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# The Best of Hawaii

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

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. Most of the laid-back towns have no big shopping malls (Lihue is the only exception), very little nightlife to speak of, and the entire island has no building taller than the coconut trees (it's the law!). Folks come here to chill out and tap into a different rhythm of life.

### OAHU

Home of Honolulu and 75% percent 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 affordable, eateries are geared toward local tastes, and the beaches blissfully uncrowded. The top tourist attraction here, and it's a doozy, is the Kalaupapa Peninsula, once the most notorious leper colony in the Pacific. You get there on the back of a mule, bumping down the tallest sea cliffs on the planet. Many day-trippers come just to experience Kalaupapa, but a longer stay will reward the visitor—and lower their blood pressure. There are few places anywhere as serene.

## LANAI

Lanai is the most exclusive of the Hawaiian Islands, owned almost entirely by billionaire David Murdoch. He's brought in the Four Seasons to manage its resorts, so prices are elevated. Still it retains its small town charm. Its single town, Lanai City, has a handful of bed-and-breakfasts and almost all 3,000 of Lanai's residents live there. 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. Also visit-worthy is Hulopoe Beach, one of the most postcard-perfect in all of Hawaii.

## 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 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 snowcapped) 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. 393.

**See 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 to purples, greens, blues, grays, and reds. See p. 60.

**Snorkel the reef.** At Molokini, explore a half-sunken volcanic crater off **Maui**; at Kealahou Bay on the **Big Island**, the water is so clear you can see the bottom at 100 feet; and at Hanauma Bay on **Oahu**, the fish are so tame you can practically join their schools. See p. 303, 403, and 136.

**Pay homage to the dead at Pearl Harbor.** An intensely moving memorial, at which you'll learn the history of what Franklin Delano Roosevelt aptly called "A day that will live in infamy."

**Go whale-watching.** Thousands of humpback whales spend the winter in Hawaii, mating, calving, and making a big splash—especially around **Maui**. See p. 286.

**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. 288.

**Take a sunset cruise.** Sip a mai tai under sail as night falls along **Kauai's** spectacularly rugged Na Pali Coast (p. 51) . . . or off the high-rise urban jungle of Waikiki (p. 95) . . . or upon the tranquil waters around Lahaina (p. 226) . . . or in the deep near-shore waters off Kailua-Kona (p. 334).

**Visit a historic leper colony.** The Kalaupapa Peninsula was home to thousands of exiles with Hansen's Disease. Hearing their stories and scaling the sea cliffs that back the colony will be one of your most moving and exciting experiences in Hawaii.

## BEST PEOPLE-WATCHING BEACHES

**Waikiki Beach, Oahu** Diamond Head (which has been an extinct volcanic crater for 15,000 years), 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. 133.

**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. 272.

**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. 48.

**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 bare it all. See p. 269.

## **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. 370.

**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. 275.

**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. 217.

**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. 52.

## **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. 273.

**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. 48.

**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. 48.

**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. 273.

## **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. 137.

**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. 136.

**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. 273.

**Kite Beach, Maui** Practitioners of Hawaii's newest extreme sport, kiteboarding, have claimed this as their very own beach, a safe distance from the airport to keep them out of the flight paths of planes. See p. 273.

**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. 367.

## BEST ACTIVE EXPERIENCES

**Surf lessons.** Learn to ride the waves with a pro surfer on Oahu, with county lifeguards on the Big Island, or at the old whaling port of Lahaina on Maui.

**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. 310.

**Landing a marlin.** Some of the world's best deep-sea fishing is just offshore from Kailua-Kona on the Big Island. See p. 405.

## BEST "OTHER HAWAII" ACTIVITIES

**Kick it.** Hang with Hawaiian musicians jamming backyard-style while you nibble on a pupu (appetizer) and knock back beers at a down-home country club in Waimanalo on Oahu. See p. 155.

**Relax.** Get mellow on *awa* (or *kava* as this mildly narcotic, but perfectly legal, brew is also known) in Honolulu amid candlelight, hushed tones, and Hawaiian-studies students from the University of Hawaii; or in Kailua-Kona amid throngs of tourists; or with Big Island bohemians in the wilds of rural Puna. See p. 398.

**Become an ecotourist.** Join conservationists in the field; stand watch over the nests of endangered turtles, root out an invasive species from native rainforests, or plant ohia and koa seedlings on the slopes of Mauna Loa. See p. 398.

## 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. 127.

**Blossoming Lotus, Kauai** At this affordable, gourmet vegan place, you can get roasted-red-pepper curry for dinner and a kava brownie for dessert. See p. 43.

**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. 267.

**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. 366.