

# Blue Hawai'i

## Aquatic adventures in the Aloha State

By Rob Dunton

For more than two decades, I have rejuvenated my soul in the idyllic waters of the Hawaiian Islands. From river to reef to wave, I have pursued aquatic escapes on the four main islands (O'ahu, Maui, Kaua'i and the Big Island) that have restored my spirit and drawn me back time and again. Hawai'i's cerulean waters are my perfect playground—one without sprinkler heads to trip over, trees to smack into or grass to stain clothes—just warm water to catch me when I fall. Water is in my blood. To be fair, it's in everyone's: Blood is more than 80 percent water, after all. But ask scuba divers, marine biologists, wave riders and kiteboarders, and most will tell you that water is much more than something that pulses through their bodies or quenches their thirst—they don't feel at home unless they are in water. While the Hawaiian Islands provide opportunities that match my beginner/intermediate sensibilities, they also offer world-class destinations that draw the planet's top water-sports enthusiasts: think Kelly Slater surfing O'ahu's Banzai Pipeline, Robby Naish windsurfing Maui's Ho'okipa Beach Park and David Doubilet photographing manta rays while diving near Kona on the Big Island.

Though surfing is but one of the multitude of water sports enjoyed throughout the Hawaiian Islands, it is one of the oldest and most revered. The sport originated with the early Hawaiians, who considered it a symbol of status and power. Only royalty were allowed to own surfboards made from superior wiliwili wood, distinguishing royal boards from those of commoners.

In the early 1900s, O'ahu surfing legend and Olympic swimming gold medalist Duke Kahanamoku popularized surfing by promoting the sport—and Hawai'i's beautiful ocean waters and spirit of aloha—around the world. Today Duke is still one of Hawai'i's most legendary and beloved folk heroes; visitors to O'ahu will find a statue of him, often draped with fresh lei, at Waikiki Beach, and

spot numerous aquatic centers, parks, restaurants and other facilities named after him. One unique venue is the Duke Paoa Kahanamoku Lagoon, which reopened in December 2007 after a \$16 million restoration by Hilton Hawaii. The historic ocean-fed lagoon, created in the 1950s by American industrialist Henry J. Kaiser as a place for his wife to water ski, is located on the grounds of the Hilton Hawaiian Village. It features state-of-the-art water circulation, an island with a waterfall and a boardwalk with benches, and is an ideal locale for water enthusiasts of all ages.

My love affair with Hawai'i's waters began 24 years ago, in Maui's Molokini Crater. I jittered with excitement as I walked the dock of Ma'alaea Harbor toward a handsome 55-foot catamaran, preparing for my first scuba-diving experience. I greeted the crew, kicked off my shoes and climbed aboard. As the boat motored out of the harbor, I chatted with my fellow passengers. Before long, the engines were cut, the sails were raised and we rode the trade winds toward Molokini, a half-submerged crater and vibrant reef. The other first-time divers and I met our dive master, who familiarized us with the gear, gauges and safety guidelines.

After our review and equipment check, I relaxed with a handful of other passengers in the broad netting strung between the catamaran's hulls, as the deep-blue Pacific rushed past. A pod of dolphins joined us, swimming and diving by the bow. From the net, I watched them move nimbly a few feet below me.

An hour later, we were moored off the crescent-shaped island that is Molokini. The snorkelers donned their gear, plunged in and kicked toward the reef, while we divers geared up for our beneath-the-sea adventure. With my hand on my mask, I took a giant stride into the water.

For a moment, I sank below the surface. The sea was warm and clear, and beams of light refracted and shimmered. After I bobbed back to the surface, everyone grouped up, and we released the air from our buoyancy vests and sank into the sea.

I expected to be nervous, even claustrophobic, and worried that water might somehow seep into my regulator and impede my breathing. Instead, it was as though a spell had been cast: I was at peace, relaxed and weightless as I floated suspended in the blue. My fellow divers and I followed our dive master like a kindergarten class on a field trip, as a rainbow of colored fish swam around us. A lone green turtle glided toward us, and we stopped and watched it cruise by on its way to a hidden den in the reef below.

