

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Hawaii

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Scoping out Hawaii's top accommodations
  - ▶ Uncovering the top dining establishments and luaus
  - ▶ Exploring the best beaches and attractions
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**H**awaii is such a breathtakingly beautiful place and exudes such a generous spirit of genuine aloha that just about every island experience offers something special. Hawaii is at its best when you experience its 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 Kona joe can be your princely breakfast, and a joyous aloha shirt can be your royal robe.

But if you're looking for more worldly luxuries, that's great, too — these islands are flush with pampering experiences, and you'll run out of time before you exhaust all the possible ways to indulge yourself.

Whether you prefer the simple pleasures of life or are in the market for island luxury at its finest, you'll find it in Hawaii. This chapter is designed as an at-a-glance reference to the absolute best — the Best of the Best — that Hawaii has to offer.

## *The Best Luxury Resorts*

Are you in the market for a little luxury — or a lot of it? Hawaii's your place. These islands are home to some of the world's finest resorts. The following are the best of the best:

- ✓ **Halekulani** (Oahu): The finest hotel on Waikiki Beach is the epitome of graciousness and elegant aloha. The white-on-white rooms are gorgeous, the service is impeccable, SpaHalekulani is a pampering oasis, and the restaurants are the best on the beach. See Chapter 10.

- ✔ **Kahala Hotel & Resort** (Oahu): Oahu's only AAA five-diamond resort is a ten-minute drive from Waikiki — and a world away. The Kahala combines big, beautiful rooms (including some of the best bathrooms in the islands), premier service and dining, first-rate amenities, and a virtually private crescent beach for a glorious resort experience. A must for relaxation-seeking grown-ups who want to be within easy reach of urban excitement. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Fairmont Kea Lani Maui** (Maui): This fanciful Moorish palace on the sand not only is one of the finest, most romantic, and most relaxing hotels in the islands, but also 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. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Grand Wailea Resort & Spa** (Maui): 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 and over-the-top treat at every turn. Hawaii's best pool complex awaits your (very lucky) kids, and you can indulge in the island's finest spa. The ultra-deluxe Napua Tower offers such extra amenities as personalized concierge service. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Hotel Hana-Maui** (Maui): After years in the doldrums, this breath-taking 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 to cruise to the remotest end of the island. The intimate Honua Spa only adds to the ecstasy. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **The Fairmont Orchid, Hawaii** (Big Island): This elegant, attractive beach resort is the Big Island's most intimate and understated luxury resort. Fairmont has done an admirable job infusing this elegant property with authentic aloha; as a result, expect a full slate of enticing cultural and outdoor activities. Dining is excellent and service is imbued with warmth. Not quite as fabulous as the Four Seasons or Kona Village (below), it's also not quite so expensive, either. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Four Seasons Resort Hualalai** (Big Island): You'll want for nothing at this elegantly understated resort, Hawaii's best. Ask for a room with an open-air lava-rock shower for the ultimate in natural-style luxury. A stunning oceanfront pool with a graceful wooden deck stands center stage, and a second comes stocked with friendly stingrays. Service is impeccable, the restaurants are among the island's finest, and the superb Jack Nicklaus–designed golf course is for guests only. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Kona Village Resort** (Big Island): Hawaii's only all-inclusive resort is the polar opposite of its sophisticated neighbor, the Four

Seasons Resort Hualalai (see preceding entry). Whereas that resort offers every cutting-edge luxury, this South Seas paradise of tropical cottages offers something else really special: Blissful escape, *Gilligan's Island*-style, where your "Do Not Disturb" sign is painted on a coconut and in-room entertainment is your glorious ocean view. However long you plan to stay, stay longer — it still won't be long enough. See Chapter 14.

- ✔ **Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa** (Kauai): From start to finish, this crown-jewel Hyatt is one of Hawaii's most satisfying resorts. Situated on Kauai's sunny south coast, the resort boasts a genuine tropical vibe with big, beautiful rooms; a terrific pool complex that pleases both kids and adults alike; a brilliant spa with open-air treatment rooms; and service that exudes the most genuine aloha. I'd move in if I could afford it. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Princeville Resort Kauai** (Kauai): If it weren't for the fact that guest rooms lack open-air lanais, this stunning North Shore resort would be perfect; as it is, it comes *very* close. Situated on the Garden Isle's most breathtaking coast, the resort offers spectacular views in every direction, and just out the back door is one of the island's finest beaches for snorkeling and sunbathing. The views alone are reason to come — but you won't be disappointed with elegant appointments and attentive service, either. See Chapter 16.

