

# Big Island, Big Adventure

## Alaska Airlines introduces service to Hawai'i's Big Island

By Rob Dunton

I am kneeling on the ocean floor, at night in near total darkness. Even the light beam from my freshly charged underwater torch is swallowed by the pervasive blackness.

I kneel in a circle of like-minded scuba divers who have come to Kona on the Big Island of Hawai'i in the hope of seeing giant Pacific mantas, the broad-mouthed, nonstinging rays of the sea. In the center of our ring sits a bin of flashlights, lit like an underwater bonfire and aimed toward the surface to attract plankton. Our divemaster from BottomTime Hawaii explained en route to our dive site that lights attract plankton, and plankton (the food of filter feeders) attract mantas: Roll out the all-you-can-eat-buffet, and they will come.

Forty feet above me, my fiancée, Susan McArver, snorkels with a flashlight, looking down at our dimly lit ensemble—a circle of believers staring toward the heavens, emitting a steady flow of bubbles with each exhale.

As hoped, the plankton congregate, filling the water like dancing snowflakes. Ten minutes creep by as we scan the peripheral darkness, then suddenly two feet above my head, a manta swoops out of the blackness into the light with its broad mouth agape to take in as much plankton as it can. Its wingspan must be 10 feet across and its maw is so vast I can see its rib cage inside as it loops back for another pass. Soon, a second manta joins, then a third. They perform a feasting square dance, weaving, twisting and looping through the light beams dense with plankton.

Local divers discovered this scenario when a local hotel shined its floodlights on the ocean to present a view for guests at night. People noticed rays congregating in the light, and various dive operators re-created the phenomenon. Though there is no guarantee of seeing wild mantas on these dives, BottomTime tours have a good encounter rate.

High above the swirling mantas, a few light rings have been placed on the surface by other outfitters. These rings serve the same purpose as our box of lights on the bottom, but they attract plankton and mantas toward the surface for snorkelers to view. Susan is in such a group as a massive manta performs an endless loop just below her. After an hour of exhilarating encounters, I return to the surface and find her.

"That's the coolest thing I've ever seen!" she exclaims as we kick back together to the dive boat. "It came right to us. It was so big I saw a fish riding around inside its mouth, and it came so close I had to move sometimes so it wouldn't brush against me. Amazing!"

After 450 dives around the world, I've become hard to impress, but this manta performance ranks in the upper echelon of dives I've enjoyed, on par with whale sharks in the Galapagos or the Red Sea's technicolor reefs, yet so much closer to home.

Susan and I have come to the Big Island to experience the island's wildness firsthand, then rejuvenate in the luxury and aloha spirit unique to this place. The Big Island is the youngest and grandest of all the Hawaiian Islands, home to snowcapped mountains, amazing undersea life and erupting volcanoes. It is larger than all the other Hawaiian Islands combined, the cradle of Hawaiian civilization and the birthplace of King Kamehameha, who had united the warring islands under one rule by 1795.

The Big Island was formed by a "hot spot" beneath the ocean floor where superheated magma pushed through the earth's crust. Over time, five separate shield volcanoes have erupted, one overlapping the other, pushing themselves to the surface and beyond. Now, three of the island's volcanoes lie dormant, including Mauna Kea, the world's tallest mountain when measured from its base at the bottom of the sea to its peak. Two remain active: Mauna Loa and Kī lauea, which are central to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park.

Our dive boat returns and docks beneath a full moon. Susan and I return to Ka'awa Loa Plantation, our relaxed though elegant bed-and-breakfast located in the heart of the Kona Coffee Belt at the refreshing elevation of 1,200 feet. When we arrive, it is late, and the inn is quiet and lit by candles. We rinse off in the exotic outdoor lava-rock showers, then drift off to sleep.

Come morning, our convivial innkeepers, Michael Martinage and Greg Nunn, serve up warm pineapple

upside-down cake, homemade granola, muffins with delectable liliko'i butter, and fresh juice. Outside, rainbow eucalyptus, palms, jacarandas and magnolia trees shade the property, while chirping geckos punctuate the serenity. An adjacent orchard overflows with fresh foodstuffs that Michael transforms into sumptuous meals: bananas, mangos, papayas, coconuts, passion fruit, white pineapple and Kona coffee. We enjoy breakfast on the broad wraparound lanai, and take in the stunning view of Kealakekua Bay far below.

