

Hawaii Volcano National Park

The Big Island's southernmost volcanoes, Mauna Loa and Kilauea, jointly constitute HAWAII VOLCANO NATIONAL PARK, thirty miles from Hilo and eighty from Kailua. It's possibly the most dramatic of all the US national parks; as well as two active volcanoes, of which at least one is likely to be erupting at any given time, it includes desert, arctic tundra, and rainforest.

Evidence is everywhere of the awesome power of the volcanoes to create and destroy; no map can keep up with the latest whims of the lava flow. Whole towns have been engulfed, and what were once prized beachfront properties lie buried hundreds of yards back from the sea.

The national park operates two free campgrounds on a first-come, first-served basis, while the famous Volcano House, on the very edge of the crater within the park (PO Box 53; tel 808/967-7321; \$75-100), has spectacular views, and good food in the evening, although the prices for its simple motel-style rooms are rather high. Otherwise, the small and inconspicuous town of VOLCANO, just before the park entrance on the Hilo side, provides the best places to stay in the vicinity, with B&Bs such as Hale (PO Box 758; tel 808/967-7986, ; \$75-100), south of the highway across from the village. Kilauea Lodge, on the leafy main street (tel 808/967-7366, ; \$100-130), is a comfortable inn with a good restaurant, and there's also good food at Surt's nearby (tel 808/985-6711).

Chain of Craters Road winds down to the sea from Crater Rim Drive, sweeping around a succession of cones and vents in an empty landscape where the occasional dead white tree trunk or flowering shrub pokes up. Fresh sheets of lava constantly ooze down the slopes to cover the road. When a new road is built on top of the flow, more lava covers it. Along the coast, the scale of the damage since 1983 has been too great to repair - over seven miles have been lost - so now the road is a dead end, and getting shorter year by year. One by one the landmarks along its seafront stretch - such as Wahaula Heiau, a temple where human sacrifice may have been introduced to Hawaii - have been destroyed, and before long it may not follow the shoreline at all.

Check current conditions at the visitor center when you arrive, and make sure you have enough gas. The end of the road is a fifty-mile round-trip from the park entrance, and there are no facilities of any kind along the way. For several years, depending on where current volcanic activity is concentrated, it has been possible at times to walk across the congealed lava blocking Chain of Craters Road to see molten rock gush from the earth - sometimes directly into the sea. The park's Volcano Updateline (tel 808/985-6000) has the latest details; for information on ranger-led tours, call the visitor center.

The main focus of the park is Kilauea Caldera , close to the rim of which both the visitor center (daily 7.45am-5pm; \$10 per vehicle; tel 808/967-7311,) and the fascinating Jaggar Museum of geology (daily 8.30am-5pm; free), on the eleven-mile Crater Rim Drive , offer basic orientation. Kilauea is said to be the home of the volcano goddess Pele , who has followed the "hot spot" from island to island. In 1824 Queen Kapiolani, a recent convert to Christianity, defied her by descending into the crater, reading aloud from her Bible, eating the tabu red ohelo berries, and throwing stones into the pit. When Mark Twain came here, he saw a dazzling lake of liquid fire; since a huge explosion in 1924 it's been shallower and quieter, a black dusty expanse dotted with hissing steam vents. Enthusiastic hikers should set time aside to follow the long trails that explore the caldera floor, now (mostly) solid. Both the Halemaumau Trail , a seven-mile round trip, and the Kilauea Iki Trail , a total of five miles, involve picking your way from cairn to cairn across an eerie landscape of cracked and jagged lava.

Among shorter routes, the mile-long Devastation Trail is a boardwalk laid across the scene of a 1959 eruption; scientists are monitoring how long vegetation takes to re-establish itself. Most of what you see is new growth - fresh lava is full of nutrients, and rainwater and seeds soon collect in the recesses - but a few older trees survived partial submersion in ash by growing "aerial roots" some way up their trunks.

A short drive from Volcano House , and across the road from the crater, is a rainforest. Starting from close to the Devastation Trail, a ten-minute walk takes you through Thurston Lava Tube , created when the surface of a lava stream hardened on exposure to the air. It's now a damp empty tunnel, a segment of which is open and illuminated. Gigantic ferns grow over the top, and a few roots have worked their way through cracks in the rock to dangle from the ceiling.