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f Which Hawaiian Island Should You Visit?



in

Quick overviews of Maui, Oahu, the Big Island, Kauai, Lanai and Molokai



by Dana Rebmann, [AARP \(http://www.aarp.org\)](http://www.aarp.org), Updated March 30, 2022

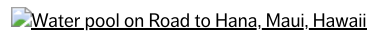


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Oahu

[En español \(/espanol/turismo/nacional/info-2021/que-isla-hawaiana-deberia-visitarse.html?intcmp=AE-TRVL-TOESP-TOGL\)](#)

COVID-19 requirements: Hawaii no longer has COVID-related requirements for arriving domestic passengers, as of March 26. For the latest rules, check gohawaii.com (<https://gohawaii.com/>).



PICTURIST/GETTY IMAGES

Road to Hana

From stunning beaches and volcanoes to waterfalls and wildlife, each of [Hawaii](#) (</travel/travel-tips/safety/info-2021/hawaii-tourism-now.html>)s six major islands has its own beauty and charm. Here's a brief rundown of what to do and where to eat and stay on each.

Maui

Perhaps best known for stunning beaches and the humpback whales that make its waters their winter home, Maui offers a plethora of fantastic ways to fill vacation days.

Top Things to Do

Snorkeling. Maui is a gorgeous spot for snorkelers. Teralani Sailing Adventures operates relaxing snorkeling cruises with barbecue lunches and an open bar, boarding at West Maui's [Kaanapali Beach \(https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/maui/regions/west-maui/kaanapali-beach\)](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/maui/regions/west-maui/kaanapali-beach). For a more adventurous day on the water, Redline Rafting Co. runs snorkeling tours to the islet of Molokini on small, fast Zodiac boats. Departing at 7 a.m. from Kihei in South Maui, the excursion includes the often-skipped backside of Molokini Crater. (On one early morning snorkeling adventure, I saw two Hawaiian monk seals, among the most endangered seal species in the world.) Hale Huaka'i at Kaanapali Beach Hotel offers outrigger canoe paddling experiences infused with Hawaiian traditions and history.

Road to Hana. For drivers considering braving the [Road to Hana \(https://roadtohana.com/\)](https://roadtohana.com/), with its legendary cascading waterfalls, reservations are now required to visit Waianapanapa State Park and its stunning black sand beach.

Cacao farm visit. Maui Kuia Estate Chocolate offers tasty tours of its working cacao farm located on the slopes of the West Maui Mountains. One hundred percent of the company's net profits are donated to Maui charities and nonprofit community organizations. Front Street, in nearby Lahaina, is lined with more shopping opportunities, dozens of restaurants and the largest banyan tree in the United States.

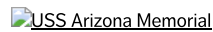
Accommodations and dining

There are scads of hotels and rentals on Maui, with the major resort areas being the Kaanapali Beach Resort in West Maui and the Wailea Resort Association in South Maui. Just opened in late May, the AC Hotel by Marriott Maui Wailea is the brand's first location in Hawaii. Sleek, contemporary and infused with Hawaiian design, the newcomer isn't oceanfront, though most of its accommodations boast ocean views.

Set steps off the beach the Westin Maui Resort & Spa, Kaanapali features 770 rooms spread across 12 acres with lush gardens, waterfalls, flamingos and six pools. The newly opened onsite restaurant, Waicoco, serves a seafood-focused dinner menu Wednesday through Sunday and breakfast daily.

The Sandbar at the Sheraton Maui Resort & Spa is an ideal location to watch the cliff-dive ceremony at Puu Kekaa (Black Rock) and the sunset while enjoying *pupus* (appetizers) and cocktails.

For dining, Star Noodle, the Mala Ocean Tavern and the Paia Fish Market are just a few of the standout dining options in Lahaina. The Paia Fish Market doesn't take reservations, but it's worth a wait.



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Oahu

[Oahu \(/travel/destinations/united-states/oahu/\)](#), offers Hawaii's take on big city living. Bustling Waikiki is home to high-rise hotels, restaurants, shopping and one of the world's most famous beaches. Day trips deliver entertaining doses of culture and history.

Things to do

Pearl Harbor. You'll want to visit the USS Arizona Memorial at the [Pearl Harbor National Memorial \(/travel/vacation-ideas/history-culture/info-2021/pearl-harbor-national-memorial.html\)](#) (buy tickets before you arrive). History buffs should consider spending time at other Pearl Harbor historical sites, including the USS Bowfin Submarine Museum & Park, the Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum and the Battleship Missouri Memorial.

Polynesian Cultural Center. Weave a fish of coconut leaves, taste poi or take a canoe ride at this [cultural theme park \(https://www.polynesia.com/\)](#), which also offers a luau and evening show with skilled fire knife dancers.

