

# BIG ISLAND BIG FUN

*Tom Hyde visits Hawai'i's  
spectacular volcanic showpiece.*

The Hawaiian Air flight from Honolulu had been airborne for less than 15 minutes before the captain announced our descent into Hilo, such is the ease of inter-island travel in Hawai'i from Oahu, the 'main island', to the Big Island. And to those who think they've just spotted a 'typo', Hawai'i has always been the correct spelling, it's just that Europeans have forever had trouble with the Polynesian guttural pronunciation, thus it was easier to say "hah-why-ee" and spell it accordingly, without the troublesome apostrophe.

Lesson over, it's back to business.

A rental car was waiting, as booked, at the airport in Hilo, the urban hub of the Big Island. Hilo doesn't feel like a city so much as an outpost – which I'm sure is how the pineapple plantation workers felt when they were labouring here in the red-dirt last century. Remnants of the plantation period remain but the real industry here now is tourism... and for a reason that truly is 'hot'.

I happened to be skiing on Mt. Ruapehu when it last erupted. We were hustled off the mountain and, from the pub below, with tables pulled into the parking lot, a hundred or so fearless skiers/drinkers watched the hot mudflow. It was a damn fine show but nothing like the ongoing experience here, where three active volcanoes give visitors a thrill everyday and night. Many people will tell you the best time to see them is at night, when the red-hot lava lights up the dark.

What makes these eruptions different from, say, Ruapehu? Answer: They are accessible. Indeed, they may be the most accessible fire-breathing peaks in the world. I said accessible, not benign. Kilauea is where, according to Hawaiian mythology, Pele, the Goddess of





Volcanoes (as opposed to Pele the God of Soccer) lived. In 1924 Pele truly blew her stack, similar to Ruapehu in the 90s, and blasted dust and rock and hot ash more than 6,000 metres into the sky.

In recent years, however, the show has been more like a never-ending Broadway musical. Some days it's good, some days it's even spectacular, but it's on every day and night for everyone to see – from land, from the sea, or from the air.

Eruptions in the last 50 years have produced softer, gentler flows, lava understood as either pahoehoe or a'a. The latter is relatively light and syrupy, the former is an extremely dense flow that leaves razor-sharp points and edges. Where pahoehoe is reasonably friendly a'a is utterly wicked.

Not to get ahead of myself, but this basic introduction to volcanology is relevant for anyone who's come here to play golf, because on some courses (and I'm coming to that) fairways are built over and through old lava flows. To wander over them looking for a lost ball is a good way to cut up a pair of golf shoes, if not a hand or leg.

I arrived in Hilo and after a night at the Hilo Hawaiian drove the car back out to the airport next morning. A scheduled Sunshine Helicopters guide was waiting. There, I received the best tip ever on what to do if, while flying in a helicopter, you begin to feel nauseous: focus on the horizon. This advice proved to be useful as we circled over a flaming caldron of Kilauea.

Mauna Loa ('long mountain') is talked about in superlatives because it's the biggest mountain in the world if measured from bottom (of the sea) to top – more than 15,000 metres. Mauna Loa became more just than a geographical fact, however, when it last erupted, in 1984, with fissures at 3,800 metres. Pahoehoe flowed down the gentle slope for 21 days. For a while it appeared Hilo itself would be engulfed, but it all came to a stop five miles from town.

Mauna Loa has its stories to tell, but for first-time visitors to the Big Island who want to witness the ongoing fires of hell, Kilauea is where it's at. A helicopter gives you the most dramatic views, down into the fiery maw, and the typical flight lasts 45-50 minutes. But it's possible to take it more sedately and drive around

the main crater with a stop at a geological museum on the way.

Then again, you should note that when Kilauea last spewed a big flow, in 1989, it overran the Visitors Centre at Volcanoes National Park, as these slopes of smoke and ash are officially known. The coastal town of Kalapana got hit, too. It remains inaccessible today. The pilot flew over the blackened flow, which in places looked like melted dark chocolate, but beneath which more than a hundred homes lay buried.

My ball lay on top of a lava flow only three metres off the fairway, where on most New Zealand courses you'd find little more than high grass, accessible and benign. But because this was a'a, I was truly a total idiot (and cheap bastard) stepping out onto the stuff to retrieve my ball. Hey, it was a new US\$7 ball, after all. Now, at the 501-metre par-5 4th on the South Course at the Mauna Lani resort on the Kohala coast of the Big Island, I wanted it back!

