

Windward Hawaii

Almost all the rain that falls on the slopes of Mauna Kea flows down to the sea on the eastern side of the Big Island. As a result, myriad streams and waterfalls nourish dense jungle-like vegetation, ensuring that the main road north along the coast from Hilo - the only sizeable base for travelers - is alive with flowering trees and orchids

Although it's the Big Island's capital, and largest town, just 45,000 people live in HILO, which remains endearing and unpressured. Mass tourism has never taken off here; basically it rains too much. However, the rain falls mostly at night, and America's wettest city blazes with tropical blooms, set against a backdrop of rainbows.

Hilo has always been at the mercy of fire and water. Cataclysmic tsunami killed 96 people in April 1946, and a further 61 in May 1960. Countless lava flows have also threatened to engulf it; in 1881 Princess Ruth summoned up all her spiritual power to halt one on the edge of town, while in 1984 another flow stopped just eight miles short.

Downtown Hilo is compact and very walkable. However, the urban area extends for several miles, and the airport at General Lyman Field (tel 808/935-4782), on the eastern outskirts, is well beyond walking distance. If you're not renting a car at the airport, a taxi into town is your only alternative, costing around \$8.

The Hawaii Visitors Bureau is at 250 Keawe St (Mon-Fri 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm; tel 808/961-5797). Hilo's HeleOn Bus Company (tel 808/961-8744) operates a small-scale city bus service, plus one service each to Kailua (Mon-Sat) and down to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (Mon-Fri) from the Mooheau Bus Terminal on Kamehameha Avenue.

Most of Hilo's (eminently missable) nightlife is in the Banyan Drive hotels, though there are a few shows at downtown's restored Palace Theater. As well as its restaurants, early risers will enjoy the daily 7am Suisan Fish Auction, at Banyan Drive and Lihikai Street, where you can buy from the night's catch of marlin and other big fish.

Bears Coffee
110 Keawe St tel 808/935-0708. Hilo's most bohemian breakfast hangout, one block back from the ocean in the heart of downtown.

Café Pesto 130 Kamehameha Ave tel 808/969-6640. Large, Pacific-influenced Italian restaurant, facing the ocean from downtown Hilo, serving tasty calzones and pizzas.

Pescatore 235 Keawe St tel 808/969-9090. Formal Italian dining opposite the visitor center, with lunch specials (\$7-10) and wonderful fish stews for dinner (\$25).

The Seaside Restaurant 1790 Kalanianaʻole Ave tel 808/935-8825. Located just over two miles southeast of town, this superb, if plain, fish restaurant presides over thirty-acre fishponds brimming with trout, mullet and catfish. A full fish supper costs under \$20.

There is a simple and tragic reason why downtown Hilo looks so appealingly low-key, with its modest streets and wooden stores: all the buildings that stood on the seaward side of Kamehameha Avenue were destroyed by the two tsunamis of 1946 and 1960. After 1960, no attempt was made to rebuild "little Tokyo," which had housed Hilo's predominantly Japanese population, and the seafront is now occupied by a succession of pleasant gardens. The story is told in the high-tech Pacific Tsunami Museum, on Kamehameha Avenue at Kalakuaua Street (Mon-Sat 10am-4pm; \$5). A scale model shows how the city looked before the 1946 disaster; contemporary footage and personal letters bring home the full impact of the tragedy. The section devoted to the wave of 1960 is even more poignant. Locals had several hours' warning that it was on its way, but many flocked to the seafront to watch it come in; photos show them waiting excitedly for the cataclysm that was about to engulf them.

The focus of the two-part Lyman Museum at 276 Haili St (Mon-Sat 9am-4.30pm; \$7) is the original 1830s Mission House, furnished in dark koa wood, which belonged to Calvinist missionaries David and Sarah Lyman. The museum next door starts with a fascinating set of ancient weapons and then documents Hawaii's various ethnic groups, including the Portuguese shipped in in 1878 from the overpopulated but similarly volcanic Azores, whose braganha became the ukelele.

A couple of miles up Waianuenue Avenue, at Rainbow Falls, just to the right of the road, a spectacular wide waterfall plummets 100ft across the mouth of a huge cavern. Continue another two miles to reach the bubbling, foaming pools known as the Boiling Pots.

The
Belt Road

(Hwy-19) follows the Hamakua coast north of Hilo, clinging to the hillsides and crossing ravines on slender bridges. At first the fields are crammed into narrow rain-carved "gulches"; further north the land spreads out. For a glimpse into the interior, head into the mountains after fifteen miles to the 450ft Akaka Falls . A short loop trail through the forest, festooned with wild orchids, offers views of Akaka and other jungle-like tropical waterfalls.

Hwy-240, which turns north off the Belt Road at HONOKAA , comes to an abrupt end after nine miles at the edge of Waipio Valley

. As the southernmost of six successive sheer-walled valleys, this is the only one accessible by land - and it's as close as Hawaii comes to the classic South Seas image of an isolated and self-sufficient valley, dense with fruit trees and laced by footpaths leading down to the sea. Spectacular waterfalls cascade down the valley's flanks, but recurrent tidal waves have ensured that only a few taro farmers now live here.

It's perfectly possible to walk down the steep, mile-long track into Waipio, but most visitors take tours, either in the four-wheel-drive vehicles of the Waipio Valley Shuttle (Mon-Sat 9am-4pm; tel 808/775-7121; \$40), at the Waipio Valley Art Works in Kukuihaele, a mile from the end of the road; in horse-drawn wagons (tel 808/775-9518; \$40); or on horseback (tel 808/775-0419; \$75). It's permissible to camp discreetly for free on the beach, for which you need a permit from the Bishop Estate (tel 808/322-5300).