## The Best Accommodations Values

Don't have limitless cash? No worries. Get the most for your accommodations dollar by booking into one of these fine establishments:

- ✔ **The Breakers** (Oahu): This vintage, low-rise charmer remains a breath of fresh air in increasingly expensive Waikiki. Everything is budget-basic but spotlessly kept. Units are set around a sparkling pool and garden blooming with tropical hibiscus, creating an oasis in this increasingly chic corner of Waikiki. Not for everybody, but an excellent choice for budget travelers who want to experience a genuine slice of Old Waikiki aloha. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Embassy Suites — Waikiki Beach Walk** (Oahu): Certainly, the rack rates aren't the lowest. But the all-suite accommodations (including pull-out sofas to accommodate the kids), the generous buffet breakfast with cooked-to-order omelet station, *and* the justifiably popular nightly manager's reception with drinks, pupus, and live entertainment, all included in the rate, make this brand-new heart-of-Waikiki hotel a terrific value. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **The Wyland Waikiki** (Oahu): Hawaii's first artist-themed hotel is a boon for modern-minded travelers who crave something stylishly different for a middle-of-the-road price. A confidently relaxed oasis in the heart of Waikiki, this attractive boutique-style hotel evokes the ocean world at every turn in its sleek, contemporary yet

comfortable design — and the Outrigger chain runs things wonderfully from behind the scenes. See Chapter 10.

- ✔ **Kaanapali Beach Hotel** (Maui): 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 12.
- ✔ **Napili Bay** (Maui): These petite studios on the sand are one of Hawaii's best beachfront bargains — especially considering their prime location on in-demand Maui. The beach is gorgeous, the snorkeling is prime, the units are thoughtfully outfitted, and the value is even better. The all-studio configuration makes this a terrific option for budget-minded honeymooners. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Noelani Condominium Resort** (Maui): This top-notch oceanfront condo complex is 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 12.
- ✔ **Waikoloa Beach Marriott Resort & Spa** (Big Island): Want a beachfront resort with all the perks, but without the hefty price tag? Try this pleasing — and pleasantly affordable — resort, situated on one of the sunny Kohala coast's finest beaches. A prime location, a genuine tropical feel, and activities galore, all for a fraction of the rates at its ritzier neighbors. Not cheap, but a relative bargain. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Nihi Kai Villas** and **Waikomo Stream Villas** (Kauai): These wonderful condo complexes on Kauai's sunny south shore, both managed by the Parrish Collection, offer the best accommodations values on the Garden Isle. Waikomo Stream's one- and two-bedroom apartments are ideal for families who want all the comforts of home at bargain-basement prices. Nihi Kai's one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments are closer to the beach and a bit more upscale, but offer equally excellent value. See Chapter 16.

## *The Best Restaurants*

Whether you're looking to celebrate a special occasion or mapping out a culinary calendar for the length of your stay, don't overlook these fabulous restaurants:

- ✔ **Roy's Restaurants** (all islands): Star chef Roy Yamaguchi is the Babe Ruth of Hawaii Regional Cuisine. His chain of Roy's restaurants has brought island-style fine dining to cities across the world, but his best successes remain those closest to home. Roy's restaurants are special occasion-oriented without feeling formal or

imposing. My favorite way to dine here is family-style from the tapas-style appetizer menu, which offers the best variety of Roy's signature taste sensations. See Chapters 10, 12, 14, and 16.

