

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of Maui

In This Chapter

- ▶ Scoping out Maui's top-notch accommodations
 - ▶ Uncovering the top dining establishments and luaus
 - ▶ Marveling at Maui's most unforgettable places and experiences
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In Maui, every day can be a slice of paradise. It's a breathtakingly beautiful place that exudes a generous spirit of genuine aloha. And best of all, it doesn't take a lot of cash or over-elaborate planning to get to the heart of Maui. This lovely island has a way of making travelers kick back and savor life's simple pleasures in their purest form. Here, everybody can feel like royalty: A simple beach apartment can be your castle, a fresh papaya and a cup of robust Maui-grown joe your princely breakfast, a joyous aloha shirt your royal robe.

But if you're looking for more worldly luxuries, that's great, too — because vacation is about having what you want. Maui certainly doesn't lack for places to pamper yourself.



This chapter gives you a sneak preview of the absolute best that Maui has to offer — the cream of the crop. Each of these places and experiences is discussed in detail later in this book; for now, you can skim them all at a glance and whet your appetite. As you read through the book, keep your eyes out for the “Best of the Best” icons.

The Best Luxury Resorts

If money is no object, Maui has no shortage of places to park yourself in style. There's a string of terrific upscale resorts along the shores of West Maui (particularly in Kaanapali) and South Maui (in Wailea).

As an extra-added bonus, most of Maui's resorts have recently added brand-new spas that raise the art of relaxation and pampering to a new level. What could be better than a massage on the beach? (Maybe a massage on the beach *with* a mai tai, too?) The following are a few of my favorite luxury resorts:

- ✔ **Fairmont Kea Lani (Maui):** This fanciful Moorish palace on the sand is not only one of the finest, most romantic, and most relaxing hotels in the islands — it gives you so much more for your money than Maui's other luxury resorts. For the same price as a standard hotel room at other places — and sometimes less — here you'll enjoy a large one-bedroom suite with a luxurious living room, a complete entertainment system (including stereo and DVD) and a huge marble bathroom. And there's hardly a better place to unwind. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Grand Wailea Resort & Spa:** Many tout the reserved understatement of the neighboring Four Seasons, but I'm underwhelmed. Instead, I prefer this grand beach palace, with its exclusive tropical theme park vibe, playtime ambience, and over-the-top treats at every turn. Hawaii's best pool complex awaits your (very lucky) kids, and you can indulge in the islands' finest spa. The luxurious Napua Tower offers such extra amenities as personalized concierge service. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Hotel Hana-Maui:** Rejoice — for the Hotel Hana-Maui is glorious once again. After years in the doldrums, this breathtaking resort at the end of the “heavenly” Hana Highway has been reborn as a luxurious haven of genuine Hawaiiana thanks to the folks behind Big Sur's Post Ranch Inn. This easygoing yet elegant hideaway on 62 expansive oceanfront acres is reason enough alone to cruise to the remotest end of the island. Book a Sea Ranch Cottage for a few days if you really want to slow down and recharge. The intimate Honua Spa only adds to the ecstasy. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Four Seasons Resort Maui:** This resort isn't my favorite on Maui — the Grand Wailea is grander and the Fairmont Kea Lani is a better value in the luxury category — but there's no arguing with the star power of this ultradeluxe hotel. The guestrooms are oversized, service is exceptional, and don't be surprised if you recognize a famous face or two lounging by the pool. However, beware of those “oceanview” rooms that overlook the driveway, as they can put the kibosh on your island-perfect mood. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Kaanapali Alii:** Luxury condo living hardly gets better than this high-rise beachfront condo complex — and with princely square footages between 1,500 and 1,900 square feet, the whole family can make themselves at home. Prices are high — but so is quality, and you'll get far more luxury for your money than you will if you and the kids are shoehorned into a pricey hotel room or two. An excellent choice for families and couples alike. See Chapter 10.

The Best Good-Value Accommodations

Maui is full of wonderful, although expensive hotels, but you can also find plenty of good-value accommodations on the island:

- ✔ **Kaanapali Beach Hotel:** This charming, older beachfront hotel is the last hotel left in Hawaii that gives you a real resort experience at a moderate price. The resort brims with genuine aloha spirit and good value — and the on-the-beach location can't be beat. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **The Whaler on Kaanapali Beach:** This well-maintained 1970s luxury condo complex sits front and center on golden Kaanapali Beach, making it the ideal island home for travelers who want homestyle comforts. The individually owned and decorated condos aren't quite as large and luxurious as those at Kaanapali Alii, but they are comfortable, quiet, and wonderfully located, and a much better value than your average oceanfront hotel room. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Napili Bay (Maui):** These petite studios on the sand are one of Hawaii's best beachfront bargains — and they're even a better deal considering their prime location on in-demand Maui. The beach is gorgeous, the snorkling prime, the units thoughtfully outfitted, and the value even better. Thanks to the all-studio configuration, this is a terrific option for budget-minded honeymooners. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Noelani Condominium Resort:** This top-notch oceanfront condo complex is both an excellent value and a really enjoyable place to stay. Every unit — from the value-minded studios for two to the family-friendly two- and three-bedroom apartments — boasts an ocean view and all the comforts of home. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Best Western Maui Oceanfront Inn:** Want to stay on the beach without paying usually exorbitant oceanfront-hotel prices? This freshly renovated small hotel is an excellent option. It's located at the quietest south end of Kihei, just north of ritzy Wailea, on golden sands offering excellent snorkeling and swimming. It's a great choice for couples; families who need space to spread out should book at the neighboring **Mana Kai Maui** instead. See Chapter 10.