Susan and I plot our day based on input from Michael, Greg and an international mix of guests, and after breakfast, begin our exploration of lush South Kona. We spend two hours at a turn-of-the-century homestead that's been transformed into the Kona Coffee Living History Farm, and learn about the rural lifestyles of immigrant Japanese and how they carved early coffee plantations out of the forests. We continue on toward the rugged lava coastline at Pu'uhonua O Hō naunau National Historic Park, or City of Refuge, a site where defeated warriors and noncombatants retreated during times of battle, and Hawaiians who broke *kapu* (laws or taboos punishable by death) fled to be absolved and avoid punishment.

Today it is a quiet, sacred place, where the bones of past chiefs augment the *mana* (power) innate to the area. Susan and I walk toward the imposing *ki'i*, tall carved statues peering out of an open-air temple. We find a slumbering green sea turtle (*honu*) at Keone'ele Cove, where royalty used to launch and land their canoes. We walk toward the point, past tall, broad lava-rock walls that once separated this sacred refuge from the outlying royal compound, and see more turtles grazing in the shallow tide pools.

We ask the park rangers if they know of a nearby place to snorkel, and they recommend a spot called Two Step just 100 yards up the road. If someone had told me to visit a place called Two Step in the southernmost state in the United States, a snorkeling spot rich with tropical fish would have been furthest from my mind.

Susan and I unpack our snorkeling gear in front of a community boathouse filled with outrigger canoes. We pass picnic tables where locals "talk story" over beers, then slip on our fins on the edge of the black lava shelf where a pair of natural steps makes it easy to enter and exit the water. Out in the bay, two six-woman outrigger canoes make fast 500- and 1,000-meter training sprints.

Susan steps into the emerald-green water and finds it alive with fish. She makes eye contact with a puffer fish that swims away coyly, as if inviting her to follow. She does for a while, then tests the relationship by turning away. The puffer fish spins and follows her, then again takes the lead. Whenever Susan stops, or dives below the surface, the fish waits. Another snorkeler joins her, but startles the friendly fish, and it swims away. Saddened, Susan swims onward, but a moment later, the puffer fish circles around to join her again, and for almost 10 minutes, the fish seems to guide her around the reef.

As we walk back to the car, she is elated. "That was the most intense animal interaction I've ever experienced, above or below the sea," explains Susan. "I felt a profound sense of trust and companionship, so privileged that this fish trusted me enough to show me its home."

Hungry, we leave this natural aquarium and head for a recommended roadside restaurant called the Coffee Shack. We drive north past Kealakekua Bay where Captain James Cook, who introduced the islands to the western world, met his demise in 1779. We wind our way up the mountainside, through the town of Captain Cook, and find the simple restaurant standing alone on the roadside. It is packed. We wait in front of a display case filled with homemade pastries and breads, and when a table clears, we order two thick sandwiches made with the restaurant's signature luau bread, a pair of tropical fruit smoothies and a slice of Kona lime pie. The food is stellar. We buy a few pastries to go, and head back to Ka'awa Loa Plantation to relax for the rest of the day.

The following day we enjoy another superb breakfast before heading toward North Kona and Kohala. As we drive north along Highway 19 (Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway), the mountainous lushness of Mauna Loa's flanks quickly gives way to broad fields of lava and dry grass, and we begin to see where Kona got its name—*kona* means the leeward or dry side of an island in Hawaiian.

As we pull into the Four Seasons Resort Hualālai, our luxurious home for our final few days, the barren landscape has come to life. Like a mirage, manicured lawns and flora have sprouted in the raw moonscape, an oasis in a sea of jet-black lava. We are greeted with leis, chilled washcloths and fresh passion fruit juice, and shown to our ocean-view room with indoor and outdoor showers, and a balcony that overlooks King's Pond, a massive stocked aquarium carved out of lava rock where guests can snorkel with 3,500 fish and rays.

Pampering will have to wait. We have decided to take a leisurely drive through the town and ranches of Waimea and hike into Waipi'o Valley for the day, an important site of Hawaiian history, culture and dramatic tropical beauty.

We drive north through the fields of lava, with the cobalt Pacific on our left, and the Hualālai and Mauna Kea volcanoes on our right. We pass the signs of beaches and Kohala Coast resorts I've heard of since my youth—Kona Village, Waikoloa, Hapuna and Mauna Kea—and then start up the steady incline toward Waimea. We stop for a picnic lunch in Waimea, and continue on to Waipi'o.