- ✔ **Sansei Restaurant & Sushi Bar** (Oahu/Maui/Big Island): Chef D.K. Kodama's 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. I'm pleased to see this Maui favorite expanded to Waikiki and the Big Island's Kohala Coast, where first-rate dining tends to be in short supply. See Chapters 10, 12, and 14.
- ✔ **Alan Wong's Restaurant** (Oahu): If there is one master of Hawaii Regional Cuisine above all others, it is Alan Wong. His warmly contemporary and tropical Honolulu dining room is the ideal showcase for his fine-dining twists on the local culinary tradition.
- ✔ **Nobu Waikiki** (Oahu): The first Pacific island venture from internationally acclaimed Japanese chef Nobu Matsuhisa bursts with innovative spirit. Unusual textures, impulsive combinations, and surprising flavors — all served in a setting that sets a new standard for high drama — add up to a first-rate dining adventure that you won't soon forget. A real joy for adventure-seeking gourmands. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Lahaina Grill** (Maui): This Lahaina mainstay still shines as one of Hawaii's most glorious dining experiences. Lahaina Grill gets it all just right, from the pretty sophistication of the dining room to the beautifully prepared dishes to the first-rate service that fuses personal warmth and professionalism perfectly. Special-occasion restaurants hardly come finer than this. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Hailimaile General Store** (Maui): Star chef Bev Gannon, the queen of Hawaii Regional Cuisine, continues to deliver one of Hawaii's finest all-around dining experiences — top-quality island-style cooking joyfully presented in a refreshingly casual and pretension-free setting. A delight from start to finish — well worth the drive Upcountry. See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Mama's Fish House** (Maui): The increasingly sophisticated Valley Isle is coming perilously close to surpassing Oahu as the fine-dining island of choice for vacationing gourmands. My absolute favorite in this well-stocked sea is this delightful seafooder, 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 12.

- ✔ **The Hualalai Grille by Alan Wong** (Big Island): The Hualalai Grille strikes all of the same exquisite, inspiring notes that Oahu's original Alan Wong's does, but adds the appeal of a gorgeous, casually sophisticated resort setting for a marriage made in culinary heaven. Service is thoughtful, attentive, and unpretentious, and every course is as it should be. Don't miss it. See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Beach House Restaurant** (Kauai): A winning combination of creative island cuisine, cool tropical cocktails, and one of the most romantic oceanfront settings in the islands make this Kauai's finest restaurant, hands down. Just ask *Honolulu* magazine, which once again selected the Beach House as its Kauai favorite in 2008. Come for sunset for the ultimate swoon. See Chapter 16.

## The Best Beaches

The world's finest surf and sands fringe the shores of Hawaii's islands. The finest are these breathtakingly beautiful beaches:

- ✔ **Waikiki Beach** (Oahu): This beach is the most famous one on the planet for a perfectly good reason: It lives up to its reputation in every way. The world's biggest and best beach party actually inhabits a string of stunning beaches fringing crystal clear, turquoise blue waters. There's something for everybody, whether you want to learn to surf, play in the waves, or just bask in the glory of it all. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Hanauma Bay** (Oahu): Without exception, this sunken volcanic crater on Oahu's sunny southeast coast is Hawaii's premier snorkel spot for beginners and experts alike. The bay is preserved as a marine life conservation district, and the fish seem to know it — they'll practically come up and stare into your mask. Even non-swimmers can wade in, look down, and see a whole new kaleidoscopic side of Hawaii. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Waimea Beach Park** (Oahu): This legendary surf spot is my favorite place to watch big-wave riders in action in the winter months. It's a nonstop rollicking beach party when the surf's up and the daredevils are in the water. The rolling waves leave a placid pool behind in summer; that's when everybody can jump in to frolic in the surf. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Kaanapali Beach** (Maui): 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 enjoying that perfect middle-of-the-day mai tai. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Hookipa Beach Park** (Maui): Come to watch the world's best wind-surfers pirouette over white-capped waves at this glorious north shore beach. Surfers have eminent domain in the mornings, and 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 13.

- ✔ **Hapuna Beach** (Big Island): Don't let anybody tell you that the volcanic Big Island doesn't have any good beaches. Copiously endowed with delicate white sands and gorgeous turquoise waves, this beauty isn't just the star of the Big Island — it just may be the most beautiful beach in all of Hawaii. Great facilities are the icing on the cake. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Kahaluu Beach Park** (Big Island): This roadside salt-and-pepper beach isn't much to look at, but its shallow, protected waters offer some of the finest snorkeling in the islands. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Anini Beach** (Kauai): This North Shore beach is one of the most beautiful — and one of the safest — swimming beaches on Kauai. The golden sands and shallow waters are protected by an offshore reef even when rough winter waves pound other North Shore beaches, making this an ideal snorkel spot. An always-peaceful feeling at this beach makes it ideal for quiet contemplation, too. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Poipu Beach Park** (Kauai): This south shore beach is Kauai's favorite family playground. There's something for everybody here: white sands for sunbathing, grassy lawns for picnicking, shallow pools for little ones to play in, reefs for good snorkeling, and waves for boogie boarders. Lots of great facilities round out the perfect beach day. See Chapter 17.