North Shore. After watching the surfers on the [North Shore \(https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/oahu/regions/north-shore\)](#) make the sport look easy, snorkel in the clear water of Shark's Cove (don't let the name scare you; sharks aren't common here). Then head into charming Haleiwa, where you can shop, eat and cool off with shave ice from Matsumoto's.

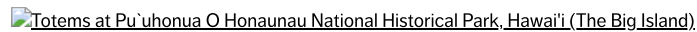
Dole Plantation. Explore the gardens, hop on the [Pineapple Express Train Tour \(https://www.doleplantation.com/product/pineapple-express-cd/\)](#) or get happily lost in the Pineapple Garden Maze. Good luck saying no to a cup or cone full of the world-famous Dole Whip pineapple soft serve.

Accommodations and dining

Hotels can be found throughout Oahu, but a majority are located in Waikiki. Located across the street from the famous Duke Kahanamoku statue, the Hyatt Regency Waikiki Beach Resort and Spa offers rooms with beach, mountain and city views.

The beachfront Outrigger Reef Waikiki Beach Resort recently reopened after renovating its guest rooms and is offering special rates during the construction of the lobby, cultural center and a new restaurant, Monkeypod Kitchen by Merriman. Turtle Bay Resort, on Oahu's North Shore, recently reopened after a top-to-bottom redesign.

Since 1952, Leonard's Bakery has been churning out hot *malasadas* (Portuguese doughnuts) and other sweets. And the iconic Rainbow Drive-In serves filling plate lunches that come with scoops of rice, macaroni salad, and meat or fish. Along with the original in Kapahulu, there are four additional locations to choose from on the island. On the North Shore, locals and visitors alike line up long before opening hours for sautéed shrimp from Giovanni's Shrimp Truck.



DENNIS FRATES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Pu'uhonua O Hōnaunau National Historical Park

The Island of Hawaii

Often referred to as the Big Island, the island of Hawaii is nearly twice as large as all of the other Hawaiian Islands combined. Among your many options for adventure are chasing waterfalls, seeing two of the most active volcanoes on the planet and swimming with manta rays.

Things to do

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (</travel/vacation-ideas/outdoors/info-2021/hawaii-volcanoes-national-park-guide.html>). Located on the east side of the island, the park includes two of the world's most active volcanoes: Kilauea and Mauna Loa. Kilauea is no longer erupting, and no glow is visible at night, but things can change quickly, so check its website for updates. Not far from the Kilauea Visitor Center, save time to walk through the 500-year-old Nahuku, or Thurston Lava Tube. When driving the scenic Chain of Craters Road, stop to explore the Puuloa Petroglyphs.

Waterfall viewing. The east side of the island is also the wet side of the island, and lots of rain makes for stellar waterfall viewing. At Akaka Falls State Park, you can glimpse two waterfalls during a spectacular hike that takes less than an hour. (The route is paved, but there are multiple steps.) Waianuenu Falls, often called Rainbow Falls, is a five-minute drive from downtown Hilo in [Wailuku River State Park](https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/hawaii/wailuku-river-state-park/) (<https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/parks/hawaii/wailuku-river-state-park/>).

Coffee farm visit. From the fields to your coffee cup. Greenwell Farms offers free guided tours daily that include samples of their 100 percent Kona coffee. No reservations are necessary.

Seahorse farm tour. The only seahorse farm in the world, Ocean Rider breeds endangered seahorses for home aquariums to help prevent them from being taken from the wild. Naturalist-led tours end with the opportunity to submerge your hand in a tank and hold a seahorse. It's nothing short of magical when they curl their tails around one of your fingers and hang out.

Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park (<https://www.nps.gov/puho/index.htm>). A stunning seaside refuge for lawbreakers, defeated warriors and any person seeking sanctuary. Once within its boundaries, all were safe from harm. It's a beautiful and easy walk around the sacred grounds.

Snorkel with manta rays. If you enjoying spending time in the water, swimming with mantas is not to be missed during a trip to the Big Island. Snorkel trips take place at night. Underwater lighting is used to attract the microscopic plankton that manta rays eat. Harmless to humans, manta rays don't have stingers, teeth or barbs. Manta Ray Advocates lead small snorkeling tours with a maximum of just six people; their tours enter the water from the beach instead of from a boat.

Accommodations and dining

Located on the Kohala Coast, about a half-hour drive from Kona International Airport, the Fairmont Orchid boasts a white sand beach and calm lagoon where I've met a turtle on more than one occasion. About a dozen honu (Hawaiian green sea turtles) call the property home. Pau Hana, the hotel's new champagne pop-up bar, serves up Veuve Clicquot champagne cocktails along with ocean vistas on Friday and Saturday nights from 5 p.m. through sunset.