The Best Restaurants

The increasingly sophisticated Valley Isle rivals — some say surpasses — Oahu as the fine dining island of choice for vacationing gourmands. Whether you want a casual burger or a lavish meal with fine wine, Maui's got just the ticket.

The island's waters are so pristine that the wealth of fabulous seafood on Maui's menus should come as no surprise. What you may not have expected is the degree to which Maui's chefs celebrate the bounty of this fertile island, showcasing its fresh produce and tropical fruits.

Maui's location at the crossroads of the Pacific also guarantees that you can enjoy an incredible culinary adventure, sampling an authentic taste of Japan, China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia.

And did I mention that you get to enjoy most of your meals in beautifully situated oceanfront restaurants to boot?

- ✓ **David Paul's Lahaina Grill** (Maui): This Lahaina mainstay still shines as one of most glorious dining experiences in the Hawaiian islands. David Paul's gets it all just right, from the pretty sophistication of the dining room to the beautifully prepared, generously portioned dishes to the first-rate service that fuses personal warmth and professionalism perfectly. Special occasion restaurants hardly come finer than this. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Mama's Fish House:** My absolute favorite choice on Maui is this delightful seafood house, which offers a magical combination of food, ambience, and service. Sure, prices are high — but the tiki-room setting is an archetype of timeless Hawaii cool, and fresh island fish simply doesn't get any better than this. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Roy's Kahana Bar & Grill/ Roy's Kihei:** Nobody should miss the opportunity to eat at one of the restaurants of Roy Yamaguchi, king of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. This liege is still at the top of the heap in the Pacific culinary world, and his food still shines. No matter which dining room you choose, you'll find a casual ambience, friendly service, and an oversized menu of dim sum, appetizers, imu-baked pizzas, and creative main courses that allow you to eat as special-occasion or affordably as you wish. See Chapter 11.
- ✓ **Sansei Seafood Restaurant & Sushi Bar:** Maui chef D.K. Kodama's two superstar sushi bars offer some of the finest dining in the islands. Choose from an adventurous sushi menu, or opt for family-style dining on a slate of D.K.'s palate-stimulating Euro-Asian signature creations. Best of all, the restaurants are casually comfortable, service is always a delight, and it's easy to keep the bill within reason. It's really impossible to go wrong with Sansei. See Chapter 11.

The Best Beaches

Maui boasts an array of wide, breathtaking beaches — more than 80 in all. Luxurious golden sands stretch beside calm turquoise waters, while palm trees sway in the wind. These settings are what make great vacations. Even in the most crowded months, you can easily stake out your own little slice of paradise.

And not that you need any more incentive, but Maui's best resort coasts face west, so you can mosey over to a beachfront bar right on the sands and conclude your day by toasting a Technicolor sunset.

- ✔ **Kaanapali Beach:** This fabulous, crescent-shaped beach is reminiscent of the Waikiki of yesteryear, before the entire world made it their destination of choice. There's something for everyone here: crystal-clear snorkeling, thrilling wave jumping, golden sands inviting hours of sunbathing, even beachfront bars for that perfect middle-of-the-day mai tai. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Hookipa Beach Park:** Come to watch the world's best windsurfers pirouette over white-capped waves at this glorious North Shore beach. Surfers have eminent domain in the mornings, while the colorful windsurfers take over in the afternoons. The action is equally breathtaking at any time of day, especially when the winter waves are in top form. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Baldwin Beach Park:** If you're looking for an off-the-beaten-path place to spend the day away from the crowds that populate so many of Maui's beaches, but you don't want to sacrifice golden sands or glorious turquoise surf to do it, this Paia-area beach is the one for you. Pick up a picnic lunch, bring a blanket, and stretch out on the sand — you've found the perfect place to bask in the Maui sun. Heed the lifeguard warnings, though — the surf can get rough here, especially in winter. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Hamoa Beach:** This remote, half-moon-shaped beach near the end of the Hana Road is one of the most breathtakingly lovely in all of Hawaii. Expect surf that's the perfect color of turquoise, golden-gray sand, and luxuriant green hills serving as the postcard-perfect backdrop. The beach is generally good for swimming and wave-riding in the gentle seasons, but stick close to the shore because you're in open, unprotected ocean. Stay out of the water entirely in winter. See Chapter 12.

The Best Activities & Attractions

The sheer variety of watersports available — diving, surfing, boogie boarding, kayaking — is astounding. What are you waiting for? Go on, get out and explore the great blue ocean.

