

A Day Trip to the Big Island from Aulani: An Aulani Resort Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

PJ Pettigrew's [article about island hopping from Disney's Aulani resort](#) planted the idea that we could explore another of the Hawaiian islands while staying at Disney's resort on O'ahu.

It was something we decided to do during our stay, but rather than flying to another island, staying there and then heading off to Aulani, we'd take it one step further, making day trips to the Big Island (Hawaii), Kaua'i, and Maui during our eight night stay at Aulani.

I think it's fair to say that some of our Disney friends thought we were crazy, and wondered why on earth we'd leave the comforts of Aulani. Once we got there, I could see why they said that. By that point though, it was too late -- the flights were booked, generally going out in the early morning and returning in the evening. As they were all flights of an hour or less, it gave us the best part of the day on each island. Our first trip was to the Big Island.

□ Island hopping was remarkably easy. Honolulu International Airport, about half an hour's drive from Aulani, although that's without traffic. It's by far the biggest of the airports you'll encounter out here, as we'd soon find out. This was our first experience flying Hawaiian Airlines, and I was impressed by their service, although I have to confess I wouldn't want to fly for any length of time in their seats, as there wasn't a great amount of legroom, shall we say?

□ Arriving at small, quiet Hilo Airport was almost like stepping back in time. Where was the modern hustle and bustle of the airports we are used to? Also unusual was how most buildings and walkways are open to the island breezes, which I guess doesn't matter when you have a climate like their. Within a couple of minutes we had made our way to the air tours section of the airport, where we would be taking off on our open-door helicopter flight over Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

□ As you can probably imagine, this day trip took quite a lot of planning, with the helicopter trip booked months in advance, along with our flights here and car rental for the day. We also had to live with the knowledge that, with a helicopter trip, if the weather wasn't in our favor, then we wouldn't be able to take to the air.

□ Thankfully, despite the fact that the flights over the previous couple of days had been rained out, we were in luck, and we had a spectacular time. We chose the flight, as we knew we just wouldn't have the time to experience all of the vast expanse of the national park from the ground,

and we wanted to try and see molten lava. Which we did, and with the doors off, we didn't just see it, we felt the heat as well! It was a truly mesmerizing experience, and one we'll both remember for the rest of our lives.

That completed, we then picked up our rental car and made our way by road back the national park. This was one of the main reasons for coming here. After all, how many national parks are home to an active volcano? From Hilo Airport, it takes around 45 minutes to drive to the park, making it very accessible for anyone lucky enough to be visiting Hilo as part of their cruise on the Disney Wonder next fall. Is it worth a visit? Most definitely!

☐ The scenery is just stunning, and seeing Mount Kileuau in front of us, billowing out smoke, was both surreal and beautiful. I kept wondering how on earth the National Parks Service manages this place, ensuring that visitors are kept safe from a slumbering giant that every so often awakes and roars into life. The best views we found were from the outlook near the Jaggar Museum. Do keep an eye on the national parks website before your visit, as roads can be closed off, depending on what the volcano's doing. Part of Crater Rim Drive were closed when we visited due to dangerous levels of sulfur dioxide in the air.

☐ As well as seeing the volcano, one thing you need to visit is the Thurston Lava Tube, which is located in a beautiful rainforest. Something we quickly learned in Hawai'i is that volcanic soil soon gives way to verdant greenery. You can walk through the tube, and as you do, all you can do is marvel at the power of the molten lava that carved this out.

☐ Another glimpse into the power of volcanoes comes from the frighteningly named Devastation Trail, which is an apt name. It starts out amidst lush green vegetation, then before you know it, you feel as if you're on an alien planet, with a lava wasteland laid out before you.

☐ As an aside, if you are exploring on your own, consider a stop at the Volcano House Hotel and Restaurant. We had a very reasonably priced bento box lunch, especially considering we were seated by windows affording a stunning view across to Kileuau.

☐ After our visit to the park, I wanted to see the western side of the island. It's a fairly tough task for a day trip, as it's a good couple of hours' drive. Big Island certainly lives up to its name! However, we thought it was worth it. Not only did we get to see some very diverse scenery, but we were also able to visit Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historic Park. If the image you have of Hawaii is of waving palm trees,

beautiful white beaches, and peaceful waves lapping on the shore, this place has all of that -- and even more!

□ The park is home to archaeological sites that date back to the sixteenth century, and it gives you a fascinating glimpse into how society used to be, when defeated warriors and lawbreakers were given the chance to escape punishment by reaching "pu'uhonua," a place of refuge. The site is littered with traditional Ki'i or wooden carved statues that guarded the various temples, while the great wall, built to separate the royal palace from the refuge is still quite something even today at 10 feet tall and 17 feet thick.

□ There is so much to see on Big Island, with more than 4,000 square miles to explore, so perhaps some of you might want to spend at least one night there. However, as the cruise itineraries (and our visit) show, it's possible to get a good sample of what the island has to offer in one short day, and indeed you can easily do it while staying in Aulani.

□ In forthcoming articles, I'll be focusing on our day trips out to both Kaua'i and Maui.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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