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Recalling a Romantic Hawaiian Getaway

TRAVEL

TRIP REPORTS

By **Kühl Editor** on May 6, 2020

Before worldwide travel restrictions were imposed, we traveled to a remote location along the Kohala Coast on the Big Island of Hawaii. Like so many other avid travelers, we look forward to the day when concerns about COVID-19 will be a distant memory, and travelers can freely explore the world again.

Hawaii is one of the few destinations in the world that repeatedly entices us to return. Decades ago, honeymoon advertisements lured us into purchasing a two-island package. We fell in love with the ocean, tropical landscape, and wildlife but quickly learned that group vacations were not our style. On two separate occasions, we independently traveled with our growing family to the Hawaiian Islands to reboot and discover island life. As empty-nesters, we've frolicked along the shoreline, explored the island's remarkable geological history, snorkeled

in the ocean, and rested peacefully under palm trees on multiple occasions.

An overnight snowfall had already blanketed the Denver metro area in mid-December when we stepped onto an airplane for our latest Hawaiian getaway. Sunny skies and 80-degree temperatures greeted us when we landed. Unlike parts of Hawaii inundated with lush vegetation, our drive to the [Westin Hapuna Beach Resort](#) looked more like a lunar landscape than a tropical environment. Rugged lava fields were ubiquitous. With an annual average rainfall of less than a foot of precipitation, it is not surprising that greenery was limited. This scenario contrasts with the windward side of the island, where rain is the norm with an average yearly rainfall in some areas of more than 10 feet. Visitors arriving at the Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport often stay along the Kohala Coast so they can enjoy Hapuna Beach, a consistent Top Ten pick on international best beach lists.

We selected a resort property in a secluded beachfront location so we could spend the bulk of our time in one place. Quiet walks along the beach sounded like an ideal way to unwind. The Westin Hapuna Beach Resort is a distance from the main road and is not sandwiched between other hotel properties. Instead, the adjacent properties are a public beach and private residences with coastal trails heading in both directions.

Within a few hours of arrival, we reconsidered our initial desire to not leave the resort. Our normally active lifestyle ran contrary to sitting for prolonged periods. More importantly, how could we spend five days at a destination and not explore the surrounding area? By dinnertime, we had selected outings and dining options.

Relaxing at the Pool & Beach

The time of day and wind conditions dictated whether we sat at the beach or at one of the pools. To avoid excessive sun exposure, we rotated our location so that we could always have access to an umbrella. Red flag warnings kept us away from the shoreline when the surf was excessive. Unfortunately, these adverse conditions prevented us from taking advantage of our accommodation package, which included free rentals of beach equipment.



Hapuna Beach, Hawaii

Complimentary Breakfast at Ikena Landing

To maximize our time, we frequently walked into the dining area shortly after its opening. With no lines, we were free to choose from the outstanding selection of tropical fruits, homemade loaves of bread, healthy cereals, waffles, fish, and made to order omelets, which were all part of our reservation package. The open-air setting with a direct view of the beachfront was an extraordinary way to start each morning as the sun moved higher into the sky.



Breakfast view from Ikena Landing, [Westin Hapuna Beach Resort](#)

Walks Along the Shoreline

On the northernmost bluff, we found the sign for the public access point for the Ala Kahakai Trail. This easy path hugs the shoreline between the Westin and its sister resort, the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. Coastal erosion has caused the narrow footpath to zig and zag at different points along the route. With minimal tree cover, I'm glad an early start fit into our plans. We were back at the Westin before the intense rays of the sun were at their peak. Drought resistant shrubs and an occasional wildflower stood in contrast to the rugged lava rocks. The backyards of exclusive oceanfront homes occasionally distracted us from gazing at the aggressive waves punishing the rocky shoreline. After a brief rest at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, we trekked back to the Westin so we could enjoy time at the beach.



Sandy on Ala Kahakai Trail. Pictured in [KÜHL Svenna Shirt](#) and [shorts](#).

Another day's early morning adventure took us south of the resort, where we followed an unpaved road leading to a dirt path weaving back and forth from the ocean. Sometimes we were along the coast, while other times our journey took us inland. The trail occasionally intersected an unpaved road and other times became a narrow pedestrian byway.

The unpredictable coastline mandated our course. An occasional grove of trees shaded us, and other times the early morning sun beat down hard. A strong tide combined with mega waves encouraged local surfers. We watched as two talented and relentless surfers tackled the challenge. Images of these surfers and the coastline will always remind us of the Kohala Coast.



Sandy poses for picture with surfer in background. Pictured in [KÜHL tank](#) and [shorts](#).

When selecting a time for dinner, we often waited until after sundown. As a result, we came home with an amazing collection of sunset images.



Sunset at Westin Hapuna Beach Resort

Hapuna Spa by Mandara

To add another layer of relaxation, I made an appointment for a 50-minute Balinese massage. The masseuse used a series of long strokes to relax my muscles and then concentrated on tighter spots with her palms and thumbs. With tension and toxins removed, I walked out of the building feeling refreshed.