## *The Best Activities and Attractions*

If all you want is an oceanfront hammock and a mai tai, Hawaii's your paradise. But part of the beauty of Hawaii is that it has a bounteous menu of rich experiences to offer if you're motivated to do more. These activities and attractions are Hawaii's finest:

- ✔ **Touring the USS Arizona Memorial** (Oahu): There's hardly a more moving site than this stark memorial to the nearly 1,200 who lost their lives in the Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which launched the United States into World War II. Arrive early for the best experience and pair your visit with a tour of the **Battleship Missouri Memorial**, also in Pearl Harbor, for a tragedy-to-triumph view of World War II. See Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Visiting the Bishop Museum** (Oahu): If you're intrigued by Hawaii's vibrant culture, the best place to get a little background is at this captivating museum, rich with the treasures of Hawaii's past. Pair a visit with a trip to **Iolani Palace**, the official royal residence of Hawaii's last monarchs, for a surprisingly riveting history lesson. See Chapter 11.

- ✔ **Whale-watching with the Pacific Whale Foundation** (Maui): Whale-watching is a premier activity in the islands from mid-December until mid-March. Boats are available to take you whale-watching from every island, but I love the Pacific Whale Foundation for its excellent naturalist guides and its nonprofit commitment to protecting whales in Hawaii. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Diving Molokini** (Maui): This sunken volcanic crater is one of Hawaii's top dive spots thanks to calm, clear, protected waters; an abundance of marine life, from reef dwellers to manta rays; and exciting viewing opportunities for every level of diver — even first-timers. You don't dive? No worries — Molokini offers excellent viewing for snorkelers, too. Molokini is reachable only by boat, so see Chapter 13 for recommended outfitters.
- ✔ **Exploring otherworldly Haleakala on horseback** (Maui): A desolate, otherworldly canyon painted in hues of blue and green and red, Haleakala National Park will reshape your idea of breathtaking natural beauty. The best way to experience it is to delve deep into the crater with **Pony Express Tours**, which leads excellent and informative trail rides along Sliding Sands Trail into the heart of the volcano. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Driving the “Heavenly” Road to Hana** (Maui): 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.
- ✔ **Snorkeling Kealakekua Bay** (Big Island): This magical marine life preserve, reachable only by watercraft, is my absolute favorite snorkel spot in Hawaii. The coral is the most beautiful I've ever seen, and the calm, clear waters teem with a kaleidoscope of colorful reef fish, octopuses, and sea turtles, plus playful spinner dolphins who often swing by to see what all the fuss is about. My favorite way to get there is with **Fair Wind Snorkel Cruises & Orca Raft Adventures**, although experienced kayakers can rent and paddle their way in. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Exploring the Big Island with Hawaii Forest & Trail** (Big Island): Nobody shows you Hawaii's natural wonders like this terrific nature guide company. You may have seen owner Rob Pacheco on the Travel Channel; Rob and his troupe of well-trained guides take you into the remote valleys of the rain forest, as well as help you scale the star-studded crest of Mauna Kea, and burrow through hidden lava tunnels. You can see a side of Hawaii that few others do — don't miss it! See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Visiting Hawaii Volcanoes National Park** (Big Island): In my book, if you do one nonbeach-related activity in Hawaii, this should be it. Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is the only national park that's



home to a live, lava-pumping volcano. Witness the yin/yang magic of the oozing red stuff as it leaves destruction in its landscape — and shapes new virgin land. Hikers shouldn't miss the otherworldly Kilauea Iki trail, which traverses four sensational miles of steaming lava beds. See Chapter 15.