I could have stayed under all day, but after 40 minutes, our air tanks hit the prescribed level to return to the surface. I earned my scuba certification within a month of returning home, and went on to log 500-plus dives around the world. A number of my best dives have occurred in the Hawaiian Islands: In 2004, I dived among more than a dozen curious sea turtles in a lava-tube wonderland off of Kaua'i. My best Islands experience was in 2008, off of Kona on the Big Island, when I perused the colorful fish, reefs, rock formations and turtles by day, then witnessed four massive manta rays loop, spin and twirl as they fed on plankton drawn to our dive lights by night—an otherworldly experience.

I first visited the Garden Isle of Kaua'i in 1987, and the dramatic lushness of the north around Hanalei exceeded my wildest dreams of tropical splendor: Rainbows come and go with regularity; the island's peaks boast the wettest spot on earth; and rivers and waterfalls spill from the mountainsides, creating deep canyons and lush valleys. The Hawaiian Islands' most famous kayaking expedition—along Napali's breathtaking, approximately 20-mile coast—is arduous and seasonal, and was out of my league at the time, but the rivers in Kaua'i's calm, quiet interior invite kayakers of every level year-round.

I rented a kayak, strapped it to the roof of my rental car and headed toward the Wailua River, the site of many dramatic waterfalls. Some, such as Wailua Falls, are reachable by car. (*Wailua* means “two waters” in Hawaiian.) The river is a meandering strand of flowing jade that spills out of the Wai'ale'ale Crater as it makes its way to the sea past verdant landscapes and one of the most sacred areas in Hawai'i—the Wailua Valley, where the remains of seven sacred *heiau* temples exist, some said to have been built by the Menehunes—mythical characters that legendarily populated the area before the Polynesians.

With trade winds blowing at my back, it was easier to paddle upstream than down. The rental-shop folks had sketched out a map to Uluwehi Falls, a dramatic waterfall upstream, hidden off a tributary. I paddled up the right side of the river, clear of the occasional ski boat or tour boat that motored up to famed Fern Grotto. I arrived at the fork the shop had told me about and followed it to the right as instructed. The tributary was narrow, shallow and shrouded by trees.

I pulled my kayak onto the shore of a small island and followed a path to the falls, passing huge albizia trees and fermenting mango and java plums that had fallen to the ground. After 40 minutes, I arrived at Uluwehi Falls (also known as “Secret Falls”), which cascade down a sheer cliff face into an inviting pool. The lone visitor, I waded into the shallow part of the pool, staying away from the plunging water in case of falling rocks. The water was cool and refreshing in the humid air. I took in the serenity and majesty of the place, then headed back to my kayak.

My most recent trip to Hawai'i, in April, was with my wife, Susan. Thankfully, Susan indulges my passion for the water, and, sharing my adventuresome spirit, joins me in many of my aquatic escapades.

From our seventh-floor perch in O'ahu's Outrigger Waikiki on the Beach, we looked out at

the ocean to watch people of all ages frolicking in the liquid playground that changes from emerald and sapphire to indigo as it stretches toward the horizon. There was much to watch: Six people paddled a wooden outrigger canoe through the breaking surf, a bright-yellow catamaran sailed toward the beach, and surf gondoliers stood on wide longboards and propelled themselves with tall paddles, while dozens of surfers rode waves in this place where surfing was born.

Inspired by the water activity below, we descended from our suite, passed a lively beach crowd at Duke's Waikiki bar and restaurant, and hit the sand. We walked north along Waikiki Beach for a private surf lesson with famed Hawaiian surfer Dane Kealoha.

A Honolulu native, Dane was introduced to surfing at age 10 by his father, a carpenter and native Hawaiian. By 15, Dane was champion of the state boys' division, and at 17, he became the men's amateur world champ. Dane won his first professional event at 18, and by his early 20s was one of the top-ranked surfers in the world, winning prestigious events such as the World Cup of Surfing, the Pipeline Masters and the Duke Kahanamoku Championship. Later, he was inducted into the Association of Surfing Professionals' Hall of Fame, and today is revered as one of Hawai'i's finest and most influential surfers.