Dinner at Meridia

Our hotel reservation included a complimentary dinner at the resort's top restaurant, where I relished every bite of my island greens salad and almond crusted ahi entrée. I left a bit of room for dessert so I could share the innovative tiramisu made with Kona coffee, Hazelnut chocolate, and ladyfingers.



Almond crusted ahi entrée, Meridia, Westin Hapuna Beach Resort

While eating offsite for the remaining evenings was our plan, the quality of the food, the outdoor seating atmosphere, and the overall convenience led us to change our minds. We dined one more time at the Meridia before we departed.

Snorkeling with Sea Paradise

Even though our intention was to spend most of our time at the resort, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to swim alongside Hawaii's marine life. We drove about an hour south to the Keauhou Bay pier, where we boarded a 45-foot sailing trimaran called the Hokulani.

[Sea Paradise](#) operates this half-day snorkeling adventures in historic Kealakekua Bay. Rough waters caused a deviation to our original itinerary—snorkeling at the Captain Cook Monument before lunch and a stop at the Red Hill area after lunch.



Captain Cook Monument, Hawaii

All agreed with the captain's recommendation to stay near the monument and not venture to the second location. Initially, we were interested in seeing fish swim through underwater lava tubes but understood that the clarity of the water near Red Hill would be compromised by the rough seas.

Hawaii Forest and Trail Tour

Even though we were staying on the opposite side of the island, we also wanted to experience [Hawaii Volcanoes National Park](#). Knowing that the drive each way was approximately two hours, we reserved spots on a prearranged tour. Hawaii Forest and Trail tours offered us curbside service. This made the four-hour driving time more palatable.

From the moment we were picked up to the time we were dropped off, Justin, our guide and driver, became an excellent source of information about the island, Hawaiian culture, and volcanoes.

At the national park, we drove through areas where steam rose from the ground and also took two short hikes leading to caldera overlooks. After a picnic lunch, we wandered around the area near the Volcano House, a hotel constructed in the 1940s.



Sandy follows path in Volcanoes National Park. Pictured in [KÜHL Sunblade Hat](#) and apparel.

Since the national park's lave tube was closed, we drove a considerable distance to experience the thrill of walking into a lava tube on private property. The long drive was definitely worth it. Yellow and gold microbial mats covered the interior while the opening to this deep cavern was partially encased in tropical foliage.



Entrance to private lava tube

Carrying flashlights, we stepped farther into the cavern as tiny droplets of water dripped onto us. When we climbed back up the steep incline, everyone in our group was happy to have made this discovery. Since our visit, the national park has reopened its onsite lava tube.

Greenwell Farms Kona Coffee Tour

For generations, the Greenwell family has been farming and processing coffee on the Big Island. Being a lover of Kona coffee, we stopped at [Greenwell's coffee orchards](#) to sample some coffee and take a short tour of the farm. The fertile volcanic soil and agreeable climate, along with hard work, are the keys to the Greenwell family's success in producing quality Kona coffee from farm to cup.



Greenwell Farms Kona Coffee Tour

A Taste of Local Food

Remote resort locations are notorious for limited dining options. To satisfy our craving to eat locally, we visited two offsite restaurants. A reservation for dinner at the [Rum Shack](#) in the Queens' MarketPlace was a wise choice. We knew we had found a popular place when we saw several people without reservations congregating outside. The people seated inside were indulging in the Kuleana rums handcrafted from 40 varieties of freshly pressed native sugarcane. While sipping a Waikoloa sour, we shared a Poke flight, a delicious assortment of three different flavors served with house-made wontons.



Tuna Poke Flight, Rum Shack

For our entrée, we tasted one of their signature dishes, the Kuleana Rum Fired Prawns, with a hefty portion of rice. We couldn't pass on the Malasadas, freshly made Portuguese donuts, which we individually filled with one of the three fillings, using an injector.



Malasadas, Rum Shack

To satisfy our intense craving for seafood, we drove a bit farther north to [The Seafood Bar and Grill](#) in Kawaihae.

After taking stairs to the second floor, we stepped inside the restaurant and passed by the restaurant’s long mango wood bar. To enjoy the evening breeze, we sat in the narrow seating area on the outdoor balcony. A lobster and crab pot pie made with a cognac lobster sauce and topped with puff pastry was Ira’s first choice while I settled for one of the fresh catches of the day.

Balancing R&R with Exploration

Our December getaway to a tropical paradise was a spectacular way to end a busy year. Simple activities like trekking along the coastline, exploring Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, and snorkeling near the Captain Cook Monument balanced our quieter moments spent reading books. With an abundance of engaging experiences packed into five days, we returned to Colorado contemplating our next island adventure.

When Sandy Bornstein isn’t trekking in Colorado or writing, she’s [traveling with her husband Ira](#). After living as an international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy published an award-winning book, [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life](#), as a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Among other things, Sandy writes about family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

Disclosure: The Traveling Bornsteins received a media rate for the Volcano Unveiled tour.



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