

Lava Glowing in the Dark, Turtles on a Beach of Black Sand, and 13,800 Feet of Stars — A 4-Day Big Island, Hawaii Road Trip

I-JOURNEY TRAVEL ITINERARY

DURATION

BEST TIME TO GO

Apr – Sep
The Big Island is warm and dry on the Kona side year-round, but April through September brings the least rain to Hilo and the clearest skies for Mauna Kea — expect highs near 85°F (29°C) in Kona and cold, windy conditions above 9,000 feet after dark whatever the season.

FROM

\$650 USD / person
for 2 people, incl. 3 nights' hotels in Kailua-Kona, Volcano Village & Hilo, a rental car, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park entrance, a coffee farm tour, and the Mauna Kea Visitor Information Station's free stargazing program — excludes flights to Kona (KOA)

DAY 1

Kona Coast: Coffee Farms & Sunset

Land at Kona's open-air airport, pick up a rental car, and spend the afternoon on the slopes above Kailua-Kona where the only coffee grown commercially in the U.S. comes from.

Land at Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport

KOA · rental car counters on-site

Kona's airport is an open-air collection of thatched-roof buildings on an old lava field north of town — nearly every major rental agency has a counter here, and a car is essential for this entire loop.

Kona Joe Coffee Farm Tour

Guided tour \$20/person, daily 9am, 11am & 1pm · self-guided free, 8am–3pm

The only coffee farm in the world to trellis its trees like grapevines, on a hillside above Kealahkekua Bay with ocean views — the guided tour walks the trellis rows and ends in a tasting of the farm's own 100% Kona beans.

Kona Joe Coffee · 79-7346 Mamalahoa Hwy, Kealahkekua, HI 96750 · www.konajoe.com · +18083222100

Sunset at Magic Sands Beach

La'aloa Bay · free, small lot fills fast

A small white-sand pocket beach that famously vanishes and reappears with the seasons — bodysurfers ride the shorebreak all afternoon, then the crowd turns to face west as the sun drops into the Pacific.

Dinner at Harbor House

Dinner · fish sandwiches & fish-and-chips, closes 7pm weekdays

A no-frills open-air spot right on the docks of Kona's harbor, pouring cheap Kona Brewing Co. pints alongside fresh-fish sandwiches — arrive before closing, since the kitchen shuts early.

Harbor House · 74-425 Kealahou Pkwy, Kailua-Kona, HI 96740

DAY 2

South to the Volcano

A long drive down the island's remote southern coast, past a black sand beach full of turtles, into a national park built around one of the world's most active volcanoes.

Punaluu Black Sand Beach

~1.5 hrs south of Kona on Hwy 11, past mile marker 55 · free

The Big Island's largest black sand beach, formed from lava rock pounded to grains by the surf — endangered honu (green sea turtles) regularly haul out to bask here, and visitors are asked to keep at least 15 feet back.

Ka Lae (South Point)

~10 min detour off Hwy 11 · free, road is narrow and partly unpaved

The southernmost point in the United States, a windswept cliff where ancient Hawaiian canoe-mooring holes are still visible in the rock — the next land south is Antarctica.

Nahuku (Thurston Lava Tube) & Kilauea Iki Overlook

Included in park admission · cave-lit 8am–8pm

A 500-year-old lava tube you walk straight through, after a rainforest trail loud with native honeycreepers — the adjacent overlook looks down into Kilauea Iki, a crater that was a lake of lava in 1959.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park · 1 Crater Rim Dr, Hawaii National Park, HI 96718 · www.nps.gov/havo

Check In at Volcano House & Watch the Crater Glow

On the caldera rim, inside the park · from ~\$300/night

The only hotel inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, perched directly on the rim of Kilauea caldera — when the crater is active, guests can see Halemaumau's glow from the hotel grounds after dark, no tour required.

DAY 3

Lava Fields, Waterfalls & a Night Above the Clouds

One last morning in the volcano's lava fields, then a short drive to Hilo's waterfalls before climbing after dark to one of the best stargazing spots on Earth.

Chain of Craters Road & Holei Sea Arch

19-mile dead-end road, ~1–2 hrs round-trip · included in park admission

A one-way drive that drops 3,700 feet through decades of hardened lava flows to the coast, ending at a natural lava-rock arch pounded by surf — the road itself was buried and rebuilt multiple times as past eruptions crossed it.

Rainbow Falls & Akaka Falls

Rainbow Falls free · Akaka Falls \$5/person non-resident + \$10 parking, 8:30am–5pm

Rainbow Falls drops 80 feet into a lava-tube pool right in Hilo, best at sunny mid-morning when the mist throws a rainbow; 25 minutes north, a paved 0.4-mile loop through rainforest reaches Akaka Falls' 442-foot plunge.

Akaka Falls State Park · Akaka Falls Rd, Honomu, HI 96728

Hilo Farmers Market

Biggest Wed & Sat, ~6/7am–3pm · smaller daily

Dozens of stalls at the corner of Mamo Street and Kamehameha Avenue selling tropical fruit, orchids, and local snacks — a good place to pick up lunch before the long drive up to Mauna Kea.

Sunset & Stars at the Mauna Kea Visitor Information Station

9,200 ft elevation · free, nightly sky program after sunset

Any car can reach this cinder-flat station below the summit (the final 8 miles beyond it require 4WD and are off-limits in a standard rental) — staff run free laser-guided constellation talks after dark, with loaner telescopes and temperatures that drop near freezing, so bring every layer you own.

DAY 4

One Last Swim & Departure

An easy final morning back on the Kona side, with turtles in the water and history on the street, before the flight home.

Snorkel at Kahaluu Beach Park

Free parking on Alii Dr · lifeguard on duty

A shallow, reef-protected bay four miles south of Kona town that's calm enough for beginners and crowded with green sea turtles grazing on seaweed — stay at least 10 feet back, as required by law.

Hulihee Palace & Alii Drive

Wed–Sat 10am–3pm · self-guided from \$16, guided tour \$20

A 19th-century Hawaiian royal vacation home right on Kona's main waterfront street, now a museum of koa-wood furniture and royal portraits — walk the rest of Alii Drive afterward for lei shops, shave ice, and a last ocean view.

Hulihee Palace · 75-5718 Alii Dr, Kailua-Kona, HI 96740 · +18083291877

Fly Out of Kona International Airport

Allow 2 hrs before departure

Return the rental car at the airport's on-site lots and allow extra time at check-in during peak afternoon departure banks, when several wide-body flights to the mainland leave within the same hour.