

Big Island Travel Guide

Discover the Big Island: Hawaii's Land of Fire and Ice

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Things to do in Big Island

Landmarks & Monuments

The Big Island's most iconic sights are shaped by fire, from active lava fields to sacred summits that anchor Hawaiian culture and modern astronomy alike.

Must See

Kilauea Volcano

3-4 hours No Booking Needed



Map

One of the world's most active volcanoes and the centerpiece of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Visitors can view the steaming Halema'uma'u crater from the Kilauea Overlook and walk sections of the Crater Rim Trail. **Eruption activity changes constantly**, so check the park website before visiting.

Must See

Mauna Kea Summit

4-5 hours No Booking Needed



Map

At 13,803 feet, this dormant volcano is the tallest mountain in the world measured base to peak and home to some of the world's premier astronomical observatories. The summit offers **panoramic sunset views above the clouds** and, at the Visitor Information Station, evening stargazing with telescopes.

Must See

Punalu'u Black Sand Beach

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A striking beach of jet-black volcanic sand formed by lava meeting the sea, frequented by endangered green sea turtles that bask on the shore. **Do not touch or approach the turtles** — federal law requires a distance of at least 10 feet.

Top Pick

Rainbow Falls (Waianuenue)

30-45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

A 80-foot waterfall in Hilo that plunges into a pool set within a lava cave, named for the rainbows that often form in its mist during morning sun. Easily accessible with a short paved path and viewing platform.

Tips for Landmarks & Monuments

- Check current eruption status before visiting Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.
- Bring warm layers for Mauna Kea — summit temperatures can drop below freezing even in summer.
- Arrive at Punalu'u early morning to see turtles before tour buses arrive.



Museums & Galleries

Small but rich collections preserve Hawaiian royal history, natural science, and the island's volcanic and astronomical significance.

Top Pick

Imiloa Astronomy Center

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A planetarium and science center in Hilo that connects Hawaiian voyaging traditions and star navigation with modern astronomy conducted atop Mauna Kea. Interactive exhibits and a full-dome planetarium theater make it a highlight for families.

Notable

Lyman Museum

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

Hilo's oldest missionary house paired with a natural and cultural history museum covering Hawaiian geology, plantation-era immigration, and native flora and fauna. A compact, well-curated stop for understanding the island's layered history.

Notable

Kona Coffee Living History Farm

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A restored early-1900s coffee homestead where costumed interpreters demonstrate traditional Kona coffee farming, roasting, and pounding processes. **Free samples of fresh-roasted coffee** are included with admission.

Tips for Museums & Galleries

- Imiloa's planetarium shows sell out on weekends — book same-day tickets early.
- Combine the Kona Coffee Living History Farm with a stop at a working coffee mill nearby.



Religious Sites

Sacred Hawaiian heiau (temples) and places of refuge reflect centuries of native spiritual and legal tradition predating Western contact.

Must See

Pu'uhonua o Honaunau (Place of Refuge)

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A national historical park preserving an ancient *pu'uhonua*, a sacred sanctuary where defeated warriors and law-breakers could seek absolution. Reconstructed temples, royal fishponds, and wooden ki'i (carved images) sit along a dramatic lava-rock coastline.

Notable

Mo'okini Heiau

30-45 minutes No Booking Needed



Map

One of Hawaii's oldest and most sacred temples, a massive lava-rock structure on the remote North Kohala coast used historically for royal ceremonies and human sacrifice. Remains a site of active cultural practice — **visit respectfully and stay on marked paths.**

Tips for Religious Sites

- These are active sacred sites, not just historical exhibits — keep voices low and do not remove rocks or artifacts.
- Pu'uhonua o Honaunau's tide pools nearby are good for snorkeling after your visit.



Parks & Gardens

From tropical botanical gardens to a volcanic national park spanning sea level to summit, the Big Island's green spaces showcase its extraordinary climate range.

Must See

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

Full day No Booking Needed



Map

A UNESCO World Heritage Site encompassing two active volcanoes, lava tube caves, steaming vents, and rainforest trails. The Thurston Lava Tube and Devastation Trail are accessible highlights alongside the main crater overlooks.

Top Pick

Book Ahead

Hawaii Tropical Bioreserve & Garden

2-3 hours Book Ahead



Map

A lush botanical garden along the dramatic Onomea Bay coastline north of Hilo, home to over 2,000 species of tropical plants along a shaded boardwalk trail with ocean and waterfall views.