Located on the northern Hamakua Coast, sacred Waipi'o Valley was the boyhood home of King Kamehameha and an important center for political and religious life in Hawai'i. Known as "The Valley of the Kings," this fertile valley is about a mile across and more than five miles long, surrounded by cliffs up to 2,000 feet tall. Since a tsunami in 1946 flooded the valley, the area has been sparsely populated with fewer than 100 residents living among the waterfalls (including the island's tallest, Hi'ilawe Falls at 1,300 feet), taro fields and rivers that permeate the valley.

From the trailhead, Susan and I look down into a broad, green valley ending at a long curved shoreline (*waipi'o* means "curved water" in the Hawaiian language). We hike down a rugged 25 percent-grade road to the valley floor, and 20 minutes later we are at the bottom, walking in the shade of tall ironwood trees toward the ocean. The black-sand beach and large boulders that line the shore are battered by frothy turquoise surf. Two surfers take on sizable waves, while a dozen others look on from shore. We head south toward Kaluahine Falls, find a shaded spot and enjoy an afternoon snack. Afterward, we scramble over boulders and up a dirt cliff to a small shrine at the base of the falls. A heavy mist and the sound of thundering water fill the air, creating a sense of tranquility. We watch the waves crash below, and take in the solitude and serenity.

We hike north along the shore until we reach Waipi'o Stream, where a pair of surfers walk chest deep through the water with surfboards overhead as they return from the beach on the other side. When our time runs short, we head back to make the one-mile climb to our car. I stick out my thumb as a four-wheel-drive truck bounces past, and they stop to pick us up. On the ride up, the driver tells us about an amazing hike across the valley, up the zigzagging Muliwai trail carved in the valley wall, which leads to the pristine Waimanu Valley—an off-the-beaten-track adventure I add to my mental list of future trips.

When we return to the Four Seasons Hualālai, Susan and I are happy we had the foresight to book hot rock massages at its Hualālai Sports Club and Spa, the epitome of serene tropical elegance. Based on LaStone therapy, hot and cold basalt stones are placed under our bodies to open and balance our bodies' energy centers, followed by a slow, penetrating massage using heated, smooth stones and oils.

In a state of bliss, we float to the resort's Pahu i'a waterfront restaurant to catch the sunset for the most elegant meal of our trip. The warm trade winds stir palm trees near our table as we start with the restaurant's signature Hawaiian Anthology Appetizer: ahi poke (raw ahi salad), Liliko'i barbecued Kālua pork steamed buns, Hawaiian abalone and lobster. We focus on locally caught seafood for our entrées: a Pacific seafood ragout (a well-seasoned stew of wild shrimp, scallops, abalone and mahimahi with red pepper–coconut sauce) and prosciutto-wrapped "Kona Blue" kampachi, raised sustainably in a nearby aquafarm. Seeing that we are seated on the lava flow of a dormant volcano, we choose warm dark-chocolate lava cake for dessert—*à la mode*.

The next morning, Susan and I awake refreshed and rejuvenated, ready to put our bodies back to work with back-to-back lessons in stand-up paddle surfing and outrigger canoeing. At 8 a.m., a golf cart arrives at our door, driven by Randy Perez and Ehitu Keeling, two tan, fit and easygoing islanders who have spent much of their lives on the sea—perfect representatives of the Four Seasons' *Alakai'i Nalu* (Leaders of the Waves) water program.

It is early, and the ocean is calm. The sky is a deep blue, and the water is warm and clear. Randy and Ehitu transport four 12-foot stand-up paddle-boards to the shoreline of Kukio Bay, then go over the fundamentals. As we push the boards into the ocean, we pass two sea turtles feeding nearby, then stand up, balance with our feet shoulder-width apart, and start to paddle. We aim for a rock promontory that separates Kukio and Kakapa bays where slow, gentle waves peel along the reef. After 30 minutes of relaxed, exploratory paddling, we feel stable and confident enough to try to catch a wave—a small one.

Ehitu demonstrates first. As a small swell approaches the reef, it arches up and begins to crest. Ehitu paddles rapidly to match the speed of the wave. Suddenly his board catches, and the ride begins. He shifts his

feet around to turn and uses his paddle to balance and carve; as the wave peters out, he turns and paddles back to us, standing all the time.

Susan, Randy and I get in position for the next wave. Ehitu stands on the sidelines to coach and lend a hand should one of us fall. Randy catches the first wave, but Susan and I are not powerful or efficient enough in our paddling, so we miss it. Another comes in behind it, and Ehitu cheers us on. I paddle furiously, then feel the board catch, and the wave takes over. The long, broad, heavy board is stable for paddling, but slow to respond when I try to apply my amateur surfing moves to make a turn. Right behind me, Susan also catches the wave, but once the wave begins to drive the board, she gets tossed into the drink.

