

2023 Hawai'i Travel Guide

(Courtesy of Scott Laird, TravelPulse)

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was much discussion in the Hawaiian Islands about overtourism, with many tourism stakeholders agreeing that Hawai'i is at or at least very near the limits of its tourism industry growth. The Hawai'i Tourism Authority and its local county partners are now actively pursuing plans designed to focus on regenerative tourism - that is, tourism that is additive, rather than extractive, to local communities.

As Hawai'i works towards these plans, here are some guides on visiting in 2023 - with an eye toward doing so in ways that contribute to the local community. First and foremost, travelers should remember that they are visiting Hawai'i as guests—in communities with vibrant culture and a proud history dating back thousands of years—in an environment that is beginning to quantify adverse effects from visitor demands, and their top consideration should be how to minimize their footprint during their travels, and to hopefully leave Hawai'i better than they found it.

The author values the importance of Hawaiian language diacritical marks like the kahako (macron) but notes that some of these have been omitted for web browser compatibility.

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Traveling Safely in Hawai'i in 2023

Everybody wants to have a fruitful, safe vacation in Hawai'i. Traveling safely here not only means preserving one's own safety, but also preserving the health and safety of Hawai'i's residents, environment, and wildlife - simply because it's the right thing to do.

Visitors should maintain vigilance when engaging in the following activities in Hawai'i:

Hiking

Hikers should stay on designated trails, be sure not to enter areas marked off-limits, and not hike beyond their ability. The state spends significant money and resources each year rescuing hikers who are stuck or injured, and visitors who wish to hike should stick to trails that match their experience.

Visitors should also take local cues when hiking – if a local resident says an area is off-limits or private, turn around or choose another (clearly marked) path.

Swimming

Visitors should take care when swimming in areas without lifeguards, and should pay attention to the condition warning flags posted along many beaches. The Pacific often appears calmer than it really is, and strong surf, currents and undertows can sweep inexperienced swimmers out to sea.

Many areas in Hawai'i will also appear in guidebooks and on social media as being places to swim, but are in fact dangerous. In these cases, rely on posted signage rather than word of mouth or internet reviews, which often leave out important context.

Wildlife Viewing

Much of Hawai'i's ocean life is protected by federal and state law; many species have [minimum distances for safe viewing](#). Visitors wishing to view wildlife should not attempt to feed or interact with wildlife, and maintain adequate distance so that the animal would proceed as though humans are not present. [The fines can be steep](#) for violators, and ignorance of the law isn't an excuse.

There has also been an increase in road accidents between motorists and the nene, a near-threatened endemic bird that is also the state bird of Hawai'i. These docile birds are often found on roadways and don't react quickly to oncoming traffic, so drive with caution.

Visiting Cultural Sites

A common cultural site in Hawai'i is heiau, or temples built by pre-contact Native Hawaiians. When visiting these sites or other ruins, it's important not to touch or climb on the rocks and structures. Visitors should also not leave offerings of leaves, rocks, or other items (without following Native Hawaiian cultural protocols, such offerings are simply garbage, which is considered a desecration; they also consume state resources for their disposal).

Visitors should also avoid seeking out "secret" spots promoted in some guide books or by word of mouth. When in doubt, check with the Visitor's Bureau for each island - many "secret" spots are not promoted by the Visitors Bureaus or reputable tour companies for reasons of safety, environmental impact, or cultural sensitivity.

Hawai'i has a wealth of beautiful sites and spectacular vistas - visitors should follow the Hawaiian concept of pono (behavior that is correct, appropriate, respectful) by only visiting areas that are ready for and have invited tourism activity.

It should also be noted that smoking is prohibited on all of Hawai'i's beaches and in state parks.

Best Destinations

Hawai'i's six visitable islands have long been popular with visitors. They flock to Honolulu's exciting cosmopolitan Pacific Rim crossroads, or Maui's sugar-sand beaches, or the lushly forested mountains of Kaua'i. The important thing to remember for these destinations is that many of the most popular attractions may now have traffic management programs in place. Be sure to check the [state's tourism website](#) for detail on your intended attractions before heading out.

The website is also a great place for first-time visitors to pick the island or islands that best match their vacation objectives and personality. Kaua'i, for example, tends to lack in nightlife, which makes it a great place for relaxation and seclusion, compared to higher-energy O'ahu or Maui.

