

Parks Place

The Hawaiian Islands offer a wide variety of natural treasures  By Leslie Forsberg

Diamond Head, an extinct volcano, is an iconic landmark and a state monument on O'ahu.



O'AHU

MOLOKA'I

MAUI

LĀNA'I

HAWAII ISLAND

Scores of people—community members and anyone willing to get wet—splash into the water of the onetime royal canoe cove, most holding onto a 200-foot rope with thick masses of ti leaves dangling from its entire length. The fronds sweep the sandy bottom, corralling fish as the rope haulers wade deeper to form an arc that nearly encloses the cove. Hundreds watch from the lava-rock shoreline as waders slap the water with their hands like children learning to dog-paddle, attempting to drive fish closer to shore. Everyone shouts, “*Huki!*” (Pull!), and the rope haulers begin pulling the ends of the rope onto the shore.

I’m at a re-enactment of a traditional *hukilau*, or fish harvest, at the phenomenally beautiful Pu’uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park on the southern Kona coast of Hawai’i Island. The park is idyllic, with a palm-fringed, white-sand beach fronted by a sparkling aqua cove.

As the rope haulers waded closer to shore and the arc becomes smaller, a murmur ripples through the crowd. “Look! Fish!”

Trapped by the ti leaves, a massive school of yellow tang flashes in the knee-deep water just three feet from my place on the shore. The crowd grows silent as a woman in white wades into the sea. She is accompanied by traditionally attired women playing Hawaiian nose flutes, the instruments’ dulcet notes lingering in the warm air. The woman in white scribes ancient messages in the air with graceful

hands as she chants and gestures to the ocean, sending words of thanks to its sea life.

A cheer goes up as the rope is lifted, freeing the fish. One young boy can’t resist, and he clambers over the rocks and into the shallow water, lunging right and then left, at the darting tang. To everyone’s surprise, he manages to grab one. He holds the wriggling prize aloft, grinning. His family and those of us nearby laugh and clap for him, and he sets it free, eyes shining with pride.

I’D ALWAYS THOUGHT OF PARKS AS places that preserve the landscape. Yet during my explorations of the Hawaiian Islands, I’ve learned that Hawai’i’s parks are also very much about preserving the living culture of the people who have called these isles home for more than a thousand years.

“In the old days, [our mission] was all about geology. In the modern era, it’s been about natural-resource protection, and now our mission is evolving into cultural-resource protection,” says Jeff Bagshaw, an interpretive ranger at Maui’s Haleakala National Park. “On Maui, we’ve got a group of elders called the Na Kupuna o Maui who advise us on cultural practices and the proper uses of the area.”

At the same time, conservation efforts are ongoing throughout Hawai’i’s national park system to preserve and protect ecosystems vital to the survival of endangered plants and animals, such as the rare Hawaiian *nēnē* (goose). “Our number-one problem is alien species,” notes Bagshaw, “whether feral goats that disturb native vegetation or wasps that prey on the native-plant pollinators.” Examples of measures the park has taken to protect against alien species

Kōke’e State Park on Kaua’i overlooks the lush Kalalau Valley and rugged Nāpali Coast.



JAMES RANDKLEV PHOTOGRAPHY

include building fences to keep out grazing animals.

In addition to seven areas operated by the National Park System, the Hawaiian Islands are home to numerous state, county and municipal parks. Hawai'i's parks are places of astonishing natural beauty—from spectacular, golden-sand beaches rimmed with turquoise sea to rugged, black-lava-rock coastlines; from tropical rain forests streaked with rivers and waterfalls to vast lava fields where steam rises from molten lakes.

Whenever I visit Hawai'i, I always seek out these places of beauty and natural drama. Here are some of my favorite experiences.

HAWAI'I ISLAND

Hawai'i Island, sometimes called the Volcano Isle, is also known as the Big Island. The island comprises more than 4,000 square miles of verdant rain forests, volcanic deserts, snow-dusted peaks and sandy beaches, and is still growing. Kilauea Volcano, one of the world's most active volcanoes, regularly creates new land as molten lava rises and oozes out of fissures, sometimes pouring downslope into the ocean. A visit to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park to learn how the island was, and is, being formed is an amazing experience.