We spend the next 30 minutes running the circuit: paddle out, surf in. As our 80-minute lesson ends, we paddle back to shore and ready ourselves for Round 2: outrigger canoeing.

On the beach rest two modern, fiberglass versions of the Hawaiian outrigger canoe traditionally carved from a *koa* tree. A lateral support float known as an “outrigger” is fastened to the side of the main hull to provide stability, allowing fast, narrow canoes to navigate along the topsy-turvy surface of the open ocean.

We climb into the tandem outriggers—Randy with me, Ehitu with Susan. We are taught how to coordinate our strokes, and how our guides signal with a call when to switch our strokes from left to right to distribute the workout to both sides of our bodies. In 15 minutes, we are far off the shore where the emerald-green reef waters turn indigo as the water deepens. We are paddling north toward the Four Seasons, with the dramatic slope of Hualālai Volcano behind it, when we spot a pod of more than 20 spinner dolphin heading our way. As the dolphins leap and break the surface, they spin in tight corkscrews back into the sea. We stop paddling and let the pack swim toward us, and soon we are surrounded by dolphins swimming powerfully below the surface and leaping out of the sea. As the pod moves on, we make a large circle, looping out into the wind chop where we test the canoes’ astonishing stability, then return to shore sweaty and sore (in a good way), with a profound appreciation for the heroic strength ancient islanders possessed to fish and travel extreme distances in canoes.

Our last full day in Hawai‘i is devoted to volcanoes, and we are in luck. Even though there has been continuous eruptive activity since 1983, adding more than 500 acres of land to the island and destroying towns such as Kalapana (1990) and Kaimū (1990), actually witnessing a flow is rare. Two weeks before we landed on the Big Island, a major lava flow south of Pahoa threatened to overrun a housing subdivision, then dramatically changed direction, creating a wonderful opportunity for tourists and locals to view streams of glowing lava spilling into the ocean, creating plumes of steam and an occasional streak of flying magma.

En route to this lava-viewing spot and Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park, we take a leisurely drive along the Hamakua Coast, a lush, chiseled shoreline that reminds me of the north shore of Kaua‘i. We are blessed with a blue-sky day on this wet side of the island, and the serpentine coastal byways tempt us to spend the day with views of epic coves, beaches and waterfalls.

We arrive at the entrance of the park around noon, and make our way to the Kīlauea caldera, marked by a towering plume of volcanic smoke that has temporarily closed half of Crater Rim Drive and Chain of Craters Road. The Hawaiian word Kīlauea means “spewing” or “much spreading,” and, appropriately, this is the world’s most active volcano and home of Pele, the Hawaiian volcano goddess.

Susan and I spend the next five hours within the park. We learn about volcanoes in the visitors center and Jaggar Museum, then hike a section of the rim of the caldera with its red-steaming landscape that seems straight out of an early *Star Trek* episode. We see hikers on the floor of the caldera, and wish we had another day to hike and explore. We move on to explore the Thurston Lava Tube (aka Nahuku), a 600-foot-long tunnel formed by flowing lava. We hike into what feels like a prehistoric fern garden, with 25-foot hāpu‘u ferns towering overhead. We reach a bridge leading into a pitch-black lava cave, draped with overhanging vines. Once inside, there are lights, and we walk through the quiet, damp lava tube.

Susan and I leave the park to catch the rare lava flow, driving to the end of Highway 130. As we arrive, it feels like a rock concert: Cars are backed up and parked on both sides of the road as lava lovers make the half-mile trek across rugged black lava to get within view of the lava flow as it spills into the sea.

We scramble to make it to the shoreline before sunset, only to find a crowd of onlookers behind a long stretch of yellow safety tape far from shore. I ask about hiking closer to get a better look, and I am told that the shelf that is roped off is from a flow created a week ago and that it could break off into the sea at any time.

Enough said. Susan and I join the enraptured viewers, as we watch thin streams of fiery lava spill into the sea about 100 yards away. A billowing, lavender plume of steam emanates from the flow, and occasionally, blasts of molten lava arc through the air. The sun sets and the stars appear, while the glow of the lava, water and plume remain.

“We are watching the island get made,” I say to Susan, as she huddles next to me beneath the stars. “Right here, right now, the Big Island is getting bigger.”

“More island. More adventure,” she responds calmly.

I smile as I realize that after nearly a week on this diverse island paradise, we still have hundreds of beaches and surf breaks to see, resorts and spas to enjoy, mountain-top observatories to check out, hikes to take and reefs to dive. I guess we’ll just have to come back. ... Soon.