Top Pick

Akaka Falls State Park

45 minutes-1 hour No Booking Needed



Map

A short, paved loop trail through bamboo groves and ginger leads to a viewpoint of the 442-foot Akaka Falls, one of the tallest and most photographed waterfalls on the island.

Tips for Parks & Gardens

- Hawaii Tropical Bioreserve & Garden requires a small parking reservation fee — book online ahead of time.
- Akaka Falls parking fills quickly; arrive before 9am on weekends.



Neighborhoods & Districts

The Big Island's two coasts have distinct characters — a historic port town on the wet, green east side and a resort-lined sunny coast on the west.

Top Pick

Downtown Hilo

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

A historic waterfront town with early-1900s storefronts, farmers markets, and a laid-back, rainy-side charm quite different from the resort coast. The Hilo Farmers Market runs Wednesdays and Saturdays with fresh tropical fruit and local crafts.

Top Pick

Kailua-Kona

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

The island's sunny west-coast hub, centered on Ali'i Drive with oceanfront restaurants, shops, and Kamakahonu Bay where King Kamehameha I once lived. The main departure point for Kona coffee farms and snorkel/dive charters.

Notable

Waimea (Kamuela)

1-2 hours No Booking Needed



Map

An upcountry ranching town on the slopes of Mauna Kea, home to the historic Parker Ranch, cooler climate, and a growing farm-to-table food scene distinct from the coastal resorts below.

Tips for Neighborhoods & Districts

- Hilo and Kona have very different weather — Hilo is wet and lush, Kona is dry and sunny, often on the same day.
- Waimea is a good lunch stop when driving between Kona and the volcano side.



Tours & Activities

The Big Island's volcanic terrain and clear coastal waters support some of Hawaii's most distinctive outdoor experiences.

Must See Book Ahead

Manta Ray Night Snorkel/Dive

2-3 hours Book Ahead

An after-dark boat excursion off the Kona coast where lights attract plankton and, in turn, gentle giant manta rays that glide within feet of snorkelers. One of the most sought-after wildlife encounters in Hawaii.

Top Pick Book Ahead

Lava Boat Tour

2-4 hours Book Ahead

When active surface flows reach the ocean, licensed boat operators run tours to view lava entering the sea from a safe offshore distance. **Availability depends entirely on current eruption activity** — confirm with operators before booking.

Top Pick Book Ahead

Mauna Kea Stargazing Tour

5-6 hours Book Ahead

Guided small-group tours drive to the visitor station and summit for sunset above the clouds followed by expert-led telescope stargazing, avoiding the altitude and road hazards of a self-driven visit.

Top Pick Book Ahead

Kealakekua Bay Snorkeling

3-4 hours Book Ahead

A marine life conservation district with some of the best snorkeling on the island, accessible by kayak or boat tour, near the Captain Cook Monument. Coral reefs here host spinner dolphins and vibrant reef fish.

Tips for Tours & Activities

- Book manta ray and lava boat tours several days ahead in high season (June-August, December-January).
- Kealakekua Bay access by land requires a steep hike or 4WD road — most visitors go by kayak or boat tour instead.



Day Trips & Excursions

The Big Island's size (larger than all other Hawaiian islands combined) rewards full-day loop drives connecting its volcanic, coastal, and upcountry regions.

Must See

Waipio Valley Lookout

1-2 hours (lookout only) No Booking Needed



Map

A dramatic overlook of a mile-wide, steep-walled valley with black sand beach and cascading waterfalls, considered sacred in Hawaiian tradition as the childhood home of King Kamehameha I. The valley floor is reached only by 4WD, horseback, or a steep hike.

Top Pick

Hamakua Coast Scenic Drive

Half day No Booking Needed



Map

A winding coastal route north of Hilo through former sugar plantation towns, one-lane bridges, and jungle valleys, passing Akaka Falls and the Waipio Valley overlook along the way.

Notable

South Point (Ka Lae)

2-3 hours No Booking Needed



Map

The southernmost point of the United States, a windswept lava coastline with dramatic cliffs, ancient canoe moorings, and access to the green sand beach at Papakolea via a rugged coastal walk.