One of the Big Island's first resorts, the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel was built by Laurance S. Rockefeller. (The Manta Moonlight Snorkel with Manta Ray Advocates departs from the beach activities kiosk at the Mauna Kea.) One hot bite and you'll be hooked on the homemade

Hawaiian *malasadas* from the nearby Manuela Malasada food truck on Puako Beach Drive in Waimea.

Volcano Village Lodge is located in a quiet residential neighborhood just a couple of miles from Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Rooms feature small refrigerators, microwaves and toaster ovens; included gourmet breakfasts are placed in the room's refrigerator so guests can enjoy them on their own schedule. Nearby Kilauea Lodge Restaurant serves brunch, dinner and *pupus* (Hawaiian for appetizer or snack) Wednesday through Sunday. You can't beat the pad thai or papaya salad at the Thai Thai Bistro & Bar.



MATTHEW MICAH WRIGHT/GETTY IMAGES

Kauai

Nicknamed the Garden Island, Kauai boasts a dreamy landscape including sun-kissed beaches and towering serrated-edged mountains that reach for the sky and then plunge into the blue Pacific Ocean. It has all the makings for a romantic getaway or a vacation soaked in natural beauty.

Things to do

Napali Coast. Set on [Kauai's North Shore](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/kauai/regions/north-shore) (<https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/kauai/regions/north-shore>), the 17-mile stretch of magnificent coastline is accessible only by boat, air or difficult hike. Capt. Andy's offers tours that allow time for snorkeling and sailing (be on the lookout for turtles). Island Helicopters provides a bird's-eye view of the isolated Napali Coast along with 400-foot-high Manawaiopuna Falls (featured in the movie *Jurassic Park*) and Olokele Canyon, the gateway to Waimea Canyon, sometimes called the Grand Canyon of the Pacific.

Poipu Beach Park. This inviting stretch of sand is frequented by visitors, locals and the occasional endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Lifeguards are on duty seven days a week.

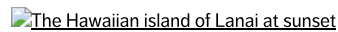
Kauai Backcountry Adventures. Don a headlamp, grab a tube and gently float your way through a former sugarcane plantation. The mountain tubing adventure winds through channels, flumes and tunnels hand-dug circa 1870 to irrigate the Lihue Plantation sugarcane fields. Guides are fun and knowledgeable. I was worried about being cold, but at the end, I wanted to do it all over again.

Accommodations and dining

There's a range of accommodations to choose from when staying on Kauai. Many visitors opt for the south side, near Poipu. Stretching 20 acres along Kauai's Poipu Beach, the Sheraton Kauai Resort is an easy walk to shopping and dining, including Uncle's Shave Ice. The shave ice is top-notch, but the Shave Snow is even better. Inspired by Taiwanese Shave Ice, milk, sugar and flavoring is added to the water before it's frozen into ice blocks, so unlike with Shave Ice, no syrups are needed on top. The flavor is in the ice. You'll thank me later.

Located on a secluded bluff overlooking the North Shore, condominium accommodations at The Cliffs at Princeville are spacious, with well-equipped kitchens and private balconies.

In addition to oozing old-school Hawaiian charm, Hanalei is loaded with delicious dining locales. The Hanalei Dolphin specializes in fresh seafood. Parked at the Hanalei Pier, by Black Pot Beach, Pat's Taqueria white taco truck serves burritos and tacos with rice and beans, carne asada, kalua pork and fish. Wishing Well Shave Ice whips up smoothies, acai bowls and, you guessed it, shave ice, out of an old bus at the entrance to Hanalei town.



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Lanai

A former pineapple plantation that once produced up to 75 percent of the world's pineapples, Lanai is home to rugged scenery and just 3,500 residents. The island has just three hotels, two of which are Four Seasons resorts. Larry Ellison, billionaire cofounder of software giant Oracle, owns 98 percent of Lanai, the smallest of the six inhabited Hawaiian islands.

Things to do

Hulopoe Bay. Located on Lanai's southern coast (next to the luxurious Four Seasons Resort Lanai), [Hulopoe Bay](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/south-landai/hulopoe-bay) (<https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/south-landai/hulopoe-bay>), is the most talked-about spot on the island for snorkeling and swimming. Summer conditions are best; surf and currents can intensify in the winter months.