On a tour of the park—a 333,086-acre UNESCO World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve just 30 miles from Hilo—Rob Pacheco, our Hawai'i Forest & Trail guide, told our group, “This will be a silent hike ... just walk and observe.”

As we descended from the Visitor Center to beneath the rim of Kilauea Volcano, I felt my senses sharpening. Walking through a tunnel of towering tree ferns, I felt very small. Farther along, the stout, gnarled branches of *‘ohi‘a lehua* trees bore surprisingly elegant crimson flowers.

Crickets chirruped in the undergrowth, and the wind whistled through the forest. A flash of ruby plumage announced the arrival of an *‘apapane*, or Hawaiian honeycreeper, one of the rarest birds on Earth, found only in Hawai'i. The bird warbled a sweet, complex melody as it perched high in a tree.

Around a bend, the foliage opened up and the vast untrammelled landscape of the Kilauea crater appeared, moonscapelike lava fields surrounding a circular vent from which a narrow pillar of steam rose high into the air. I had expected to see steam in



DOUGLAS PEEBLES

the crater. But I was caught off guard moments later as I viewed a 3-foot-diameter fumarole, steam rising from it, a mere foot off the trail. Leaning over the fumarole, I closed my eyes and felt the hot, moist air on my face. Nature's own facial, I mused.

Just beyond, the soles of my shoes grew warm, as though I were walking on hot coals. Crouching down and placing my hand on the path, I was startled to feel warmth. A lava field lay near my feet. (Always hike with a guide or stay on marked trails.)

At a bluff-top overlook, steam churned out of a series of cracks hundreds of feet long, creating ghostly clouds that wisped away and rebuilt, as though the earth were exhaling its hot breath. The code of silence was lifted, and Rob explained the geology that formed this site.

“You're looking at a number of different lava flows,” Rob said. “The inner pit crater, where you see the steam, is called Halema'uma'u; it's the traditional home of Pele.”

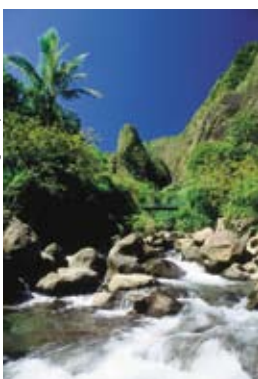
While the stark landscape certainly looked old enough to be the home of legendary Pele, the volcano goddess of Hawaiian mythology, it's actually surprisingly young. “The primary flow you're seeing is from 1919,” Rob told us.

At a nearby sulfur bank, rocks were blanketed with yellow mineral deposits, and the air was scented with musky fumes. With a sparkle in his eye, Rob quoted from Mark Twain, who visited the crater in 1866: “The smell of sulfur is strong, but

HAWAI'I ISLAND



Hikers in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park view a lava flow from Kilauea.



Top: Visitors can enjoy magnificent views of the sunrise from the summit of Haleakalā on Maui. Above: The 'Īao Needle, a 1,200-foot natural rock formation, is one of Maui's most recognizable sites.

not unpleasant to a sinner.” The remark drew laughs from the small crowd assembled.

As our group ascended to the Visitor Center, a peek-a-boo view through the trees yielded one last glimpse of the crater's fire pit. Gazing out, I expected to see the steam column, yet instead, I was stunned to see a thick brown column of smoke and ash boiling into the sky. “Looks like we've just had another pyroclastic event,” Rob remarked, without a hint of drama in his voice.

It seems remarkable to me and the other visitors to learn that events such as these are nearly as routine as the trade winds sweeping Hawai'i Island's shores, but the residents are accustomed to volcanic activity—part of the isle's past and present.

Volcanic rocks indicate where a Native village once stood on the site that is now the Sheraton Keauhou Bay Resort & Spa on the Kona Coast. Twice a week, a Hawaiian interpreter guides visitors through the Sheraton's village site, explaining historical Hawaiian lifestyles and performing traditional chants.

