

Big Island

The Big Island of Hawaii is well named - it could hold all the other islands put together, with room to spare. The entire island has the population of a medium-sized town, with 150,000 people (half what it was in Captain Cook's day) and a low level of tourism compared to Oahu or Maui; despite its fair share of restaurants, bars and so on, this is basically a rural community. The development that will surely come may put an end to that, but for the moment there are sleepy old towns all over the island, unchanged for a century. The few resorts are in the least beautiful areas, built on the barren lava flows of the Kona coast to catch maximum sunshine.

The Big Island is, in fact, growing, its southern shore inching ever further out to sea, thanks to the Kilauea volcano, which has destroyed roads and even towns, and spews out pristine beaches of jet-black sand. Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, which includes Mauna Loa as well as Kilauea (though not Mauna Kea, which is further north and higher than either at 13,796ft), is absolutely compelling; you can explore steaming craters and cinder cones, venture into the rainforest, and at times approach within feet of the eruption itself. The summits of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea have the clearest air on earth - and astronomical observatories to take advantage of it - but down below, when the tradewinds drop, the island is prone to a choking sulphurous haze known as "vog".

As befits the birthplace and base of King Kamehameha, more of the ancient Hawaii survives on the Big Island than anywhere else in the islands. Puuhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park preserves a "place of refuge" for kapu-breakers and defeated warriors, and there are further temples north along the Kohala coast, while Waipio Valley, where Kamehameha spent his youth, remains as lush and green as ever.

Flights to the Big Island arrive at Hilo on the rainy east coast, or the much less genuine but inoffensive resort of Kailua (often referred to as Kona) on the west. If you don't rent a car, you may not get to the interesting sites; one bus daily links Hilo and Kailua, and organized bus tours go to specific attractions, but public transportation is all but nonexistent.