a handful of bed-and-breakfasts, and almost all 3,000 of Lanai's residents live there. Pineapple fields covered the island until 1992, when Dole Food Company shifted its attention to tourism on the island. Now the pineapples are gone, and Dole's two ritzy hotels primarily drive the island's economy. A lot of day-trippers from Maui come over to snorkel or drive to the Garden of the Gods, an otherworldly landscape of boulders and spires that glow red and purple at sunset.

MAUI

Maui is the pampered, popular kid of the bunch, spoiled rotten with lavish resorts and idyllic beaches. Less hectic than Oahu but with no fewer things for visitors to do, its protected leeward waters are perfect for sailing, snorkeling, whale-watching, and all sorts of other ocean activities carried out by a fleet of tourist vessels. The deeply creased West Maui Mountains dominate one side of the island, while the smooth slopes of 10,023-foot Haleakala dominate the other. Trade winds trying to find their way around Haleakala gain speed and make for perfect windsurfing and kiteboarding conditions on Maui's north shore. The one-time whaling port of Lahaina is like a little Waikiki with a sense of history and a height ordinance.

THE BIG ISLAND

At just under a million years of age, the island of Hawaii, aka the Big Island, is the youngest and largest of the islands—and it's still growing. It's the land of the fire goddess Pele, who dwells in the crater of Kilauea volcano, which has been erupting almost continuously since 1983. This is where you go to see earth's fiery creation process unfold before your eyes. The Big Island is also home to Mauna Loa, the largest volcano on earth, which erupted last in 1984 and has been subtly swelling and deflating since. Mauna Kea, the tallest (and sometimes snow-capped) peak in the Pacific and the best site for astronomy on the planet, is there as well. Rainforests cover one side of the island and lava deserts cover the other,

with upcountry ranchland resembling the Scottish highlands in between. Deep waters off the Kona Coast bring giant ahi and billfish close to shore, giving Kona its reputation as one of the world's best places for deep-sea fishing.

BEST SIGHTS, ATTRACTIONS & ACTIVITIES

Visit a live volcano. Hike out to the lava flow at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on the **Big Island** and watch molten rock ooze, pool, spill, and cascade through the flow field, occasionally gushing into the ocean over 80-foot cliffs. See p. 343.

Check out the Grand Canyon of the Pacific: Nearly 3,600 feet deep, Waimea Canyon on **Kauai** was carved from the runoff from Waialeale, one of the world's wettest spots. Drive the rim and watch the rock walls change from purples, greens, blues, grays, and reds. See p. 61.

Snorkel a reef: At Molokini, explore the half-sunken volcanic crater off **Maui**; at Kealahou Bay on the **Big Island**, gaze into water so clear you can see the bottom at 100 feet; and at Hanauma Bay on **Oahu**, swim with fish that are so tame you can practically join their schools. See p. 310, 415, and 165.

Go whale-watching: Thousands of humpback whales spend the winter in Hawaii, mating, calving, and making a big splash—especially around **Maui**. See p. 294.

Scale Haleakala: Wake up on **Maui** in the wee hours to see the sunrise from atop Haleakala, “The House of the Sun,” a dormant 10,023-foot volcano with a crater so alien NASA trained astronauts for moonwalks there. See p. 295.

Take a sunset cruise: Sip a mai tai under sail as night falls along **Kauai**'s spectacularly rugged Na Pali Coast (p. 78) . . . or off the high-rise urban jungle of Waikiki (p. 165) . . . or upon the tranquil waters around Lahaina (p. 326) . . . or in the deep near-shore waters off Kailua-Kona (p. 422).

BEST PEOPLE-WATCHING BEACHES

Waikiki Beach, Oahu: Diamond Head (an extinct volcanic crater), high-rise hotels, and the turquoise sea frame a sandy shore where thousands of visitors lay out in the sun and play in the long, gentle waves. See p. 137.

Kaanapali Beach, Maui: Come for the long, broad swath of sand lined with restaurants, bars, catamarans, and taut, tanned beachgoers. There's good swimming and snorkeling here. See p. 276.

Poipu Beach, Kauai: Visitors from nearby hotels and locals from around the island mingle in the water, on the sand, and in the grassy park here. See p. 23.

Big and Little Makena, Maui: Big Makena is a long golden beach that draws a huge crowd but never feels crowded. Little Makena is a short stretch of sand, hidden in a cove, where beachgoers bear it all. See p. 270.