In the late 18th century on the north Kohala Coast—the other end of the island's main vacation corridor—workers ruled by King Kamehameha I used Earth's own “building material”—lava rocks—to construct a sacred *heiau* (temple). It is said that the *heiau* was built by thousands of workers, who formed a human chain 20-plus miles long as they hauled huge lava rocks from the Pololū Valley. Today the original 1791 *heiau*, which stands on a hillside above a white-sand beach, is protected as part of the Pu'ukoholā Heiau National Historic Site.

On the central Kona Coast, a few miles south of Kona International Airport, the Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park holds yet more reminders of Hawai'i's past. The park preserves the coastal

parts of two *ahupua'a*, or traditional land divisions. Hundreds of Hawaiians once lived here, using lava rock for agricultural, religious and fishing structures, including the Kaloko Fishpond.

On a visit to the pond, rare *ae'o* birds (Hawaiian stilts) high-stepped their way through the shallows by a *kuapā*, or traditional lava-rock dike, that's being reconstructed by the park. The massive original *kuapā*, which stood for hundreds of years and was built without mortar, was a testament to the engineering skills of the local residents. The *kuapā* was made with porous lava rock, so water could flow through the rock and circulate around the pond. Its walls were constructed at an angle to diffuse the power of ocean waves. A sluice gate, or *mākāhā*, allowed for manual exchanges of pond and seawater.

Destroyed by storms in the 1950s (after mortar was applied), the *kuāpa* is being rebuilt by the National Park Service, lava rock by lava rock, to allow it to once again be used for aquaculture.

A two-mile round-trip coastal walk, part of the 175-mile Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail, begins at the Kaloko Fishpond and takes trekkers through a fascinating coastal landscape, past remnants of ancient structures and flowering shrubs, such as the *'ilima*, whose tiny, delicate yellow flowers were used to fashion lei for royalty. Along the fine-sand beaches, it's common to see green sea turtles hauling themselves out of the ocean to absorb the sun's rays.

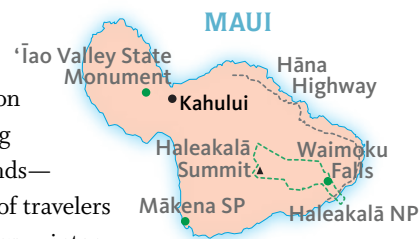
At the walk's terminus—the 'Ai'ōpio Fishtrap, a lava rock-and-coral wall enclosing a shallow pool of water—a *heiau* adds a dramatic historical backdrop to a crescent beach beloved by sunbathers and snorkelers. I was charmed by the presence of a couple of net-fishermen nearby, carrying on the traditional ways of their ancestors.

MAUI

Maui is one of the best-known vacation destinations among the Hawaiian Islands—a place thousands of travelers choose for weddings, winter golf and whale-watching trips.

Much like Hawai'i Island, Maui's skyline is dominated by a famous dormant volcano—Haleakalā, which reaches 10,023 feet and is the centerpiece of Haleakalā National Park.

In addition to Haleakalā, Maui is famed for its





A couple admires the vista of Kaua'i's Waimea Canyon—known as the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific"—from an overlook in the canyon's namesake state park.

valleys—one of the island's nicknames is "The Valley Isle." I discovered why at 'Āo Valley State Monument, three miles west of Wailuku on the central part of the island. I drew in my breath in wonder as I drove into a deeply shaded cleft in a forested ridgeline where the sharp ridges resembled the spiky armor of a dinosaur.

At the park, I crossed a bridge over a rushing stream and walked up a mist-soaked stone path to a viewing platform.

The 1,200-foot Kūkaemoku rock formation—commonly called the 'Āo Needle, and draped with velvety green vegetation—was traditionally considered a representation of Kanaloa, a Hawaiian god.

Showing their reverence, early Hawaiians buried their kings here.

Below the bridge, in a streamside clearing, is a traditional taro patch. A ribbon of diverted stream rushed in rivulets into lava-lined pools planted with taro. The

scenery was spectacular.