Notable

Papakolea Green Sand Beach

2-3 hours round trip No Booking Needed



Map

One of only four green sand beaches in the world, its distinctive color coming from olivine crystals eroding out of a volcanic cinder cone. Reached via a strenuous 2.5-mile coastal walk or a paid 4WD shuttle from local operators.

Tips for Day Trips & Excursions

- A full loop drive around the island (Kona to Hilo via the volcano, back via Hamakua) takes a full day — fill the gas tank, stations are sparse in remote stretches.
- Green sand beach shuttle operators charge a flat cash fee — bring small bills.

Practical Information

The Big Island is a year-round destination with warm coastal temperatures averaging 75-85°F (24-29°C). **April-May and September-November** offer the best mix of good weather and lower prices, avoiding summer and winter holiday crowds. Note the island's dramatic microclimates: Kona/Kohala (west) stays sunny and dry nearly all year, while Hilo (east) is wet year-round with December-March its rainiest months. Whale watching season (humpback whales) runs December through April.



Rental car is essential — the Big Island has no public transit network suited to visitors, and attractions are spread across an island larger than Connecticut. Two main airports serve visitors: Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport (KOA) on the west side and Hilo International Airport (ITO) on the east side.

- **Hele-On Bus:** A limited free county bus system connects main towns, but with infrequent schedules impractical for touring.
- **Driving distances:** Kona to Hilo is about 2 hours via Saddle Road or Hamakua Coast; a full island loop is roughly 225 miles.
- **4WD recommended** if visiting Waipio Valley floor, South Point, or unpaved backroads — most rental agreements prohibit standard cars on these routes.

Kona coffee is the signature souvenir — buy directly from farm stands along the Kona coffee belt for the freshest beans and best prices. Other local buys include macadamia nuts, Hawaiian sea salt, ukuleles, and local artist work found at the Hilo Farmers Market (Wed/Sat) and Kona's farmers markets. Look for a "100% Kona" label — blends labeled "Kona Blend" can be as little as 10% Kona coffee.

The **Merrie Monarch Festival** (March/April, Hilo) is the world's most prestigious hula competition, drawing visitors from across the Pacific — book accommodations up to a year ahead if visiting during this week. Other notable events include the **Kona Coffee Cultural Festival** (November) and the **Ironman World Championship** (Kailua-Kona, October), which fills the west side's hotels for race week.

Day 1: Kona Coast

Morning snorkeling at Kealahou Bay, afternoon exploring Kailua-Kona town and Kona coffee farms, evening manta ray night snorkel.

Day 2: Volcano Country

Full day at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park — crater overlooks, Thurston Lava Tube, Devastation Trail, and (activity permitting) an evening glow viewing.

Day 3: Hilo & Hamakua Coast

Downtown Hilo and farmers market, Rainbow Falls, then the scenic Hamakua drive to Akaka Falls and the Waipio Valley lookout.

Day 4: Mauna Kea & Upcountry

Relaxed morning, afternoon drive up to Waimea, sunset and stargazing at the Mauna Kea Visitor Information Station.

Day 5: South Point & Green Sand Beach

Drive to Ka Lae, hike or shuttle to Papakolea Green Sand Beach, and stop at Punalu'u Black Sand Beach for turtles on the way back.

The **Kilauea Overlook** at blue hour captures the crater's steam glowing orange if there's active lava. **Mauna Kea summit at sunset** offers a rare above-the-clouds shot. **Punalu'u Black Sand Beach** is best photographed early morning with turtles on the sand and soft light. The **Waipio Valley Lookout** is stunning in late afternoon when the valley walls catch golden light.

Hawaii uses the standard **US electrical system: 120V, Type A/B plugs** (two flat pins, or two flat pins plus a round ground pin). No adapter is needed for US devices; visitors from outside North America will need a plug adapter and possibly a voltage converter.



Must-try dishes include **poke** (fresh raw fish salad, best from local grocery stores and fish markets), **loco moco** (rice, hamburger patty, egg, gravy), **malasadas** (Portuguese-style fried doughnuts), and fresh Kona coffee. Hilo's farmers market is the best spot for tropical fruit — try lilikoi (passion fruit), rambutan, and apple bananas. Poke bowls from local grocery deli counters (not tourist-focused restaurants) are often the best value and freshest option.

Tourist Passes

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park Annual Pass

Covers unlimited entry to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park for one year — **worthwhile for return visitors** or anyone staying more than a few days near the park, since a single-visit pass is valid only 7 days.



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