BEST SECLUDED BEACHES

Makalawena, the Big Island: If you're willing to hike across a withering lava desert, you can discover this perfect Big Island beach where hardly anyone goes. See p. 384.

Red Sand Beach, Maui: An eroding red cinder nourishes this vibrantly colored beach at the bottom of a treacherous trail on Maui's lush, rural east side. See p. 281.

Shipwreck Beach, Lanai: Visit this windy Lanai beach at the end of a bumpy road to see two old ships rusting on the rocks. See p. 223.

Hanakapiai, Kauai: A 2-mile hike along the cliffs of Kauai's Na Pali Coast leads to this idyllic little beach fronting a deep, narrow tropical valley. (Keep hiking and the beaches become even more secluded.) See p. 47.

BEST BEACHES IF YOU'RE A KID

Kanaha Beach Park, Maui: The reef far offshore gives windsurfers waves to jump and keeps near-shore waters calm enough for babies to enjoy. See p. 279.

Lydgate County Park, Kauai: Here, easy swimming in well-protected pools carved into the reef, as well a community-built playground wonderland—with tall bridges to cross, a lava slide to shoot, and mazes to run—delight children. See p. 50.

Poipu Beach, Kauai: An open bay at this beach attracts Kauai's surfers and snorkelers, while a lava-rock jetty creates a sheltered area for kids. See p. 23.

Kapalua Beach, Maui: Two rocky promontories do an extremely good job of calming the waters at this perennially popular Maui beach fronting the Kapalua Bay Hotel Resort. See p. 278.

BEST BEACHES FOR OCEAN SPORTS

The North Shore, Oahu: Home to Sunset Beach, Pipeline, Waimea Bay, and many more celebrated surfing breaks, this area comes to life in the winter with giant waves. See p. 139.

Makapuu, Oahu: A consistent, year-round bodysurfing beach, Makapuu welcomes beginners when the surf is small and eats them for lunch when it gets big. See p. 138.

Hookipa, Maui: Also known as the Windsurfing Capital of the World, this is the home base for the Maui Air Force—windsurfers who catch huge air off the faces of breaking waves. See p. 280.

Kite Beach, Maui: Practitioners of Hawaii's newest extreme sport, kiteboarding, have claimed this as their very own beach. See p. 280.

Magic Sands, the Big Island: The sand here at the islands' best bodysurfing beach—along Alii Drive in Kailua-Kona—comes and goes with the storms. See p. 383.

BEST ACTIVE EXPERIENCES

Surf lessons: Learn to ride the waves with a pro surfer on Oahu or at the old whaling port of Lahaina on Maui with county lifeguards on the Big Island. See p. 157, 303, and 413.

Blasting down a zipline: You don't swing through the trees on Maui, you zip through them along a series of steel cables strung through a eucalyptus forest, back and forth across a gaping gulch. See p. 318.

Landing a marlin: Some of the world's best deep-sea fishing is just offshore from Kailua-Kona on the Big Island. See p. 417.

BEST "OTHER HAWAII" ACTIVITIES

Kick it: Hang with Hawaiian musicians jamming backyard-style while you nibble pupus and knock back beers at a down-home country club in Waimanalo on Oahu. See p. 156.

Relax: Get mellow on *awa* (or *kava* as this mildly narcotic, but perfectly legal, brew is also known) in Honolulu or with Big Island bohemians in the wilds of rural Puna. See p. 90 and 408.

Become an ecotourist: Join conservationists in the field; stand watch over the nests of endangered turtles. See p. 298.

BEST PLACES TO EAT

Ono Hawaiian Foods, Oahu: The *poi* is thick and fresh, the *laulau* luscious, and the line out front perpetual. See p. 132.

Blossoming Lotus, Kauai: At this affordable, ecofriendly, gourmet vegan place, you can get roasted-red-pepper curry for dinner and a kava brownie for dessert. See p. 39.

Mama's Fish House, Maui: Mama's elegant yet casual fine dining is tucked in a palm grove in a lovely cove, with South Seas castaway decor so hokey it's chic. See p. 272.

Kilauea Lodge, Big Island: French and German classics share the menu with ostrich filet in this restaurant set in a cool, misty rainforest near the volcano on the Big Island. See p. 382.