The crystal-clear cascades that dash from mountain peaks over waterfalls are truly some of Hawai'i's most wonderful sights, and I was eager to explore Maui's most famous waterfall, Waimoku Falls, on the island's south coast. The waterfall is reachable via a lengthy journey on the twisty, often one-lane Hāna Highway. It's best to set out early, so I made plans to spend the night at Paia Inn Hotel, in the boutique-filled, artsy town of the same name at the start of the highway. The hip hotel is a convivial place in a gorgeous location, just steps from a three-mile-long, white-sand beach. I joined other guests for a glass of wine in a leafy outdoor courtyard in the evening, as conversation swirled about the mystique of the Hāna Highway.

As I set off at 7 A.M., a periodic mist kept the tropical warmth at bay, and a rainbow spread overhead. Surrounded by a wild profusion of tropical plants, I rolled down my windows and breathed in the ginger-scented breezes. A waterfall thun-

dered down around nearly every bend, spraying the roadway with mist. Giant tulip trees scattered their bright-orange blossoms on the road like cheerleaders' pompoms, and the songs of cicadas and exotic birds echoed through the rain forest.

I took my time and arrived in Hāna at 1 P.M., where I checked into the Trevaasa Hāna luxury resort, which combines old-style Hawaiian architecture with thoroughly modern comforts and fascinating cultural opportunities in one of the most scenic settings I've ever seen. My Sea Ranch cottage was set on a broad sweep of palm-studded lawn near a lovely pool. I indulged in local cuisine—a crunchy *pahole* (fern) salad and a tender Maui beef filet—at the resort's open-air Ka'uiki Restaurant.

The following day, I drove to the coastal part of Haleakalā National Park. Less than 20 miles past Hāna, I arrived at 'Ohe'o Gulch, excited to finally see the famous Waimoku Falls. On my hike up the two-mile-long Pīpīwai Trail that ascends past a scenic set of pools spilling down the hillside,

I found myself walking beside people of many nationalities. I struck up conversations with a British couple and a family visiting from India, the matriarch wearing a sari. At the end of the hike, just past a forest of bamboo waving in the wind, I waded across the stream to a mist-soaked vantage point. Standing at the base of the 400-foot falls, I felt the water's thundering power.

The power of nature was visible again the next day at the summit of the dormant Haleakalā Volcano. Driving south from Hāna, I skirted the volcano's southern flank and ascended to the Haleakalā Visitor Center. The drive helped me to understand a bit better just how massive this park is: It covers more than 30,000 acres.

Stepping out of my car at 9,740 feet of elevation, I gazed out over the immensity of the lunarlike, cinder cone-pocked landscape of the summit—it's 7 miles long by 2 miles wide—and wondered if anything could survive in such a harsh environment.

The answer is yes, I was told by Jeff Bagshaw, the interpretive ranger. "Most

visitors say, 'What's the harm in me going off-trail? It's just bare rock,'" he said. "But there's life everywhere.

"We've got a ground beetle that lives only on the uppermost portion around the Visitor Center and the summit building, and that's it on the whole planet. There's also a nesting colony of 10,000 endangered seabirds—'ua'u [Hawaiian petrel]—that nest underground just below the Visitor Center. If people hop over the railing at sunrise, walking across what they think is barren land, they crush the burrows."

With his cautionary words in mind, I descended into the crater on the Keonehe'ehe'e Trail in search of the elusive 'āhi-nahina, or silversword, a plant species threatened not only by man, but also by the ungulates that roam these slopes. (The park has installed fencing to keep unwanted grazing animals off the fragile land, but it's not a perfect solution.)

Then I spied them: a cluster of foot-tall plants contrasting with the red soil, shimmering silver in the sun. The tufts of veg-

etation with their swordlike leaves reminded me of giant silver pincushions.

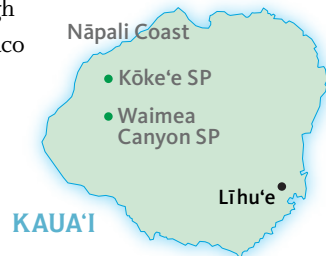
After my visit to the vast rocky caldera, I was eager to enjoy some time on the beach. At Mākena State Park's Big Beach in South Maui—one of the island's most beautiful beaches, with bridal veil-colored sand—a half-dozen young men with body boards were putting on an impressive show, running and throwing themselves, belly down, onto their boards, and then skimming out toward seven-foot waves before coasting in to shore. The sight was mesmerizing. But the waves here were too high for me. I happily munched on a fish taco and papaya slices I purchased from a couple of food carts lining the road at the park's entrance. I was just there for the show.

