



For most people, Hawaii begins and ends with tiny bikinis, ridiculously patterned shirts and heat so thick you could almost lean on it. It's why more than 50,000 visitors flock to Hawaii's main island, O'ahu, each year. But O'ahu is no more Hawaii than London is Britain.

Around 130 islands comprise the Hawaiian archipelago, so when you tire of O'ahu and its capital, Honolulu, fear not as there's lots more to see and do.

A 40-minute flight away is the Big Island, so called because it's twice the size of every other land mass in this cluster of islands strewn across the Pacific. It was originally christened Hawaii, but when that name was stretched to include the entire island chain, the locals simply shrugged and said, "Let's call our island the Big Island." And so they did.

From the air, the Big Island looks like a giant chocolate brownie – a burnt brown crust covering 10,000 kilometres of molten goo.

"It looks like the end of the world," says the elderly Californian in the plane seat next to me. "But don't be fooled, the Big Island is actually more like the beginning of the world."

A few days later, driving over the scorched belly of the island, I finally understand what he meant: the Big Island sits astride an undersea magma hotspot which, over

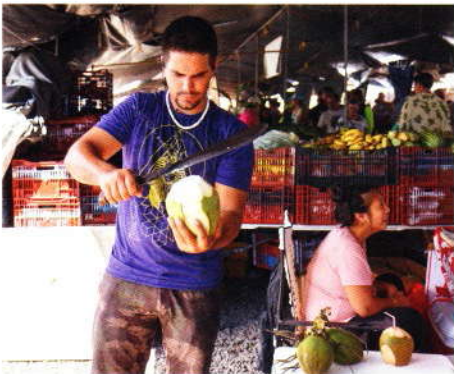
By Sharon Stephenson



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Photos courtesy of Martin Haughey.



the past 44 million years, has given 'birth' to a succession of volcanic islands. The whole Hawaiian chain is, in effect, one big island production chain. And the Big Island, book-ended by the Hualalai and Mauna Loa volcanoes (the latter the world's largest volcano) is the most geographically active of them all – Mauna Loa has been spewing lava continuously since January 1983, devastating more than 78 square kilometres.

We fly into Hilo, the Big Island's charmingly ramshackle capital, where the locals are so laid-back they could almost be horizontal. Luck, it appears, is on our side because it's a Saturday – which, in Hilo, means one thing – the Hilo Farmer's Market. Named by the *Huffington Post* as one of America's leading farmer's markets, this twice-weekly event on Wednesdays and Saturdays is a great introduction to the sights and sounds of Hawaii's largest agricultural region.

I watch as a boy too young to be troubled by a razor yet wields a bayonet, which he uses to deftly chop the top off a coconut before handing it to me, the fresh juice a welcome salve to the heat.

We wander the market aisles, our eyes and tastebuds assaulted by stalls piled high with bright pink dragon fruit, fragrant lilikoi (passionfruit), the largest paw-paw I've ever seen and numerous fruit and veggies we're unable to find names for.

Started in 1988 with just four sellers, more than 200 stallholders now crowd the parking lot with their multi-ethnic wares, including Peruvian tamales, Portuguese bread and a troika of coconut milk-based local deserts – haupia, kulolo and haulolo – that are much easier to eat than they are to pronounce.

I get chatting to the flower seller, a charming elderly woman who tells me she came to the Big Island from her native Michigan three decades ago.

"I moved here to get away from a failed relationship and somehow never left," she

says. "There's something magical about Hawaii, and the Big Island in particular. The locals have the sacred art of relaxation down to a fine art. There's a much slower pace here," she adds, showing me the pungent noni plant, which produces medicinal fruit that can apparently heal everything from acne to cancer.

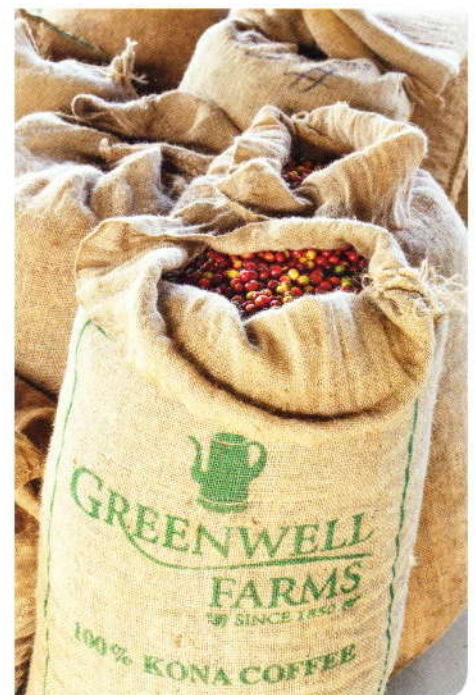
"It smells like a combination of cheese and teenage boys' socks," she jokes, as we politely refuse an offer to try some.

The drive across the Big Island is an astonishing exercise in extremes: there's the deep green of pineapple and coffee plantations, the rippling seas of ebony rock that evoke a post-apocalyptic landscape and the heavy blanket of tropical rainforest.