- ✔ **Snorkeling:** Even if you're not usually the sporting type, you don't want to miss the chance to try snorkeling on Maui. The waters offshore are so clear that snorkelers are guaranteed to see clouds of tropical fish in every color of the rainbow, and possibly even a green turtle or two. You can see a stunningly beautiful underwater world. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Whale-watching with the Pacific Whale Foundation:** Whale-watching is a premier activity in the islands from mid-December until mid-March; in some lucky years, the great humpbacks remain in Hawaii's warm waters into April. Boats are available to take you whale-watching, but I love the Pacific Whale Foundation for its

excellent naturalist guides and its commitment to protecting these gentle giants. If you don't want to splurge on an expensive cruise, you don't need to — the foundation also operates a **Whale Information Station** on the road to Lahaina, where you can spot humpbacks from shore with an expert for absolutely free. The Pacific Whale Foundation can also take you out on terrific snorkel cruises year-round, even when the whales aren't in town. See Chapter 12.

- ✓ **Diving Molokini:** This sunken volcanic crater is one of Hawaii's top dive spots thanks to calm, clear, protected waters; an abundance of marine life — reef dwellers to manta rays; and exciting viewing opportunities for every level of diver — even first-timers. You don't dive, and you're not ready to learn? No worries — Molokini offers excellent viewing for snorkelers, too. Molokini is only reachable by boat, so see Chapter 12 for recommended outfitters.
- ✓ **Visiting Haleakala National Park:** The massive, 10,023-foot-high dormant volcano that sits at the heart of the Valley Isle is Maui's biggest natural attraction. Its crater looks like a barren moonscape; no wonder that NASA's astronauts have used it for space exploration training. Haleakala is best known for its mystical sunrise vistas, as crowds of visitors arrive in the dark at predawn hours to watch the spectacle of dawn breaking over the crater. But take heed, early morning phobes: You can enjoy this wonderous park at anytime of day. See Chapter 13 for details.
- ✓ **Exploring Upcountry Maui:** Discover the Valley Isle's bucolic side on the slopes of Halakala, where beaches, condos, and tourists give way to verdant fields dotted with purple-flowering jacarandas and grazing cattle, rambling plantation-style ranches, rural towns, and friendly local-style warmth. You can experience the inner workings of Maui's agricultural heartland at such upcountry attractions as Alii Kula Lavender Farm and Surfing Goat Dairy. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Driving the “Heavenly” Road to Hana:** Hawaii's most spectacular drive is well worth a day of your vacation. For 52 winding miles, this blissful highway takes you past flowering gardens, spectacular waterfalls, and magnificent ocean vistas. Start early and keep in mind that it's all about the drive, not about getting to the end of the road. Rent a convertible for maximum effect. See Chapter 13.
- ✓ **Learning to surf:** Believe it or not, surfing is easier than it looks — and there's hardly a feeling finer than conquering a wave. A number of good surfing schools guarantee that you'll be hanging ten in a single two-hour lesson. My Maui favorite is the **Nancy C. Emerson School of Surfing**. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **Hitting the links:** If you love golf, don't miss the opportunity to play at least one of Maui's premier courses. Glorious Kapalua is the best, but you have a bounty of quality courses to choose from, duffers. See Chapter 13.

- ✔ **Getting a bird's-eye view:** Touring Maui by helicopter gives you a whole new perspective as you swoop over the island's otherwise inaccessible heartland, where nature has been unspoiled by modern man. You'll scale the desolate peak of Haleakala National Park and enjoy a breathtaking view of the road to Hana that takes an hour instead of a day. It's expensive, but worth it. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Shopping the Valley Isle:** Maui has become a premier shopping destination, especially for those who eschew traditional chains for boutiques that are artful, offbeat, or unique. The charming, funky surf town of Paia and sophisticated, cowboy-infused Makawao are best for creative spirits, while Kaanapali's Whaler's Village and the Shops at Wailea offer creative choices and art-filled galleries in elegant, open-air environments. See Chapter 14.

The Best Luau

The best luaus are in high demand, so book your spots before you leave home to ensure access:

- ✔ **Old Lahaina Luau:** Hawaii's most authentic and acclaimed luau is justifiably celebrated, and a real treat to experience. Come early to watch craftspeople at work in the lovely oceanfront setting; you can also watch as the luau pig is unearthed from its underground oven, where it's been slow-cooking all day. The live hula show is dazzling. You simply can't do better than this. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **The Feast at Lele:** The folks behind the Old Lahaina Luau (see preceding entry) also operate this interesting twist on a traditional luau. The Feast at Lele is an excellent alternative for romance-seeking couples, or anyone who would prefer a luau with a more upscale demeanor, a more intimate setting, and/or a fine-dining twist. The multicourse meal and thrilling performance troupe reach beyond the Hawaii tradition to celebrate the food and culture of the South Seas as well, and the beachfront setting can't be beat. See Chapter 11.