

The Big Island of Hawaii- the most primal of the spectacular 1,500-mile Hawaiian archipelago- is a unique place of contrasts and superlatives. It's the largest island in the Pacific and the youngest and one of the least touristed in Hawaii, a place of black-lava deserts and dense tropical rain forests. It is home to five volcanoes (including *Kilauea* and *Mauna Loa*, two of the world's most active) and eleven of the earth's thirteen primary climate types. If you wanted to, you could ski and surf in a single day. At 93 miles long and 76 miles wide, the Big Island is big indeed-twice the size of the other islands combined and approximately the size of Connecticut, with some 250 miles of encircling roads that require seven hours to drive. *King Kamehameha the Great* was born here in 1758, uniting the island kingdom between 1785 and 1810 and inviting foreign traders to settle on the island. Today some of the earth's most well-heeled persona come to play golf on world-class courses known for their beauty.

From the black-sand beach at its mouth, the lush *Waipio Valley* sweeps back 6 miles between thickly jungled walls that reach almost a mile high. Once considered the sacred "Valley of the Kings," its cool rivers, tumbling waterfalls, and wild horses encourage the feeling that this is the valley that time forgot.

Nearby, ½-mile-high *Waimea* (also called *Kamuela*) is the island's upcountry, where about 50,000 head of cattle graze on the 225,000 acres of 200-year old Parker Ranch, one of the largest privately owned cattle ranches in the United States. Those with a mind to can hire one of the ranch's 400 horses and explore the area's magnificent terrain in the hoof prints of Hawaii's famous "paniolo" cowboys.

Below is the black-lava *Kohala Coast*, exceptional for the dazzling white-sand stretch of *Kaunaoa Beach* and the close-by *Hapuna Beach State Park*, stellar exceptions to the young island's beach-challenged reputation. This is the location for the perfectly situated 60-acre Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, the trail-blazing super-resort that started it all and set the standard. Built in 1965 by

Laurence Rockefeller, it's welcoming, understated and surprisingly lush considering its desert-like location. It's also home to an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Sr. golf course, one of the state's oldest, best, and most photographed. Throughout the resort a 1,600-piece collection of Pacific and Asian art is on display.

The *Kohala Coast* ends where the serrated *Kona* ("leeward side") *Coast* begins. Its oceanfront town of *Kailua-Kona* has generally been known for superb snorkeling beaches (such as) and especially for big-game fishing. The Pacific blue marlin, called "granders" here, when they weigh 1,000 pounds or more, makes Kona a sport fisher-person's dream destination. Less-than-extravagant accommodations are the norm, with the prime exception being the exquisite Four Seasons Resort Hualalai, a spare, breezy, plantation-chic oasis with low-rise bungalows and secluded swimming areas. Open only to resort guests, the 18-hole Jack Nicklaus-designed Hualalai Golf Course lies atop an 1801 lava flow produced by its now extinct namesake volcano. On October 1, 2004, the Sheraton Keauhou Bay Resort and Spa will be opening its newest resort jutting out on the oceanfront point at Keauhou Bay. This replaces the once lovely Kona Surf Hotel.

For a traditional luau, head to the tiki torch-lit Kona Village, whose Friday-night lagoon-side luau is the island's oldest and spirit of Old Hawaii and escape corniness. The retreat's clutch of rustic thatched-roofed haies (cottages) are fashioned after the cultures of the Polynesian peoples, from Hawaiians to Fijians and Samoans, and have interior décor to match. Regardless of where you stay on the western coast, watch for summering humpback whales (December to April) and the sunset's legendary "green flash," both best seen from the Kona area.

The island's real show, where Mother Nature pulls out all the stops, is at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, home of Pele, the volcanoes goddess. *Mount Kilauea*

(meaning “spreading, much spewing”) has been erupting since 1983, adding hundreds of acres to the island in the longest continuous eruption ever recorded. From the rustic Volcano House, the only hotel within the park, you can access the 11-mile summit Crater Rim Drive (which takes you around the Kilauea Caldera) and the Chain of Craters Road, a 28-mile drive from the Visitors Center down 4,000 feet to the coast. Both lead you past a surreal moonscape of raw power, hissing fumaroles, and both oozing and petrified lava flows.

On the snowcapped peak of neighboring *Mauna Kea* (“White Mountain”), the highest point in all of Hawaii, ten nations have built state-of-the-art telescopes. Thanks to unusually clear skies, it is possible from this lofty perch to view 90 percent of the heavens-though the oxygen-starved might prefer an only slightly compromised view from their hotel’s beach hammock or better yet, from the lanais of their Big Island home.