

Kona coast

Hawaii's leeward

Kona coast

divides into two distinct areas. To the north of its only sizeable community, Kailua

, barren lava trails down to the sea from the third highest of the Big Island's volcanoes, Hualalai. Thanks to the relentless sun on its magnificent beaches, luxury hotels dot the shoreline, incongruous green patches in the wasteland. To the south, the hillsides are more fertile, and although the condos are spreading, you can still get a real feel for the old Hawaii, in the land where Captain Cook met his end.

Although the Big Island's main resort is officially called

KAILUA

, and its postal address is "Kailua-Kona," you're likely to hear it referred to as Kona

as often as not. It's reasonably attractive, and has played its part in Hawaiian history, but its summer-holiday seafront of fast-food restaurants and souvenir shops could be anywhere; and the wind-borne "vog" means that the atmosphere can be as bad as in Los Angeles or London.

Hulihee Palace

(Mon-Fri 9am-4pm, Sat & Sun 10am-4pm; \$5) faces out to sea from the center of Kailua. Built as the governor's residence in 1838, it's not all that imposing from the outside. Within, it's notable for massive koa -wood furnishings, made to fit the considerable girth of the various members of the Hawaiian royal family who later lived here, such as the redoubtable 400-pound Princess Ruth. The 1836 Mokuaikaua Church directly opposite was the first in Hawaii, and part of it has been set aside as a museum of the early days of Hawaiian Christianity. A peculiar "sausage-tree" from Mozambique, named after the elongated fruit that dangles from its branches, grows in the church grounds. Nearby, King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel dominates the northern end of the bay. King Kamehameha's funeral rites were performed in the ancient temple of Ahuena Heiau, which juts into the sea in front of its beach.

Some of the world's best fishing, snorkeling and scuba spots are approached by sea from Kailua. Expensive two-hour tours on Atlantis Submarines (\$79, under-12s half-price; tel 808/329-6626) descend one hundred feet to a coral reef, accompanied by the Star Wars theme, to see a frenzy of feeding fish and the occasional lurking shark. The catamaran Fair Wind (\$80; tel 808/322-2788) goes to Kealakekua Bay, for snorkeling and a bit of scuba. If you fancy chartering a boat to fish for the big ones, contact the Charter Desk (tel 808/329-5735,); rates start at \$75 for a half-day.

Open-plan

Keahole Airport

, on a field of black lava nine miles north of Kailua, has the usual car rental places; otherwise Speedi Shuttle (tel 808/329-5433) into town costs around \$20 per person. In Kailua, a regular shuttle bus runs the six-mile length of Alii Drive every ninety minutes (8.30am-9.30pm; \$2; tel 808/961-8744). One daily bus

follows Hwy-11 around the north of the island to Hilo, leaving Kailua just before 6am and returning in the evening.

Competition ensures that the bars and restaurants of central Kailua - especially those along the seafront - are well priced, though the relentless vacation atmosphere means the place can seem a bit unreal.

Cassandra's Greek Taverna Kona Plaza, 75-5719 Alii Drive tel 808/334-1066. Delicious and inexpensive Greek food, from light salads to substantial moussakas.

Huggo's 76-6828 Kuhakai St tel 808/329-1493. Lunch and dinner only served on a large ocean-view terrace. The menu includes burgers, salads and sandwiches, as well as Pacific Rim specialities, and there's often live evening entertainment.

Ocean View Inn 75-5683 Alii Drive tel 808/329-9998. Very inexpensive Hawaiian and Asian diner overlooking the sea, where the menu includes roast beef dinners, traditional fish dishes and even Chinese cuisine. Closed Mon.

Oodles of Noodles Crossroads Shopping Center, 75-1027 Henry St tel 808/329-2222. Pan-Asian noodle joint, a mile up from the ocean near the highway, serving great dinners from around \$15.

Kealakekua Bay

, a dozen miles south of Kailua, was where Captain Cook was killed on his second voyage to Hawaii. One of ancient Hawaii's major population centers, it's now barely inhabited, and the white obelisk on the death site - legally a small piece of England - is all but inaccessible. You can only get to within a mile of it by car, to the beach at Napoopoo across the bay, though you'll glimpse it from the road on the way down. The bay itself is the best place on the Big Island for snorkeling, even if there are sharks further out. It's also possible to hike down to the monument, but it's a grueling four-hour round-trip, for which you need to carry all your water and supplies. The trail starts just before the town of CAPTAIN COOK, which is also home to the bargain

Manago Hotel

(tel 808/323-2642,

; up to \$35/\$35-50), offering comfortable ocean-view rooms amid flowering Japanese gardens.

