

Destination
FABULOUS!

Welcome to LAVA LAN

A VOLCANIC LANDSCAPE IN HAWAII GIVES SHARON STEPHENSON POST-APOCALYPTIC VISIONS

Jealousy can do strange things to a girl. Just ask Pele, the Hawaiian goddess of volcanoes. Legend has it Pele was so jealous of her sister, who seduced her boyfriend, that she killed the man, banished her sister and spent the next few centuries hurling great rivers of lava across the Hawaiian islands.

A good place to witness Pele's hissy fit is at the summit

of Kilauea Crater on Hawaii's Big Island, where red-hot molten lava spills forth from the planet's most active volcano.

A 40-minute flight from Waikiki is the Big Island, so-called because it's twice the combined size of the 130 islands that form the Hawaiian archipelago. Originally christened Hawaii, when that name was stretched to include the entire island

chain, the locals simply call it the Big Island.

Most visitors are drawn here by the two active volcanoes, Mauna Loa and Kilauea, the latter the most geographically raucous of the Hawaiian group. It has been spewing lava continuously since January 1983 and, to date, has devastated more than 78km² of the island.

Wanting a ringside seat to the action, we stay at Volcano House, the only hotel within the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park that overlooks Kilauea Crater. At night, our room is aglow with the same light that Mark Twain enjoyed when he stayed here, back when it was little more than a shack. These days, there are 34 rooms – and a fireplace the size of a room!

We drive part of the 32km Chain of Craters Road, which winds down to the sea like a ribbon, skirting steam plumes and vents belching thick ash. Almost an hour in, we reach the end of the road, where 2003 lava flows

obliterated the round-island highway. As eerie as it is to walk on rippling seas of ebony rock that evoke a post-apocalyptic landscape, we're also mindful that we're treading on some of the youngest land on earth.

You know that saying, four seasons in one day? Well, triple that on the Big Island, which hosts around 11 climatic zones, ranging from tropical rainforest to sub-Arctic tundra. Five minutes after clambering over blackened rocks, the sky starts spitting on us – five more and 35-degree heat wallops us in the face.

The park offers a range of walking routes, from the 30-minute Devastation Trail to Mauna Loa, which takes two days – and a greater fitness level than I possess – to scale the southern rim of the dormant volcano. We opt for the three-hour Kilauea Iki Trail, a loop that begins and ends in dense rainforest.

Sandwiched between the forests is the crater floor. It's a sharp descent into the chasm and we have to watch our footing as we hike across the jagged surface of the lava lake. Amping up the excitement is the steam that still emerges from the earth, despite the last eruption being more than 50 years ago.

A fortnight after we return home, the news is filled with reports of lava flows from the Kilauea volcano and the evacuation of several towns. Some women, it appears, never get over their jealousy. ■

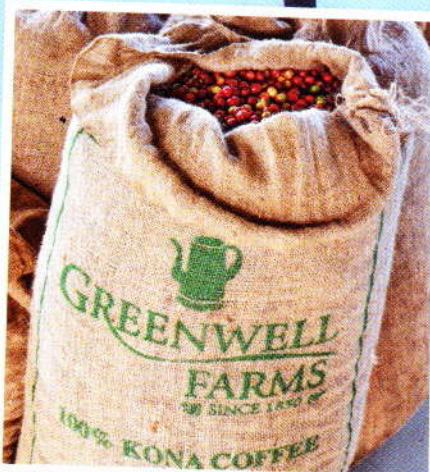
On the south-east side of Big Island is Kilauea Crater, the world's most active volcano.

Picturesque Small Harbor at Kailua on the Kona coast.



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Right: Coffee beans grown by a family who have been on the Big Island for four generations.



Insider's guide to... the Big Island

BEST PHOTO OP: Anywhere. But don't cross barricades or ignore warnings to get a better look at the active volcanoes. There are numerous places around the Big Island where you can have a Kodak moment without endangering your life.

BEST COFFEE: Actually, Kona is the sweet spot for coffee bean cultivation. More than 700 small, mainly family-run coffee plantations are strung along the coast like baubles and most have free tastings.

DON'T MISS: The Thurston Lava Tube, a 500-year-old dark recess that is the result of subterranean lava. Almost 200m long, the tube is lit by electric lights that cast an eerie glow.

LOCAL FLAVOUR: The Big Island is much more laid-back than the state capital Honolulu, so kick back and enjoy "island time".