Blame it on the weather: the Big Island boasts 11 climactic zones, ranging from sub-Arctic tundra to the tropical rainforest. And we seem to cop most of it during our stay on the Big Island. Five minutes after leaving Hilo, it starts raining, five more and 35 degree heat wallops us in the face. On our drive to the sea, pea-soup fog forces us to the side of the road. It's this hot and wet weather, together with the mineral rich soil, that makes Kona such a sweet spot for coffee bean cultivation on the lush western flanks of the Big Island.

Those famous Hawaiian blue skies greet us when we arrive at Greenwell Farms, one of the region's 700 coffee plantations.

Guide Wayne Harmon leads us on a coffee tasting, or cupping, session where we try some of Greenwell's 11 coffee varieties.





"It's a little like wine tasting," says the Oregon native who followed the heat to America's 50th state.

"After assessing the aroma, take a sip and swirl it over your tongue to check for body and acidity. Once you've swallowed, evaluate for finish and after-taste."

Kona's coffee belt stretches for 50 kilometres and features mainly small, family run plantations.

"You can almost set your watch by the rainfall," says Wayne. "The clouds roll in at 2:00pm and it rains from 4:00-7:00pm."

It's easy to see why Kona produces some of the best coffee in the world. And certainly some of the most expensive – Wayne tells us premium Kona coffee can go for around \$US122 (NZ\$170) a kilogram.

We wander among some of Greenwell's 650,000 coffee trees, heavy with bright red fruit, and tour the milling and roasting facilities. And then it's time to taste, or 'cup', the 11 varieties of mild, medium and full-bodied roasts which, much like wine, cough up floral notes with hints of plum, peach and berry. I leave with a packet of rich chocolate and macadamia nut coffee which is a happy marriage of the region's two main crops – coffee and nuts.

Wired on coffee, and keen to get out of the skin-blistering sun, we drive over an hour to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, created in 1916 to preserve the region's unique volcanic features, early human history and the plant and animal life that's such an integral part of this bio-region.

Wanting a ring-side seat to the geological action, we stay at Volcano House, the only accommodation within the National Park, which overlooks the active Kilauea Crater. At night, our room is aglow with the same volcanic light that author Mark Twain enjoyed

when he stayed here in 1866, back when it was little more than a shack. These days, Volcano House is a 34-room hotel with a fireplace the size of my living room.

Timing, it appears, is on our side. "Right now, Kilauea is erupting in two places," says a National Park guide. "The Pu'o Vent, a crack on the volcano's southern slopes, is particularly restless." It's news that has the locals twitchy: on the drive here, the radio announcer had warned of impending evacuations.

In the end, the lava stays away, allowing us three nights to marvel over the kind of spectacle that draws visitors from far and wide.

The best view is from the Thomas A Jaggar Museum, overlooking the Kilauea Crater, where we watch steam rise and it vents belch thick ash. Sadly, we're not allowed to get any closer, but it's close enough to remind us of the power of one of the world's most active volcanoes.

We also get a glimpse into the aftermath of lava flows driving the Chain of Craters Road, which winds down to the sea like a ribbon through a blackened landscape. Almost an hour in, we literally reach the end of the road, where 2003 lava flows slashed through the road, wiping out the round highway. Walking over the rippling sea of ebony rock is a little like I imagine walking on the moon must be like.

It's a world away from Honolulu's glitzy resorts but, as my fellow passenger on the flight over said, "This is the soul of Hawaii." I couldn't agree more. 🌋



What you need to know

How to get to Hawaii:

It's a 9.5-hour direct flight from Auckland to Honolulu, the capital of O'ahu. Air New Zealand flies to Honolulu four times a week, while Hawaiian Airlines flies three times a week. It's a 45-minute flight from Honolulu to the Big Island. For more information, visit gohawaii.com/nz

Where to stay:

Volcano House, in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, is the only accommodation inside the Big Island's National Park. There are a range of rooms to suit all budgets (hawaiivolcanohouse.com)

In Kona, the Courtyard King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel is, as the name suggests, right on the beach. It's also slightly removed from the main action, so is a bit quieter than some of the other beach front hotels (marriott.com/hotels/travel/koacy-courtyard-king-kamehamehas-kona-beach-hotel/).

What to eat:

No-one ever called Hawaiian food pretty – but the mishmash of styles that borrows from all over the world sure is tasty. Local delicacies include poke (pronounced poh-kay) which is basically raw fish and salad, Spam (apparently the favourite food of local boy, President Obama), malasadas (sugary, no-hole doughnuts which arrived with Portuguese immigrants) and Loco Moco, which doesn't sound or look too appetising – a hamburger patty atop white rice, crowned with a fried egg and gravy – but the locals won't hear a word against it. You have been warned.



How to get around:

Don't let the palm trees and beach put you off – Hawaii is still a United States territory and, as such, the car is very much king. Hiring a car is easy (just remember to drive on the 'other' side of the road!) but the window-less local buses are also fun.