This region, South Kona, is the prime source of Kona coffee

, which sells here for around \$20 a pound (including shipping). A mile south of Captain Cook, the Coffee Shack (daily 7am-3.30pm; tel 808/328-9555) serves wonderfully fresh coffee and smoothies on a terrace that enjoys staggering views all the way down to Kealahou Bay.

When

Captain James Cook

sailed into Kealahou Bay on January 17, 1779, he was on his second visit to Hawaii, after a year spent searching in vain for the fabled Northwest Passage. As he anchored his ship, the Resolution, in this sheltered harbor, a vast crowd of Hawaiians gathered to greet him - eyewitnesses claim that as many as ten thousand were out on the water. For three weeks, he was fed and feted by chief Kalaniopuu, attending temple ceremonies and wrestling matches, and replenishing his supplies.

The departure of the Resolution, amid

declarations of friendship, might have been the end of things, had it not been forced to return just a week later, following a storm that left the ship in tatters. This time the islanders were not so hospitable, and far from keen to part with further scarce resources. On February 14, Cook led a landing party of nine men in a bid to kidnap Kalaniopuu and force the islanders to return a stolen small boat. In an undignified scuffle, surrounded by thousands of hostile warriors, including the future Kamehameha the Great, Cook was stabbed and died at the water's edge. His body was treated as befit a dead chief: the skull and leg bones were kept, and the rest cremated.

The legend soon grew that the Hawaiians had taken Cook to be the great god Lono

; but Hawaiian commentators now argue that such tales say more about European attitudes to Cook than about Polynesian perceptions. To the European mentality of the time, it was self-evident that a noble figure of the Enlightenment such as Captain Cook must appear god-like to superstitious "natives." That Hawaiians prostrated themselves on the ground in front of Cook could only mean that they were worshipping him as a god - even though commoners were obliged to do so before any of their chiefs. It was in England, not Hawaii, that popular images appeared showing his ascent to heaven, borne by angels.

The major anomaly in the legend is quite why the Hawaiians would have killed this "god." Some proponents say it was a sacrifice, even though it happened in battle, while others argue that the man who struck the final blow "didn't know" that Cook was a "god." The usual explanation, that it was simply an accident, serves both to perpetuate the idea of Hawaiians as "innocent" savages, and to absolve Cook himself of any responsibility for his fate. What seems more likely is that his actions in peremptorily dismantling a temple at Napoopoo for use as firewood antagonized the priests, and when he infuriated the chiefs as well by seizing Kalaniopuu, deference gave way to defiance

Drive tel 808/329-1112. Popular, informal Indonesian restaurant, with no views but some atmospheric outdoor seating. Serves \$11-14 entrees, including a tasty shrimp sate

The best of the spectacular sandy beaches along the Kona coast - safe for summer swimming, though with tempestuous winter surf - lie to the north of Kailua. Hapuna Beach, almost forty miles up the coast, is deservedly the most famous, despite being overshadowed by the giant Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel (tel 808/880-1111 or 1-800/882-6060, ; \$250+); it's still possible to rent \$20 beachside cabins (tel 808/974-6200), but since opening in 1994 it has lost some of its charm. For real idyllic seclusion, head instead for Kona Coast State Park (daily except Wed 9am-8pm; free), reached via a bumpy dirt road just a couple of miles north of Keahole Airport.

Several extraordinary resort hotels lie in the district of South Kohala, thirty miles north of Kailua. Three separate enclaves - Waikoloa, Mauna Kea and Mauna Lani - have been landscaped out of this inhospitable lava desert, each one a self-contained oasis holding two or three hotels, a beach or two, and nothing else. Although Waikoloa is the least exclusive of the three, it's home to the ludicrously ostentatious, mile-long Hilton Waikoloa (tel 808/886-1234, ; \$250+), said to consume seven percent of all the island's energy. Guests travel to and from their rooms by electric boats or monorail.

Puuhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park (daily 7.30am-5.30pm; \$2;), four miles on from Kealahou, is the single most evocative historical site in all the Hawaiian islands, jutting into the Pacific on a small peninsula of jagged black lava. The grounds include a palace, with fishpond and private canoe landing, and three heiaus, guarded by large carved effigies of gods - reproductions, but still eerie in their original setting. An ancient "place of refuge" lies firmly protected behind the mortarless masonry of the sixteenth-century Great Wall. Those who broke ancient Hawaii's intricate system of kapu (taboo) - perhaps by treading on the shadow of a chief, or fishing in the wrong season - could expect summary execution unless they fled to the sanctuary of a place such as this. As chiefs lived on the surrounding land, transgressors had to swim through the shark-infested seas. If successful, they would be absolved and released overnight.