

has *far* more activities available. This leads to another reason—the ocean. Since it’s on the leeward side of the island, and because there are no permanent streams on the entire west side of the island (except for the one from Kona to Hilo that’s filled with tax money), Kona has the calmest, clearest water in the state. Water sports such as swimming, snorkeling, SCUBA, fishing—you name it—are usually unmatched on the Kona side. This side also has the best beaches on the island, with some, such as Hapuna, consistently rated in the top five in the United States. (With a few notable exceptions, the Hilo side has poor beaches.) All this adds up to a traveler’s delight, one of the reasons that the Kona side has such a high visitor repeat ratio.

But stand by for a shock when you fly into Kona Airport for the first time. Kona makes a *rotten* first impression on the uninitiated airborne visitor. Part of the airport sits atop a lava flow from 1801, and the first thing you think when you fly in over all that jet black lava is, “I came all this way for *this*?” Don’t worry; it gets much better.

Hilo Side

On the other hand, the Kona side is short of what Hilo has in abundance—green. Whereas much of the Kona side is dominated by lava, Hilo is plant heaven. The weather usually comes from the northeast, so Hilo gets around 140 inches of rain per year. This is paradise for anything that grows. Hilo also has breathtaking waterfalls. You won’t find *one* on the Kona side unless it’s in the lobby of your hotel. Hilo’s weather has created beautiful folds and buckles in the terrain. The unweathered Kona side lacks angles—it’s mostly gentle slopes. Lastly, Hilo is *much* more convenient for exploring Kilauea volcano.

The Two Sides

The schism between the two sides of the island is wide and deep. Because the two sides are so different and the distances so large (for Hawai’i, that is), most people who live on the west side haven’t been to Hilo or Kilauea volcano in years. Most Hilo residents haven’t been to Kona in years. Both sides tend to playfully bad-mouth the other. The Kona side creates the tax base and the Hilo side, the center of county government, spends it (often on Hilo-oriented infrastructure). Hilo has lots of roads that few drive, while Kona drivers curse the traffic on their limited roads.

Suggested Itinerary

If you have a week on the Big Island, you might want to spend four to five days on the Kona side and two to three days in Hilo or Puna. The volcano itself can take one to two days, and you’re better off exploring it from Hilo or Puna than from Kona. Hilo all but closes down on Sundays, with most business, even the few tourist-related ones, taking the day off.

GEOGRAPHY

The Big Island is made up of five volcanoes. (See map on the foldout back cover.) Kohala in the north is the oldest. Next came Mauna Kea, Hualalai, Mauna Loa, and finally Kilauea. None are truly dead, but only Mauna Loa and Kilauea make regular appearances, with an occasional walk-on by Hualalai. Nearly the size of Connecticut, all the other Hawaiian Islands could easily fit inside the Big Island’s 4,000 square miles. And it’s the only state in the union that gets bigger every year (thanks to Kilauea’s land-making machine).

Gentle slopes are the trademark of this young island. It hasn’t had time to develop the dramatic, razor-sharp ridges that older islands such as Kaua’i possess. The exception is the windward side of Kohala

Mountain where erosion and fault collapses have created a series of dramatic valleys. Two of our mountains rise to over 13,000 feet. Mauna Kea, at 13,796 feet, is the tallest mountain in the world when measured from its base, eclipsing such also-rans as Mount Everest and K-2. Mauna Loa, though slightly shorter, is much broader, earning it the moniker as the *largest* mountain in the world. It contains a mind-numbing 10,000 cubic *miles* of rock.

Another of our mountains is not really a mountain at all. Kilauea, looking more like a gaping wound on Mauna Loa, is the undisputed volcano show-off of the planet. Hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of lava per day issue from its current outlet, Pu’u ‘O’o, creating and repaving land on a daily basis.

All this adds up to an exciting and dynamic geographic location. Things change faster here than any place you will ever visit. There have been lots of times that we have gone to a certain beach or area only to find that it has changed beyond recognition. A new black sand beach shifts to another location. Trails become absorbed by a restless and vigorous Mother Nature. Whole roads get covered with lava. Island hopping in this state is like traveling through time. This is an exciting time in the life cycle of this particular island. Enjoy the island in its youth, for like all youths, this, too, shall pass.

SO IS HAWAII’N AN ISLAND OR A STATE?

Both. This island, more than any other in this state, is a bit schizophrenic when it comes to names. This is the biggest island in the state, so it is commonly referred to as (brace yourself) *the Big Island*. Its Hawaiian name is *Hawai’i*. So far, so good. But the whole *state* is called Hawai’i. So you figure the capital must be here, right? Nope, Honolulu is on O’ahu.

This must be where most of the people live, right? Uh-uh. O’ahu has 80% of the population. Well, this must be where Pearl Harbor is, correct? Wrong answer—it’s on O’ahu, too. So why is the state named after *this* island? Because it’s the *biggest* island, and this is where King Kamehameha the Great was from. It was he who brought all the islands under one rule for the first time. His first capital was here at Kailua (another naming headache—see below). When you do all that, you have some historical influence. In this book we will refer to this island as *the Big Island*. When we say Hawai’i, we mean the whole state. (Even my brother, when he came to visit the Big Island, called from Honolulu to have me pick him up, assuming it must be on the “main” island.) In short, *in Hawai’i* could be anywhere—*on Hawai’i* is on the Big Island.

I won’t even get into the name confusion for the town of Waimea. (Or is it Kamuela? See page 133.) Let’s tackle a more annoying naming problem. The main town on the west side is called **Kailua-Kona, Kona, Kailua** or some-

How Big is The Big Island of Hawai’i?