Tan and solid at 50, Dane greeted us at his Waikiki surf academy with a warm smile. After questioning us about our level of surfing experience (I'm intermediate; Susan's a beginner), he selected a soft-topped longboard from a rack on the wall, rested it on the floor and began our lesson. We'd never met a world-champion surfer before, and certainly never received instruction from one, so we listened, enthralled, as he mixed anecdotes of his childhood in Waikiki with surfing basics, such as how to paddle through the surf, position ourselves on the board and "pop" from belly to feet in one fluid motion.

It was clear that Dane loved teaching people to surf. "Many people teach surfing," he explained. "What I add is a sense of the Hawaiian people and the spirit of aloha. I know I am lucky to have received all I have, and this is how I give back. If my students discover the joy of surfing, an appreciation for the waves and a respect for the water and other riders, then I am happy."

After our floor exercises, Dane led Susan and me to the shoreline, where we slipped booties on our feet and strapped board leashes to our ankles, and paddled out. The famed Waikiki surf zone was already full, with as many beginners as competent surfers competing for waves. Dane stood in waist-deep water and helped Susan catch her first wave, while calling out advice to me as I caught waves farther out. He was quick to offer a hand, guidance or a reassuring smile to other novice surfers as they practiced around us.

With each ride in the white foam, Susan's confidence increased. Under Dane's tutelage, I completed more trips to the nose of my board to "hang five" or "hang ten"—albeit short ones—than I had in my life. After about 90 minutes, our lesson ended with our skills dramatically improved. Dane encouraged us to keep surfing on our rental boards as he went in to meet his next group of students. We surfed for another hour, until our arms and shoulders grew tired, before making our way back to shore.

By design, our afternoon plans required no arm strength—we just needed our legs, feet and fins to kick around Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve. En route, we refueled on superb pizza, fish tacos and salad at the Kona Brewing Company, a restaurant recommended by the Outrigger concierge. Re-energized, we continued south to Hanauma Bay, known for its vibrant tropical fish and visiting sea turtles (summer is the best time to see them), called honu by the locals. We turned off the main road and drove down toward a large basin filled with sparkling blue water and skirted by a broad perforated reef. After parking, we grabbed our gear (available for rent on-site if needed) and headed toward the other snorkelers in the calm, protected water. We waded in, donned masks and fins, then put our faces underwater and were transported to another world.

Everywhere around us were tropical fish, in every shape and color, completely unimpressed

by the awkward bipeds swimming among them. Why they put up with us, I don't know, but I'm glad they did. I imagined native Hawaiians centuries

ago fishing in this bowl of plenty. Unfortunately, without masks, they wouldn't have been able to witness—at least clearly—what we saw.

Susan, who grew up outside Washington, D.C., knowing only the Atlantic, was impressed. "When I was young, I'd never seen more than a dozen fish outside an aquarium," she told me. "All I had to look for in the ocean was crabs nipping at my toes. But this is like a teeming fish metropolis where the fish don't care we're here."

Our experience at Hanauma Bay rivals one of our other favorite snorkeling spots: the comparatively quiet Two Step, on the Kona Coast of the Big Island. Two Step (named after two natural steps in the lava shelf that make entering the reef easy) is adjacent to Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau ("City of Refuge") National Historic Park. During our visit there, Susan and I were two of only four snorkelers, and Susan was befriended by a friendly puffer fish that led her on a tour of the reef.

After we had our fill of snorkeling in the bay, Susan and I made the drive back to Waikiki in time for a traditional Hawaiian lomilomi massage at the Outrigger's Waikiki Plantation Spa. The view from the spa's penthouse deck was as stunning as it was serene. Susan and I were escorted to a tranquil couple's room, where our massages began. Incorporating techniques practiced by ancient Hawaiian healers, the masseuses used flowing motions made with their forearms and elbows to refresh our sore bodies. Our massages were some of the best we have enjoyed.

That evening, we strolled a block from our hotel to the Kuhio Beach hula mound (near the statue of Duke Kahanamoku) to watch the free sunset torch-lighting ceremony and hula show.

As we sat beneath rustling palms and the sky grew dark, five musicians began to play enchanting Hawaiian music on instruments such as the steel guitar and 'ukulele. Children lined up in leaf skirts and lei ready to perform. I expected the show to draw mostly visitors, but local families dominated the scene, as the venue showcases some of Hawai'i's finest hula schools, musicians and other performers. Men, women and youth performers alternated on the grass, adding their own interpretations to graceful hula stories and other traditional dances. David Kalākaua, King of Hawai'i from 1874 to 1891, once said, "Hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." In bustling Waikiki, it was wonderful to find the heartbeat alive and well.