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Alaska Airlines offers daily nonstop service to the Hawaiian Islands of Kaua’i, Maui and O’ahu, and on November 17 starts service to Kona, on 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.

Sidebars

## City Side

### **Kailua-Kona**

Perennially sunny, the island’s western Kona Coast stretches from lush and balmy South Kona on the flanks of Mauna Loa to stark, lava-strewn North Kona at the base of dormant Mount Hualā lai. Sitting between them on Kailua Bay is Kailua-Kona, where Kamehameha the Great established the archipelago’s first capital and where he spent his final years. With Kailua-Kona being a leisurely retreat for Hawaiian royalty for most of the 19th century, it comes as no surprise that the Kona Coast is now the island’s major commercial and tourism district. This 5-mile stretch is home to well-preserved cultural sites such as Ahuena Heiau and Hulihee Palace; an amazing array of topographies and activities; cuisine ranging from shave ice and Spam musubi to chic Japanese and French dining experiences; a broad spectrum of hotels, condominium complexes and shopping areas; and soft, white-sand beaches bathed almost daily in sunshine.

### **Hilo**

Perched on a crescent bay on Hawai’i’s eastern shore, Hilo is the Big Island’s melting pot, founded in the sugar trade that brought together a variety of immigrant contract laborers from countries such as Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Portugal. Today the city has a historical core that features a terrific farmers market (Wednesdays and Sundays) with fresh island produce. Hilo is the governmental seat of the Big Island, is a significant port city and has a campus of the University of Hawai’i. In recent years, the city’s historical buildings have begun to host art galleries, fine shops and restaurants.

Located on the wet side of the island (averaging 140 inches of rain per year), Hilo has also become one of the world’s largest orchid producers, with more than 22,000 varieties grown here in spectacular nurseries. Notable museums in Hilo, which detail the natural and cultural history of the island, include the Pacific Tsunami Museum, the East Hawai’i Cultural Center (dedicated to local artists), the Hawaiian Plantation Museum, and the Lyman Museum and Mission House.

With the area struck by tsunamis in 1946 and 1960, and threatened by erupting Mauna Loa (1984), some wonder why people stay in Hilo. When you discover the stunning waterfalls along the Hamakua Coast, Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park, Puna’s hot springs and Mauna Kea’s stargazing all within an hour’s drive, you’ll know why.

## More Hawai'i

There are many opportunities for Hawaiian adventure on the other islands served by Alaska Airlines. In addition to the Big Island of Hawai'i, the airline also offers daily direct flights from Seattle to Kaua'i, Maui and O'ahu, and from Anchorage to Maui and O'ahu. Each of the islands has its own unique appeal, and offers a full range of experiences.

**Kaua'i** is Hawai'i's Island of Discovery, a spectacular place where rugged mountainside cliffs plummet thousands of feet to the Pacific Ocean. Narrow valleys shimmer brilliant green as they open onto the pristine coastline of the "Garden Isle." Activities range from exploring the wonders of Waimea Canyon, the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific," to riding ziplines through jungle canopies and diving amid schools of acrobatic spinner dolphin. The 11-mile Kalalau Trail, which crosses five valleys, is the only land access to the unforgettable Nā pali Coast.

**Maui** is the state's second largest island. Known as "The Magic Isle," Maui is incredibly diverse, from the barren upper reaches of the Haleakalā Volcano to the verdant fairways of more than a dozen resort and public golf courses scattered throughout the island. Major attractions include the winter gathering of humpback whales in the warm Pacific waters offshore of Maui; the coastal resort communities lining the beaches of Kā'anapali, Lahaina, Kihei and Wailea; more miles of swimmable beach than any other Hawaiian island; and the wind and wave sports scene on the windward north shore of the island.

Just a short flight or ferry hop from Maui are the small, laid-back island of **Lāna'i**, and the old-Hawai'i, working-cattle-ranch island of **Moloka'i**.

**O'ahu** is the island better known for surfing, from the gentler waves more typical of Waikīkī Beach to the raw, powerful breaks that fuel international competitions on the island's north shore. Waikīkī, just southeast of downtown Honolulu, is also the more fashionable side of the island, with high-end boutiques, galleries and gift shops. Touring Pearl Harbor and the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu, snorkeling Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve, and hiking the Diamond Head crater rank among the island's top visitor attractions.

But, as with all the Hawaiian Islands, the list of activity options can seem virtually endless.