

REDISCOVERING TRUE HAWAII

Dan Avila sets out to find the aloha spirit on Maui and the Big Island.

Anywhere in the world, the very mention of Hawaii has conjured up visions of a seductive island paradise for generations. Countless movies, songs and stories have featured Hawaii and romanticised every aspect of its culture, landscape and people, resulting in its undeniable influence on popular modern culture. Yet, as the 50th state of the USA - with every modern development and convenience one would expect - I wondered if Hawaii could still deliver on its famed spirit of adventure, romance and natural discovery. Over 10 days, I set out to explore two of these islands to see if Hawaii stands up as a luxury destination in a world of the 'the next big thing'.

My trip started on Maui and finished on the Island of Hawaii, known as The Big Island, because (surprisingly) it is the biggest island in the group. Armed with a camera, board shorts and convertible Jeep Wrangler, I set off to circumnavigate Maui starting in a little town called Paia. This is where Maui first seduced me with its vibe perfectly blending Byron Bay with Margaret River. On Maui's famed north shore and under the gaze of the dormant Haleakala volcano, Paia is arty and bohemian with a mix of bars, inns and surf - all oozing a relaxing hippy-chic vibe. Dining in

Paia is much like anywhere on the island with deference paid to locally sourced, organic and sustainable produce.

The road to Hana

The road to Hana is arguably one of the world's greatest ocean drives and we set off early to capture the morning light. Deep blue skies, emerald green vegetation and a cobalt ocean fill the senses as the road snakes east to Hana. There are beautiful coastlines around the world, yet Maui delivers it all with a climate that can only be described as perfect. Travelling in March, there was no tropical humidity to contend with. Days were warm enough to spend an entire day at the beach yet tempered with a gentle breeze fragranced by the ocean and tropical plants giving way to comfortably cooler nights.

First stop on the road to Hana is Hookipa Beach with its popular surf beach. Surf culture runs deep on the island and harmoniously balances with the locals' profound respect for nature. Here, surfers share the beach with a large resident group of green sea turtles, usually found sunning themselves in the corner of the bay. Known in Hawaii as Honu, these turtles are revered symbols of luck. Perhaps it was the time spent quietly on the beach in their presence that ensured good luck for the rest of



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our trip.
 Final stop before Hana is Wai'anapanapa (which means "glistening water") Black Sand Beach and State Park with a seabird colony, natural stone arches, the largest-known Hawaiian Temple, ancient lava caves, blowholes and anchialine pools (inland, freshwater pools).
 Hana may just be heaven and Travaasa Hana was our little piece of it for a few days. The sprawling estate originally established in the 1940s maintains a heritage feel with each of the guest rooms scattered around the estate with the sights, smells and sounds of the sunrise coast flowing into the breezy rooms. There is no air conditioning in Travaasa Hana; the weather is simply perfect and air-conditioning would criminally disconnect the guest room from the sublime environment. The team at Travaasa Hana arranged for an aerial photo expedition in the only aircraft permitted to fly over the Haleakala crater: a power glider. With panoramic visuals through a perspex shell surrounding us, pilot Hans set off

under power until we reached 3650 metres. At that point, Hans killed the engine and we glided beautifully across the astounding crater and back to Hana with a sliding window perfectly positioned for both ventilation and to stick out the camera lens.
 The road from Hana to Wailea took us around the south side of the island as the pace slowed from top-down cruising to adventure driving. The terrain on the south side is more like the Scottish Highlands than a tropical paradise. Equally astounding yet vastly different, the drive to Wailea was an all-day event, factoring in a must-do stop at the Ocean Vodka Organic Farm and Distillery, and Up-Country Lavender Farm high up on the shoulder of the crater - shrouded in mist.
 The Fairmont Kea Lani in Wailea is an all-suite beachside hotel with premium beach houses in prime position, all located on the manicured strip of Maui's most affluent enclave. It was home for our last few days on Maui. Feeling like the Beverly Hills of Hawaii, hotel cars shuttle guests to nearby

high-end boutiques, yet the area's natural environment is an equally strong drawcard. Setting off before dawn after a Hawaiian call to the gods by my burly guide, I canoed out into the bay scattered with breaching humpback whales in all directions. As we stopped paddling, a mother and calf directly approached our canoe with dorsal fins breaching the water and after a brief emotional encounter, put tails to the sky and dived away. Such is the magic of Maui!

The Big Island

A short flight from Maui is the Island of Hawaii, known to locals as the Big Island. It's similar to Maui in that it is packed with natural beauty and heritage, yet with a completely different feel. Driving out from Kona, the landscape is like tundra overlaid with enormous lava flows, so young (in geological terms) that large swathes

remain devoid of vegetation.

About an hour's drive south of colourful Kona is Pu'uhonua O Hōnaunau National Historical Park, or 'the place of refuge'. Hawaiians who broke ancient laws could avoid certain death by fleeing here. Defeated warriors and non-combatants could also find refuge here during times of battle.

Driving back up the west coast, our next residence appears like an oasis through the lava field, the historic Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. At the time of its construction in the 1960s by Laurance S. Rockefeller, it was the most expensive hotel ever built. It was carefully designed to allow the ocean breezes to flow through the hotel with the suites enjoy stunning sunset, ocean views, surrounded by a perfectly kept golf course with greens set upon the jagged-lava ocean edge. At night, the bay is partially illuminated and this attracts masses of phytoplankton which

in turn attracts manta rays up to four metre wide to visit the bay each night. Under the guidance of marine biologist and manta expert, James Wing, we swam at night in close contact with these magnificent creatures as they barrel-rolled in a feeding frenzy just centimetres away as we whooped with excitement.

The penultimate Big Island experience is the spectacle of the volcanic terraforming as enormous lava flows pour into the ocean, growing the land mass as the planet's newest oceanfront real estate formed in front of our very eyes. For the ultimate view of the active

Travel file

Information

www.gohawaii.com/au

Getting there

Hawaiian Airlines flies direct to Oahu from Sydney and Brisbane, and between all Hawaiian islands. www.hawaiianairlines.com.au

Accommodation

travaasa.com/hana
www.fairmont.com/kea-lani-maui
www.princeresortshawaii.com/mauna-kea-beach-hotel

Experience

Paradise Helicopters' Volcanoes & Waterfalls Extreme Helicopter Tour
www.paradisecopters.com/hilo-helicopter-tours-hawaii
 Gliding over Maui www.skyviewsoaring.com

lava fields, we strapped on our cameras and wind-breakers and boarded our helicopter with the doors removed. It was a sensational high-octane experience seeing the enormous swathe of land engulfed by lava as it flowed to the ocean. The super-heated air from the 1000-degree-Celsius lava field filled the helicopter as we flew at low altitude to grab some photos.

Back on the ground, a visit to Volcanoes National Park allowed us to experience the active crater on the ground with venting hot steam warming us as we stood in the high-altitude cold night air, watching the bubbling lava and its glow against the starlit night sky. This is a primal and romantic spectacle that simply must be experienced and it was a spectacular way to end an exploration of the real Hawaii. ♦