The next day, Susan and I embarked on another water adventure: a kiteboarding lesson at Kailua Beach Park on O'ahu's windward coast, a noted destination for windsurfing and kiteboarding. Susan and I first tried kiteboarding in Cozumel and now look to advance our skills whenever we can. Kailua—with its three miles of sandy beach, steady onshore trade winds and protective offshore reef—was the perfect spot for us. Robby Naish, one of the most famous names in windsurfing and kiteboarding, is a resident of the area.

When Susan and I arrived in Kailua, the wind was blowing onshore at about 15 knots. The beach was dotted with kites and sails in nearly every fluorescent color imaginable. Onlookers relaxed in the shade of the palms and pine trees that lined the beach, while sunbathers soaked up rays next to the turquoise Pacific.

With us was Josh Seymour—our instructor and co-owner of Hawaiian Watersports—a longtime windsurfer and surfer who moved to Hawai'i in 1989 to follow the endless summer. After Josh reviewed how to rig and launch a kite, plus critical safety features, Susan and I fastened our

harnesses and took turns flying the kite from the beach in preparation for the water. Once we were able to demonstrate solid kite control, we took to the sea.

Susan went first. She filled her kite with air and guided it in consecutive figure eights to build power. Then, with one hard pull, she launched herself and “body-dragged” through the water along the shoreline. After 100 yards, she drove her kite into the water and ended her ride. She waded to the beach, and, with Josh’s help, walked the kite back to me.

Then it was my turn. I launched but stalled, launched and stalled again. I reminded myself that this was an opportunity to practice *ahonui*, a unique Hawaiian word that means patience and perseverance. Finally, I was steadily moving through the water. The power of the wind raced through the lines to my hands and harness, and I reveled in the rush. All I heard was racing water and wind as I moved my eyes from kite to horizon to kite, making sure I kept a safe distance from other boarders. Irrepressible glee erupted. As much as I’d have loved to sail for miles, I knew my skills weren’t good enough to even get me out of the bay. I stopped a few hundred yards down the beach and walked the kite back to Susan. For the next two hours, our skills improved as we enjoyed the exquisite feeling of riding the wind.

When the wind died, Josh packed up our kite and board, and we called it a day. Susan and I headed to the Aloha Tower Marketplace in downtown Honolulu to feast at Chai’s Island Bistro, a highly

recommended restaurant that showcases Hawaiian/Pacific Rim cuisine, as well as some of Hawai’i’s best musicians. That evening we were serenaded by Nathan Aweau and Barry Flanagan of Hapa, described by *The New York Times* as “the most successful Hawaiian music group in recent history.”

Entranced by the music, we began our meal with delicious and brilliantly presented pan-seared sea scallops with a dash of white-truffle oil, covered in a lobster-and-pumpkin beurre blanc. We then shared grilled mahimahi with a red Thai curry sauce, and a New York filet accompanied by an oven-dried tomato, fire-roasted chestnuts and caramelized pearl onions laced with fennel. We topped off our meal with a warm molten-chocolate lava cake and a freshly baked macadamia-nut tart crowned with vanilla ice cream. The entire dining experience was stellar.

Susan and I awoke early on our last day and surfed with only a handful of others sharing the waves. Then we soaked up the sun and enjoyed a tropical lunch at Duke’s, before boarding a flight with Island Seaplane for a bird’s-eye view of the water world we so enjoy. The seaplane’s pontoons slapped the water as we sped along a secluded channel to take off. We flew over Honolulu Harbor and past inviting Waikiki Beach, our hotel and the surf break. The reef below us was long, wide and vibrant, the colors of the sea even more dramatic from our vantage point.

We curved around Diamond Head and past Hanauma Bay and Kailua Beach Park—backed by the jagged, verdant mountains that parallel the windward coast—before crossing over the island, past dramatic Mount Ka’ala, and landing safely back on the water. It was the perfect way to end our visit.

