

They say you never forget your first kiss with a dolphin. This one came with the usual anxiety: Will he like me? Will his bottlenose get in the way? In the end, it went perfectly fine: It felt like smooching a snorkel flipper. I was elated. He was rewarded with fish and promptly received kisses from every woman in our group. Then again, that is his job.

Dolphin Quest is one of the highlights of a trip to the Big Island of Hawaii, though it's a toss-up between that and watching huge clouds of sulfuric ash explode from a 2-mile-wide volcanic crater. Or snorkeling with Technicolor fish by a black-sand beach.

Ask locals what makes the Big Island special, and you'll hear three words: diversity, openness, authenticity. Twice as large as the other Hawaiian islands put together, Hawaii – commonly called the Big Island – is home to 11 of the world's 13 ecosystems. (Where else can you snowboard in the morning and surf in the afternoon?) It's the heart of a traditional cowboy and coffee culture. It's dominated by some of the world's most active volcanoes. And it's a great place to watch the sun melt into the sea while sipping a coconut cocktail.

Lay of the Island

The Hawaiian archipelago was born when a tectonic plate beneath the Pacific Ocean slid across a hotspot in the Earth's mantle. Kauai was the first to explode onto the scene, followed by Oahu, Molokai, Lanai and Maui. The Big Island is the youngest and the only one with still-active volcanoes, giving us the best glimpse of an island in formation – it's growing by about 23 acres a year.

Nonstop flights from Phoenix land at the Kona airport in the windswept west, where the sun shines 360 days a year onto black lava fields covered by a shag carpet of straw-colored grass. Hawaiian graffiti – words and pictures made from bleached coral set on lava – litters the roadside that leads north to the Kohala Coast, where most of the resorts cluster.

Farther north is verdant Waimea, the heart of a thriving farm culture and world-class restaurants, and beyond that lies waterfall-strewn Waipio and Kohala.

About 200 inches of rain annually soak the tropical eastern side of the island, which is anchored by Hilo, the wettest city in America. But don't let that deter you. This is classic Hawaii: a surfer community with charming plantation-style architecture fringed with exotic flora.

A saddle road cuts diagonally through the island, which is dominated by Parker Ranch – one of the largest in the U.S. This is where paniolos (Hawaiian cowboys) roam and local musicians strum. At the island's center rises the observatory-topped extinct volcano Mauna Kea, a favorite of skiers in what passes for winter.

In the southeast lies the island's raison d'être: the 377-square-mile Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, where you can encounter Kilauea, which has been erupting constantly since 1983, and Mauna Loa, which last erupted in 1984.

Where to Stay

Base yourself on the Kohala Coast at Hilton Waikoloa Village, part of a 1,350-acre complex that also includes Hilton Grand Vacations Club, two golf courses, two shopping centers and petroglyph-etched lava fields. Stroll through the resort along the mile-long walkway that doubles as a museum showcasing art from Oceanic cultures. If your feet get tired, take the hotel's light rail or boat instead.

The shore surrounding the hotel is black and rocky, as it is on much of the island, but water babies can get their fix swimming in three spectacular pools, lounging on the manmade beach or kayaking in the private lagoon. Golfers can take on the Robert Trent Jones Jr.-designed Beach Course or the Tom Weiskopf/Jay Morrish-designed Kings Course, while spa lovers can indulge in Kohala Spa's tropical-themed treatments and Lomi Lomi Hawaiian massage.

Several on-site restaurants will keep foodies satisfied. Become a regular at Malolo Lounge for pau hana (happy hour), and dine on fresh-caught fish while watching the sun sink into the ocean from KPC restaurant's patio.

Activities in the Water

Hilton Waikoloa Village is most famous for Dolphin Quest – one of two of its kind in the state but the only one within a resort. Touch, feed and frolic with the world's most charming and intelligent animals in a manmade lagoon. Slap the water or wave your hand and they'll jump, do headstands and "talk." Several programs are available for humans ages 5 and up, and the dolphins even moonlight as ring-bearers for weddings.

For more close encounters with sea creatures, Ocean Sports will sail you to a secluded cove bordered by a black-sand beach. Don snorkel gear to commune with parrotfish, butterfly fish, yellow tangs and, if you're lucky, sea turtles or sharks.

Activities on Land

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is sometimes called "the world's only drive-in volcano," but don't rent a flameproof car. You're unlikely to see explosive lava, and you'll be cruising among gently sloping shield volcanoes that lie mostly undersea. In fact, the island is figuratively the tip of an iceberg: Mauna Loa, the most massive single object on Earth, is taller than Everest if measured from its base on the seafloor.

Ogle at Halema'uma'u Crater, a 2-by-3-mile-wide maw exhaling an enormous plume of ash and sulfur dioxide that glows orange at night. Walk on lava rock whose silica content makes it look like the rainbows in a wet oil slick and sound like crushed glass underfoot. Peer into tree molds – swirling, wrinkly black holes left behind when lava wraps around trunks. Comb for Pele's hair – flaxen strands of spun lava that look like they were plucked from the head of the fire goddess. Stand in the hot, rotten egg-scented blast of sulfuric steam vents reminiscent of Yellowstone. And explore the Thurston lava tube (the remnants of a lava stream), which is like walking through a huge black esophagus.

Hawaii Forest & Trail will take you to the national park and provide a knowledgeable guide, such as geologist/musician Danny Almonte, who recalls standing at many of the viewpoints as a child, watching the volcano ooze an orange lake of lava.

The company also leads half-day hiking trips to Waipio Valley, where a waterfall-laced gorge plunges into an emerald vale sprinkled with old taro farms. This so-called Valley of Kings – birthplace of King Kamehameha – is shrouded in disturbing legend and history: human sacrifice, rivaling chiefs, a half-shark half-man prince, vengeful spirits and the entrance to the underworld.

As we hiked above Waipio, ocean mist and vog (volcano fog) filled the valley, obscuring the view. But every time our guide stopped to recount a Hawaiian myth about star-crossed lovers or jealous goddesses, the mists mysteriously cleared, giving us fleeting glimpses of this spectacular island before we kissed it goodbye.

Activities

Dolphin Quest at Hilton Waikoloa Village

Contact Hilton Waikoloa Village or Dolphin Quest reservations

800-248-3316

Hawaii Forest & Trail

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Hawaii Volcanoes National Park

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Ocean Sports

69-275 Waikoloa Beach Drive, Waikoloa

888-724-5924, hawaii oceansports.com

Sleep & Stay

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Information

Big Island Visitors Bureau
800-648-2441, bigisland.org