KAUA'I

Though not nearly as tall as the mountains on Maui or Hawai'i Island, Kaua'i's Mount Wai'ale'ale shapes this isle's character, as well: The rain that drenches its bulk brings

rushing streams and a verdant climate to the "Garden Isle." Vivid bougainvilleas spilling over road banks, lush banana plantations and green hillsides make the entire island a showy masterpiece of nature. Two of Kaua'i's finest parks—neighboring Kōke'e State Park and Waimea Canyon State Park—occupy a good portion of the Wai'ale'ale uplift.

Within Kōke'e State Park, high on Wai'ale'ale in the northwestern part of the island, an overlook yields views through rain forest foliage into the green-velvet world of the Kalalau Valley, set against the accordion-pleated ridges of the Nāpali Coast, with seemingly endless Pacific rollers beyond. My husband, Eric, and I arrived just after a brief rain shower, in time to see a brilliant rainbow arcing across the for-



ested valley and shafts of sunlight picking out white-tailed tropic birds wheeling in the updrafts. Past that, the ocean swells crashed on the coast.

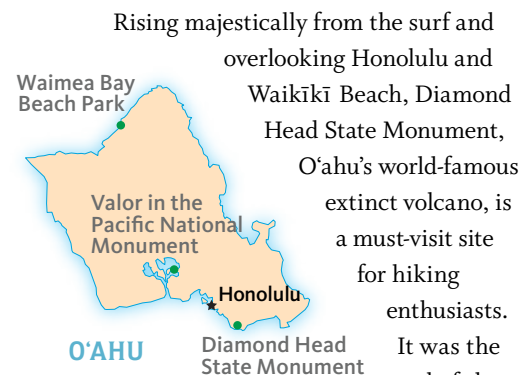
Yet it is only a short distance from such expansive perspectives to one of the world's most insular and unusual landscapes, the Alaka'i Swamp. This plateau on the approaches to Mount Wai'ale'ale is a brooding wilderness of stunted trees and shrubs, shrouded in mist. Rain falls in this area more than 300 days a year; annual totals surpass 400 inches, and climatologists debate whether this, or a place in the Himalayan foothills, is the wettest spot on Earth. Lucky wanderers on paths winding into the woods may see some of Kaua'i's endangered native forest birds here, including the stunning vermilion 'i'iwi that we glimpsed darting through the trees. The bird's conspicuous bright plumage contrasted vividly with the prevailing gray-green foliage.

The saying "The journey is just as important as the destination" is especially true on

Kaua'i. Waimea Canyon Drive, the road leading up to Kōke'e State Park, offers panoramic overlooks of Waimea Canyon State Park and its namesake canyon, sometimes called the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific." More than 14 miles in length and 3,600 feet deep, the canyon is a wonderland of red-earth gorges, striated buttes and impressive spires, with a dusting of contrasting emerald vegetation. The dramatic eroded landscape reminds me that the islands are works of nature ever in progress.

O'AHU

Parks are also intrinsic to the character of O'ahu, Hawai'i's most populous island, home to Honolulu and famed Waikīkī Beach. Several of these parks, such as Diamond Head State Monument and the World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument, are important travel destinations on O'ahu—every bit as much as Haleakalā is on Maui and Kīlauea is on Hawai'i Island.



Rising majestically from the surf and overlooking Honolulu and Waikīkī Beach, Diamond Head State Monument, O'ahu's world-famous extinct volcano, is a must-visit site for hiking enthusiasts. It was the end of the

day when I arrived at the Waikiki Beach Marriott Hotel & Spa, conveniently located near Diamond Head. I spent the evening relaxing on my 14th-floor lānai, enthralled with the view of Waikīkī Beach. Even as dusk drew near, the oceanfront pathway still bustled, and surfers offshore caught waves. The sun sank into the ocean, and the soft crooning of Hawaiian music from the outdoor lounge drifted in the languid air.