On the flight back to California, I reflected on all the amazing water experiences I have enjoyed in Hawai’i over the years. Who would have guessed that nearly 25 years after my first trip, I’d still be discovering new aspects of this tropical paradise? Now I get to pursue my aquatic passions with my wife by my side, forever expanding the ways we get to play in my first love, water.

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*Getting There: Alaska Airlines offers daily nonstop service to the Hawaiian islands of O'ahu, Maui, Kaua'i and the Big Island of Hawai'i. To book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Hawai'i, visit [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 800-468-2248.*

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## **Maui**

From November to April, visitors can observe humpback whales, mostly along Maui's south and west coasts, via numerous whale-watching excursions.

For scuba enthusiasts, in addition to Molokini, Maui offers excellent diving opportunities. Many dive schools take beginners to Uluu Beach Park in south Maui, where the water is calm and the ocean floor has a gradual incline. Shipwrecks, such as the St. Anthony off Wailea, are popular among more advanced divers.

Great surf breaks are found throughout the island. Launiupoko State Wayside Park, south of Lahaina, has long, easy waves for beginners. Advanced surfers catch world-class swells at spots such as Ho'okipa Beach Park on the north shore and Honolua Bay on the northwest shore.

Ho'okipa's well-shaped waves and strong wind also make it an ideal locale for experienced windsurfers and kiteboarders.

Snorkelers of all abilities can observe a variety of reef fish in the calm waters of Kapalua Bay, on the northwest side of the island. —*Joseph Moon*

## **O'ahu**

Hawai'i's most populous island offers some of the world's most famous surf spots on its north coast, including Waimea Bay and the Banzai Pipeline at Ehukai Beach Park (both are for experienced surfers only). North Shore beaches host many prestigious surfing competitions during the winter when the waves are largest, including the men's Billabong Pro Pipeline Masters and the women's Roxy Pro. Waikiki Beach, on the island's south end, has gentle surfing for beginners, as well as numerous surf schools.

The trade winds that blow steadily toward the shore make Kailua Bay, on the island's east shore, an ideal place for novice kite-boarders and windsurfers, as well as for veterans who want to practice their skills. Several local shops offer instruction in these sports.

Snorkeling is another popular pastime. In addition to Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve, great snorkeling with plentiful sealife is found between May and September at Shark's Cove, a lava-lined pool on the North Shore. —*J.M.*

## **Kauai**

Experienced sea kayakers are attracted to Kaua'i's approximately 20-mile Napali Coast on the northwest side of the island, where they can stop to explore secluded beaches, caves and ancient ruins (a permit is required; call 808-587-0166 for information).

Guided kayak tours are available, as are helicopter tours offering an aerial view of the Napali Coast.

Kayakers looking for an easier adventure can explore the island's interior on the Wailua River, where the slow current and upstream trade winds allow for peaceful paddling through the jungle. Notable sights include Uluwehi Falls, a spectacular secluded waterfall; Kamokila Village, a reproduction of a 17th century Hawaiian village; and Fern Grotto, a lava-rock cave that is covered from floor to ceiling in tropical ferns.

Those who want to visit the grotto without paddling can board one of the boat tours that depart every 30 minutes from the marina on the south side of the river. —*J.M.*

## **Big Island**

At nearly twice the size of the other Hawaiian Islands combined, the Big Island offers plenty of memorable places for snorkelers and scuba divers.

The best spots for snorkeling include Hapuna Beach State Recreation Area and the Sea Caves near Pu'uhonua o Ho'onaunau, both on the Kona-Kohala Coast.

With volcanic terrain below sea level, this scenic leeward coast is also great for diving, at sites such as Turtle Pinnacle, Wall's Wall and Black Coral Forest. Dive tours from a variety of outfitters are widely available.

If you're not certified to dive, try snuba, a combination of snorkel and scuba where the diver uses an air tank that remains on the surface of the water.

As in Maui, humpback whale-watching tours are offered during the winter months, and dolphin-watching tours are offered throughout the year.

Fishing—for big game including Pacific blue marlins, as well as for ahi, mahimahi, wahoo and spearfish—is another popular water activity. Most charter boats depart from the Honokohau Marina just north of Kailua-Kona. —*J.M.*