



Lei of the land

The magic of Hawaii stretches from its golden beaches to its jaw-dropping landscapes, finds **India-Jayne Trainor**

I'm strapped into my seat, headphones blocking out the beating of helicopter rotors overhead, as we rise gently above the gold and green landscapes of Maui. We're on a scenic flight with Blue Hawaiian Helicopters and our captain Tim, who wouldn't look out of place in a *Top Gun* movie, calmly navigates along 88 miles of remote coastline. The theme tune from *Hawaii Five-O* plays through the headphones as we approach the island of

Moloka'i and its dramatic sea cliffs – some of the highest in the world – making me feel like I'm in my very own movie, thrilling helicopter finale and all.

LIFE'S A BEACH

Long before taking to the skies, I begin this tour operator fam trip exactly where you'd expect a Hawaii escape to start – the beach. Maui is the second-largest island in Hawaii, but it doesn't take ➤

Moloka'i sea cliffs

PICTURE: Hawaii Tourism Authority/Tor Johnson

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A green sea turtle; *lau lau* food preparation at Fairmont Kea Lani, Maui; Molokini Crater; Wailea-Makena Beach Trail, Maui PICTURES: Hawaii Tourism Authority/Tor Johnson, Ron Garnett; Eliza Hodgson



TRIED
&
TESTED

Fairmont Kea Lani, Maui

Fairmont Kea Lani sits shoulder to shoulder with other top resorts in Wailea-Makena on Maui's southwestern coast.

Renovated in 2023, it is an all-suite and villa property. My Fairmont Suite King had views over the central pools and the ocean from a wraparound *lanai* (balcony), with a separate living room and huge en-suite bathroom.

Dining options are abundant, from an extensive international buffet at Kea Lani Restaurant to signature Hawaiian at Kō and snacks at swim-up bar Ama. Hawaiian authenticity runs throughout the hotel's decor and artworks to activities including hula lessons and lei-making. Guests also enjoy direct beach access and can rent kayaks, paddleboards and scuba gear. For chill-out options, there's a spa with treatments using local ingredients and three impressive pools, including one adult-only and one with a 40m waterslide aimed at kids.



long to get anywhere; a half-hour drive takes me from Kahului Airport to the Fairmont Kea Lani in Wailea-Makena, a resort area home to golden shores and a scenic coastal trail.

Armed with a beach towel and a book, I claim a deck chair as my toes sink into the soft white sand. The gently lapping waves are as warm as a bath and I spend an hour paddling, swimming and watching locals skim through the surf.

The area has five sweeping beaches, perfect for watersports, swimming and sunbathing, along with several smaller coves and bays. And all beaches in Hawaii are public, so visitors can kick back on any that catch their eye.

HAWAIIAN LEGENDS

Polynesian culture is infused in many of Hawaii's local customs, not least its traditional *lū'au* feast. Most major resorts host their own version for visitors, usually including a meal and entertainment.

At the Grand Wailea Resort, we're greeted with colourful lei (flower garlands), before being shown to a private table as the sun sinks below

the horizon and tiki torches flicker to life. Our table bows under the weight of *ahi poke* (yellowfin tuna) and *kalua* (roast) pork, while a voice booms over the speaker, introducing hula dancers, musicians and fire-breathers to perform scenes re-enacting Hawaii's history, myths and the legend of Maui. We learn about the spirit of aloha, a philosophy meaning love, kindness and compassion – giving rise to Hawaii's moniker as The Aloha State – and retire to bed with a better understanding of the island we're setting out to explore.

UNDER THE SEA

Hawaii comprises 137 islands, including its eight main islands, so surfing, sailing and fishing are the lifeblood of the Hawaiian people, and we see that first-hand on a sunrise snorkelling trip with local provider Alii Nui. A sleek 20m catamaran carries us to Molokini Crater, a crescent-shaped volcanic rock formation that offers perfectly sheltered waters for snorkelling.

The journey costs \$249 per adult, and for an extra \$100, guests can ➤

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ASK THE operators



"Hawaii has something for all interests, whether you like nature,

the ocean, culture or history – in fact, the beach might be the last thing you do here. I loved the catamaran experience on Maui. Starting early meant we packed in breakfast, lunch and two snorkel sites by lunchtime and still had the rest of the day to enjoy."

Helen Tabois, product manager, Carrier



"My favourite experience was our helicopter flight in Maui

– I've done a few helicopter trips, but this was outstanding. Every island is wildly different, so four to five nights on each island is recommended, to get the most out of everything on offer."

David Pointer, senior product manager Caribbean, North America & Australasia, Inspiring Travel



"Experiencing a traditional lū'au is the perfect way to introduce travellers to

the islands – it's a fascinating cultural experience. Maui ticks all the boxes and has every iconic activity. Even with a week here, you wouldn't run out of things to do."

Tucker Jaffe, product assistant, Scott Dunn



ABOVE: O'o Farm in Maui, which specialises in organic produce and offers tours and dining experiences

opt for the Top Deck experience (up to 12 people), with priority boarding, a private space on the boat's sun deck and first access to the bar and buffet lunch. This ensures our stomachs are steady as we start the half-day round-trip, first stopping at a spot dubbed 'Turtle Town', where we see four green sea turtles, then continuing to the crater.

As I don my snorkel mask, something catches my eye – a pod of dolphins jumping out of the waves in the distance. The water here is impossibly clear, almost glowing in its reflection of the sky, and as we dip below the surface, thousands of tropical fish surround us. The catamaran's onboard photographer is just as keen to get stuck in, following us into the water and snapping photos (available at an extra cost) for us to remember this special moment.

FRUITS OF THE LAND

Having sampled the bounty of Maui's clear waters, there are yet more delicious treats in store back on land, with a farm visit in Maui's cooler upcountry. O'o Farm is the Willy Wonka's chocolate factory of organic produce, with fields full of every fruit and vegetable you could imagine.

The deeply rooted passion of our guide, James, is palpable as he introduces us to the smell and taste of local ti leaves, often used for hula skirts and to signify good luck. We learn about citrusy pineapple sage, bright orange loquats and the grapefruit-like

pomelo, and admire a huge orchard of coffee trees, the first plant to be cultivated on the farm's land.

Afterwards, we chat over a multi-course sharing meal made with ingredients grown on the farm. From springy rosemary focaccia and fresh salad to a vibrant fruit platter, every bite celebrates Hawaiian ingredients.

It makes a fitting (and filling) end to a journey through Maui that's been an absolute feast for all the senses and a lesson in the true meaning of 'aloha'. **TW**

BOOK IT

Inspiring Travel offers an eight-day trip to Maui from £5,970 per person, including return flights from Heathrow via Los Angeles, with British Airways and American Airlines, plus seven nights at the Fairmont Kea Lani, eight days' SUV car hire, a Blue Hawaiian Helicopters tour and a full-day, upper-deck catamaran cruise with Alii Nui, based on a March 1, 2027, departure.

inspiringtravel.co.uk

Kuoni's eight-night Volcanoes to Beaches trip starts from £5,495 per person, based on two sharing, including four nights each at the Westin Hapuna Beach Hotel on Hawaii (formerly Big Island) and Fairmont Kea Lani in Maui, with car rental and United Airlines flights via San Francisco, departing April 28, 2027. Guests should budget a further £290 for resort fees and car parking, paid locally.

kuoni.co.uk