Best Attractions

Kaua'i's famed Na Pali Coast is one of that island's most popular attractions, with towering mountain cliffs weathered by millions of years of rainfall standing resolute over the azure Pacific in an ever-changing tapestry that morphs with the sun and the clouds. The best way to see these spectacular vistas is from the air or sea.

Helicopter tours are also the best way to see volcano activity on Hawai'i Island, and are an alternative to peer into Haleakala Crater on Maui or the sea cliffs of Molokai. One note about helicopter tours in Hawai'i is that they must stay within the same county - so tours departing Kaua'i, Hawai'i Island, or O'ahu must remain on those islands. Maui County also comprises the islands of Lana'i and Molokai, so departures from Maui can visit all three islands.

Must See 2023 Events

Hawai'i's events are world-class. Here's a small sampling:

January 13-14 - O'ahu - Chinese New Year Celebration

February 18-26 - Kaua'i - Waimea Town Celebration

March 10-12 - O'ahu - Honolulu Festival

April 9-15 - island of Hawai'i - Merrie Monarch Festival

May 12-21 - Maui - Maui Classical Music Festival

June 11 - O'ahu - King Kamehameha Celebration Floral Parade

Events later in 2023 may not yet have confirmed dates.

Best Places for Families

Hawai'i is almost purpose-built for families. Both Hawaiian and Hawai'i's immigrant cultures place strong emphasis on familial bonds and raising children, and Hawai'i's sun, sand, and sea are draws for families with children of all ages.

In particular, families will enjoy Waikiki Beach's calm surf, and the protected lagoons of Ko Olina, fronted by Disney's [Aulani](#) resort and the [Four Seasons O'ahu](#). On Kaua'i, the calm waters of Poipu Beach are a draw, as well as the recently refurbished waterslide and extensive pool complex at [Grand Hyatt Kauai](#).

[The Ritz-Carlton Maui, Kapalua](#) offers The Ambassadors Keiki program, where kids can tour the resort kitchens and gardens and enjoy a pizza cooking class, or track green sea turtles in the wild. On Hawai'i Island, the variety of pools at [The Four Seasons Resort Hualalai](#) and the wide range of children's amenities (from special welcome amenities to complimentary use of a children's video library and pool toys) to fully-tailor programming for younger kids ranging from crafts to swimming, while older kids might take excursions to visit waterfalls or lava tubes,.

Hawai'i's commercial luau are also a draw for families, including the Smith's Family Luau on Kaua'i, Paradise Cove Luau on O'ahu, and Royal Lahaina Luau on Maui.

Best Places for Couples

The 130 year old kiawe tree at [Halekulani's](#) House Without a Key is one of the most romantic spots on O'ahu, where former Miss Hawai'i and Miss Hawai'i USA winners sing and dance nightly for guests during the golden hour surrounding the sunset.

Kaua'i's [The Beach House](#) restaurant is a similarly sunset-focused destination, set on Lawai beach on the island's south coast, just steps away from a tiny beach and one of the south shore's most popular surf breaks.

Owned by rocker Mick Fleetwood, [Fleetwood's on Front Street](#) on Maui offers some of Lahaina's best sunset views. Reservations, like at many popular restaurants, are essential, and should be made well in advance.

Best Places for Group Travel

Hawai'i's larger resort communities are best suited for group travel. Hawai'i faces a residential property crunch, and groups seeking vacation rentals or vacation homes should be careful only to rent from operators that have posted or provide state or county license numbers, to ensure rentals are appropriately zoned and overseen.

Large groups will be best suited for the state's largest resort areas: Waikiki on O'ahu, Poipu or Kapa'a on Kaua'i, Ka'anapali, Wailea, or Kapalua on Maui, and Kailua/Kona or Kohala on Hawai'i Island. Most attractions and outfitters are happy to work with groups large and small - larger groups can even benefit from dedicated charters, particularly on ocean excursions.

Large groups can also consider cruises as a way to see the islands - NCL's [Pride of America](#) sails in the Hawaiian Islands year round.