Puupehe. Located less than a mile walk from Hulopoe Beach, [Puupehe](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/south-landai/puu-pehe) (<https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/south-landai/puu-pehe>) is one of Lanai's most recognizable natural landmarks. The rocky islet, reaching 80 feet into the sky, and the neighboring cliffs offer a beautiful contrast to the vibrant blue surf. I was so taken with the view at sunrise, I made the early morning trek again the following day. Also known as Sweetheart Rock, according to Hawaiian legend, a warrior overwhelmed with grief jumped to his death here after his lover drowned during a storm.

Keahiakawelo. A windswept rock garden with striking red and orange hues, [Keahiakawelo](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/north-landai/Keahiakawelo) (<https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/lanai/regions/north-landai/Keahiakawelo>) is what I imagine Mars looks like. Sometimes referred to as the Garden of the Gods, it's about a 45-minute drive from Lanai City and is accessible only in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. A rental car is a must to truly explore Lanai, and four-wheel-drive is recommended, since only 30 miles of the island's roads are paved. There are also no traffic lights.

Accommodations and dining

The Four Seasons Lanai overlooks beautiful Hulopoe Bay, and it would be easy to spend your entire vacation on the grounds, but with rooms starting at \$1,100 a night, it's a splurge. Along with renowned Japanese restaurant Nobu Lanai, onsite dining options include the steak and seafood-focused One Forty. Sensei Lanai, A Four Seasons Resort focuses on wellness and is open to guests 16 and older.

Hotel Lanai, which has just 11 rooms, is the island's most budget-friendly hotel and home to the Lanai City Bar & Grille. Nearby Dole Park is bordered by a handful of shops and restaurants, including the Blue Ginger Café and Pele's Other Garden deli and bistro.

Getting here

There are no direct flights to Lanai from the continental United States; the small Lanai Airport is served by inter-island planes. Located just nine miles from the island of Maui, the Expeditions passenger ferry offers daily service from Maui's Lahaina Harbor to Lanai's Manele Harbor. The scenic trip across the Auau Channel takes about an hour.



FLORIAN KRAUSS/GETTY IMAGES

Molokai

Another Hawaiian island without a traffic light, Molokai is notably less developed than the other five inhabited Hawaiian islands, making a visit here a bit like stepping back in time.

Things to do

Papokaku Beach Park. Located on the island's west shore, [Papokaku Beach Park](https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/molokai/regions/west-end/papohaku-beach) (<https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/molokai/regions/west-end/papohaku-beach>) is one of the largest white sand beaches in all of Hawaii, making it perfect for strolling. Swimming is recommended only when the surf is calm and flat. Conditions can be hazardous in fall and winter.

Halawa Valley. With lush, stunning vistas and thundering waterfalls, this is a must-do for hiking enthusiasts. On Molokai's East End, the only way to explore the Halawa Valley is on a guided hiking tour, so be sure to plan ahead.

Accommodations and dining

There are some home and condo rental accommodations and a couple of bed-and-breakfast options, but there's only one hotel — Hotel Molokai. The hotel restaurant, Hiro's Ohana Grill, serves lunch and dinner with ocean views.

Kaunakakai, Molokai's main town, is home to a handful of eateries, including the Kanemitsu Bakery, Molokai Burger and Molokai Pizza Café.

Getting here

There's no ferry service to Molokai, but there are inter-island flights from Maui and Oahu. Public transportation isn't available, so plan on renting a car from Alamo, Molokai Car Rental or Mobettah Car Rentals.

Malama Hawaii

When the Hawaiian Islands reopened to tourism, they began encouraging would-be visitors to accept responsibility for caring for their natural resources. The Malama Hawaii program (*malama* means "give back" in Hawaiian) promotes organizations offering volunteer opportunities ranging from beach cleanup to the reforestation of native and endemic Hawaiian plants. "We are doing this work not for us, but for those not even here yet. Preserving what's here for the future," says Ekolu Lindsey, with the nonprofit organizations Maui Cultural Lands and Kipuka Olowalu. "It seems a little cliché, but I think as we go in our different cycles in life, that's what it comes down to."

As an added incentive to get travelers involved, some hotels reward participating guests with discounts or possibly a free night's stay. Volunteer opportunities are currently available on Maui, Kauai, Oahu and Hawaii. In addition to pulling weeds at Maui's Kipuka Olowalu, I helped clear invasive plants from a taro pond at Kualoa Ranch on Oahu. (It's muddy work and I recommend wearing a good pair of water shoes.)

Guests that book Outrigger's Malama Hawaii Experience and spend a couple of hours volunteering at Kualoa Ranch receive every third night free when staying at the Outrigger Waikiki Beach Resort or the Waikiki Beachcomber by Outrigger.

Dana Rebmann lives in Sonoma County wine country and writes about travel, nature and wine. Her work has appeared in Hemispheres, Delta Sky, TheTelegraph.com and more.