The hole swings around a mean-looking, broken flow of razor-sharp lava and I had pulled my tee shot left. There it was, in plain sight, just a short distance away. It meant maybe having my shoes torn up and, should I fall, injuring myself in a way no one wants to do on a holiday anywhere, much less on the most intriguing and compelling of all the islands of Hawai'i.

The Big Island is so big it has a really wet side and a really dry side. Hilo averages 3,350 mm of rain a year. The other side, the Kohala Coast, gets only 254 mm. After my stop to explore the volcanoes, the drive around to the other side took me most of one morning including the scenic stops along the way. Alternatively, you might choose to arrive direct from Honolulu at the island's other airport, Kona International, just a few minutes down the road from Mauna Lani and Mauna Kea, two of the best resorts in all of Hawai'i.

Mauna Lani and Mauna Kea have collectively won more awards for everything from architecture and cuisine to golf courses and endangered species protection than, I would guess, any two neighbouring resorts in the world.

Each rests on the coast overlooking the sea and sensational brown-sand beaches in one direction, and one of the island's dormant volcanic cones in the other. Mauna Lani ('mountain reaching heaven') has two luxury hotels: the 360-room Mauna Lani Bay and Bungalows, ideal for families with young children; and the 539-room Fairmont Orchid, one of the prestigious Fairmont Hotels & Resorts worldwide.

Of course, the fun-in-the-sun stuff is the same for both – swimming in the ocean or at a freshwater pool, sailing, kayaking, snorkelling, tennis, walks along trails that lead to archaeological cave sites, and, I almost forgot: golf. On the day I arrived, the daily activity menu included yoga on the beach, horseback riding, and a poolside lecture on Hawai'ian art. The latest amenity at

*North Course, Mauna Lani*





#### Hotel pool at Mauna Lani.

Mauna Lani is 'Fire & Ice' – a luxurious spa with thatched huts, plunge pools, and outdoor showers that altogether make for a tropical garden with the fragrance of oils and sweet flowers emboldened by walls of ancient lava.

Mauna Kea was the vision of legendary hotelier Laurance Rockefeller. It's a development that spans nearly 30 years, from 1965, when Rockefeller opened it, to the launch of the Hapuna Beach Prince Hotel higher up the slope in 1994. Guests stay at either hotel but move freely, by shuttle, between the restaurants, bars and golf courses at each.

The Mauna Kea golf course is a Robert Trent Jones Jr. design ranked by the people who take these things seriously as among the top 100 in the US. Its most famous hole – certainly the most photographed – is the par-3 3rd. It plays across a small bay where waves rush in front of you as you contemplate reaching a distant two-tiered green on the other side. From the 'Regular' tee it's 164m. For me that meant a 5 wood into a slight breeze. The ball wound up dry, though six metres right of the green. On in two, I missed a two-metre putt down the slope for par.

Mauna Lani next door has a North Course and a South Course and though they are just minutes away from Mauna Kea, they look and play quite differently, thanks to the lava flows they are built on. Building a golf course over lava is a trick in itself. The designer here, Robin Nelson, has made it an art form. Once the shape of the

course was (presumably) ground out, more than 200,000 cubic metres of topsoil was trucked in.

Here is where I foolishly stepped off the fairway to retrieve one of a sleeve of new balls bought just before teeing off. The thing was clearly visible (along with a dozen others in a small radius) and seemingly too close to the fairway to leave behind. Using the towel from my bag like a glove to protect one hand, I steadied myself and stepped gingerly out onto the lava, only to discover that walking across lava is a bit like climbing a steep slope: it can be easier to get up than down. Reaching the ball is one thing, getting back safely without tearing up the new shoes you just bought at Nevada Bob's in Honolulu is another.

Finally, I note that the golf courses at Mauna Kea and Mauna Lani resorts form part of a newly formed six-course King's Golf Trail – named for an ancient walking track that circumnavigated the Big Island. The other two courses are found further down the same road at the Waikoloa Beach Resort.

One coastline, three resorts, six fabulous golf courses – it's a holiday strip unlike any other in Hawai'i.

Air New Zealand flies direct to Honolulu three times a week between July and October; twice a week the rest of the year. 🌐

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