- ✔ **Stepping back in time at Puuhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park** (Big Island): This ancient “city of refuge,” the most compelling historic attraction in the islands, is guarded by fierce ancient totems just like it was back in the day. The archaeological excavations and restorations are fascinating, and the ancient sanctuary city is downright fun to explore. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Touring Kauai's Na Pali Coast State Park** (Kauai): Hawaii's most majestic coastline is a 22-mile stretch of green-velvet fluted cliffs that wrap around the northwest shore of Kauai. It's all but inaccessible to people, who can only reach it by sailing by, flying over, or hiking in — and there are outfits to take you there by any route you choose. The effort is well worth it. See Chapter 17 for details on all options.
- ✔ **Exploring the Allerton & McBryde Gardens** (Kauai): These sister National Tropical Botanical Gardens highlight the breathtaking botanical beauty of the Garden Isle. Even those who don't think they have a passion for horticulture marvel at the natural majesty of these two slices of paradise. I recommend starting with the more manicured Allerton Garden, a turn-of-the-20th-century private estate, and then returning to tour the McBryde Garden if you want more. Check the schedules in advance and plan accordingly. See Chapter 17.
- ✔ **Learning to surf** (Oahu, Maui, and Kauai): 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 favorites are **Hawaiian Fire Surf School** on Oahu, where you'll learn at the hands of moonlighting Honolulu firefighters; the **Nancy Emerson School of Surfing** on Maui; and Kauai's **Margo Oberg Surf School**. See Chapters 11, 13, and 17.
- ✔ **Hitting the links** (Oahu, Maui, Big Island, and Kauai): All the islands boast championship courses designed to make 18-hole memories, but you'll find the most spectacular challenges on the neighboring islands; others may argue, but I think the Big Island boasts the most breathtaking selection of courses. Book before you leave home to guarantee tee times. See Chapters 11, 13, 15, and 17.
- ✔ **Getting a bird's-eye view of the islands of Aloha** (Maui, Big Island, and Kauai): Touring Hawaii by helicopter gives you a perspective that others simply can't enjoy — a bird's-eye view of desolate mountain peaks or the heart of a bubbling volcano. These tours give you access to each island's otherwise inaccessible heartland, where nature has been unspoiled by modern man. Expensive, but worth it. See Chapters 13, 15, and 17.

- ✓ **Saying “aahh . . .” at the spa** (Maui, Big Island, and Kauai): What’s the icing on the cake of any vacation? A pampering spa day, of course. The neighbor islands’ spas, in particular, have raised the art of relaxation and healing to a new level, showcasing Hawaiian products and traditional treatments. On Maui, nobody does it bigger and better than **Spa Grande**, a temple to the good life whose hydrotherapy circuit is reason enough to come. For something different, try the petite but magical **Maui Spa Retreat**, a hidden Upcountry gem that made me finally understand the magic of aromatherapy. My Big Island favorite is the **Mauna Lani Spa**, a simply glorious open-air retreat. On Kauai, don’t miss the **Anara Spa**, which set the standard for alfresco island-style pampering and is still going strong. See Chapters 13, 15, and 17.

## The Best Luaus

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

- ✓ **Old Lahaina Luau** (Maui): Hawaii’s most authentic and acclaimed luau is justifiably celebrated — it doesn’t get better than this. 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. See Chapter 12.
- ✓ **The Feast at Lele** (Maui): The folks behind the Old Lahaina Luau (see the preceding entry) also operate this interesting twist on a traditional luau — perfect 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 12.
- ✓ **Kona Village Luau** (Big Island): The Big Island’s best luau is offered on Wednesdays and Fridays only, so plan accordingly. The luau grounds aren’t oceanfront, but the South Seas–style setting of grass-roofed huts and swaying palms offers ambience in excess. The food is excellently prepared, and the stage show is a real delight. See Chapter 14.
- ✓ **Luau Kalamaku** (Kauai): This newcomer is one of the most theatrical and satisfying luau productions in the islands, telling an in-depth story of Hawaii’s heritage in an artful, original showcase. The party is held on the lovely grounds of a historic 1930s plantation house at Kauai’s lush heart. A traditional *imu* ceremony gives way to a bountiful and delicious luau spread, and a full open bar means real cocktails, not mass-produced mai tais. Tuesday and Friday only, so plan ahead. See Chapter 16.