The next day, I was eager to hike. It was 7:45 A.M.—early, I figured—when I began the moderately difficult walk up Diamond Head. But there were already plenty of people hiking down. As I walked up the steep, lava-rock path, it seemed that everyone going by was talking about "the stairs." A half-hour later, after tromping up several



DOUGLAS PEEBLES

The *USS Arizona* Memorial (with the *USS Missouri* behind it) on O'ahu serves as a symbol of the United States' involvement in WWII.

switchbacks and passing through a tunnel so dark all I could see was a dime-size circle of sunlight at the end, I arrived at the stairs. Ninety-nine of them. I eased up the narrow steps, dodging those coming down. Then I climbed a spiral staircase

and squeezed out from beneath the concrete ceiling of a WWII military bunker, to emerge at the summit. (Changes are planned for the trail; please call Hawai'i State Parks for more information.)

The breeze was fresh, the views expansive—including the ivory crescent of Waikiki and the skyscrapers of Honolulu, the gentle slopes of the Wai'anae and Ko'olau mountain ranges, and a tree-dotted crater that holds National Guard buildings. Below, the surf churned, white against the rocky headlands, and the 1917 Diamond Head Lighthouse stood, a lonely sentinel.

No visit to O'ahu would be complete without a visit to Pearl Harbor, just northwest of Honolulu. Here, the World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument showcases a battleship—the *USS Arizona*—that serves as a symbol of the United States' involvement in World War II.

The sunken *USS Arizona*, viewable from a memorial platform above the ship, is a sobering reminder of the “Day of Infamy,” December 7, 1941, when Japanese forces

launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, damaging or sinking 21 ships, including all eight battleships of the Pacific Fleet. More than 2,400 lives were lost. I was reflective as I read a towering wall with the names of those lost aboard the *USS Arizona*.

Later, on the *USS Missouri*, a guide pointed out the exact location where Japanese officials signed the Formal Instrument of Surrender, and I joined others in clambering down the museum ship's stairwells and touring the labyrinthian, cramped crew quarters and mess hall.

In December 2010, the National Park Service unveiled an attractive new \$58 million Visitor Center complex at Pearl Harbor that includes two theaters, a museum, and a bookstore and gift shop, as well as tranquil lawns, gardens and pathways overlooking the harbor. A highlight of the new facility is the screening of a moving 23-minute documentary that offers explanations of the buildup to the war and dramatic newsreel footage of the attack.

After the intense emotions of the day, I

appreciated relaxing in the seaside setting of The Royal Hawaiian, O'ahu's historic 1927 "pink palace." I settled into a rocking chair overlooking bird-filled tropical foliage, then went for a dip in the warm ocean, emerging feeling refreshed and renewed.

The next day, I explored the beachside parks along the island's North Shore. All of the Hawaiian Islands have splendid municipal and county parks, many of them along the shoreline, and some of the most famous are on O'ahu's North Shore, which boasts 51 beaches along its 17-mile length. The North Shore is famous for the huge waves that pound its coast during the winter, drawing professional surfers from around the world.

In the North Shore town of Hale'iwa I discover one of the best farmers markets I've ever encountered, with tempting displays of tropical flowers, fresh fruits and traditional Hawaiian foods. After buying a loaf of banana-taro bread for a snack, I made the short trip to Waimea Bay Beach Park, the site of the Quiksilver Big Wave Invitational in Memory of Eddie Aikau, one of the world's most prestigious big-wave surfing events.

In wintertime, this legendary surf zone can boast 40-plus-foot waves. During my summertime visit, however, the calm water was mirrorlike, and the park bustled with families and snorkelers. Wading into the ocean, I watched a group of chattering girls playing on brightly colored floats, energetic boys rooster-tailing through the shallow water on skimboards, and a pod of dolphins leaping and frolicking off the beach. As I immersed myself in the warm water, I felt a sense of peace. I was so glad to be visiting another of Hawai'i's beautiful and fascinating parks. ▲

Leslie Forsberg writes from Seattle.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers daily service to Hawai'i Island, Kaua'i, Maui and O'ahu. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Hawai'i, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.