Best Places for Solo Travel

Hawai'i is also a fine destination for solo travelers, whether they're seeking to meet locals, other travelers, or simply have time on their own for reflection, they'll find what they're looking for across the island chain.

Solo travelers seeking vibrant, energetic experiences will be most at home in Waikiki and in Honolulu, or in Maui's resort centers and Lahaina. Outside of those areas, a sleepier resort vibe tends to be the order of the day (on Kaua'i, most restaurants aren't open much later than 9 p.m.). Low-impact solo travelers seeking a throwback community vibe might also try Molokai, as long as they're willing to take their cues from residents of this tight-knit community.

Regardless of where they're exploring, solo travelers, in particular, should take care not to leave valuables in their cars or on the beach while they're swimming; solo swimmers should also stick to beaches with lifeguards or significant crowds in case of emergency.

Best Foodie Destinations

At [Huihui](#) at Maui's Ka'anapali Beach Hotel, local chef Tom Muromoto draws on his days as a surfer, and traditional Hawaiian harvesting and cooking techniques in addition to the culinary contributions of Hawai'i's later immigrants from around the Pacific to turn out Hawai'i Regional Cuisine that is satisfying and thoroughly original.

On O'ahu, chef Robynne Maii at [Fête](#) was awarded the 2022 James Beard Award for the Best Chef in the Northwest and Pacific region - the first Hawai'i chef to win the award in nearly 20 years, and the first woman of Native Hawaiian ancestry anywhere to win the award.

Plant-based gastronomes will appreciate the 6 course tasting menu at [natuRe Waikiki](#) which draws on local bounty (meat-eaters, there's a menu for you too). There are also wine and non-alcoholic beverage pairings available.

The Ritz-Carlton Maui's AAA Four Diamond restaurant [The Banyan Tree](#) has a new menu from new chef de cuisine Marimer Garcia. A native of Puerto Rico, Chef Garcia's is rooted in coastal cuisine with a focus on local and sustainable ingredients.

Best Places for Adventure Travel

Voluntourism is the byword for adventure travel in Hawai'i in 2023. The statewide [Malama Hawai'i](#) program connects travelers with regeneration efforts with local nonprofits. Activities might include reforestation, replacing invasive introduced plant species with native ones, tending native agricultural systems, or participating in land-based habitat and ocean conservation activities—many of which take visitors to parts of the Hawaiian Islands they wouldn't be able to access on their own.

Think cleaning up Maui's coastline with the [Pacific Whale Foundation](#), or caring for a treasured Kaua'i beach park with [Friends of Kamalani and Lydgate Park](#). Visitors can also care for Hawai'i's residents by volunteering at [Hawai'i Food Bank](#) on O'ahu, and the best news is many participating hotels and resorts will offer incentives for guests who show proof of volunteering in a participating program

Best Places for Sports Enthusiasts

Hawai'i is a state that likes spectator sports. Local residents root on the University of Hawaii team at invitationals on O'ahu or at away games on the Mainland. College football fans cheer their teams on at the [Hawaii Bowl](#) each December. Volleyball is also a popular spectator sport on O'ahu, with particular interest in the UH Men's and Women's Teams.

[Surfing](#) was born in Hawai'i, and every November and December the Vans Triple Crown of Surfing takes up residence on O'ahu's north shore to take advantage of the world-class winter surf. [Golf](#) is also widely played in Hawai'i, with many of the public and private courses hosting world-class tournaments.

Unique to Hawai'i

Hawai'i Nei (that's Hawaiian for references to the island chain, instead of the island of Hawai'i), is, simply put, unique unto herself. Hawai'i is politically and culturally part of the United States, but is unlike anywhere else in the United States. Hawai'i is also Polynesian, but with cultural touchpoints that are distinctive.

The Hawaiian language, a mix of the Marquesan and Tahitian languages with many of its own introductions, is not completely mutually intelligible anywhere else in Polynesia. Dance is a common tradition among the peoples of the world, particularly in Polynesia, but Hula is Hawai'i's own.

Also unique to Hawai'i is its broadly Pacific culture. Fully one-quarter of Hawai'i residents reported being of two or more ethnicities on the census form—more than any other state. Hawai'i is also the only state in the nation with an Asian plurality—a legacy of successions of immigrants of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean heritage settling in these islands over the last two centuries.