

ALEX & ZEYNEP'S GUIDE TO HAWAII

Aloha. Your guide to feeling like a real kama'āina. Mahalo.

Honolulu (O'ahu)

An underrated city that often gets overlooked when people visit Hawaii. The best city¹ for Asian food in the US.

[EAT]

Breadshop

They have an unnecessarily complicated ordering process and weird hours for a bakery (they open at 2p). Basically you have to order for Wednesday onwards starting Tuesday. You can't just show up and buy stuff because they run out of the best things. But the bread and pastries are exceptional and have a local flair (guava brioche).

Tonkatsu Tamafuji

Incredible. I wish I could have some right now. Just get the regular portion, it's a lot of food.

Opal thai

Neither the spice level or the experience is for the faint hearted. In lieu of a traditional ordering process and menu, the trollish owner will come to your table and ask you a series of questions about previous experiences with Thai food and then bring you stuff. Everything was delicious and homey. I asked him what fish I was eating and he came back with a sharpie and drew a stingray on my hand.

Poke from Komedokoro M's

There's a lot of poke in Hawaii. Most of it is very good and fresh. This place was our favorite place we tried but just marginally. You could also go to Foodland (local grocery chain) and find some that's *almost* as good.

Yakitori Hachibei

The best yakitori you'll have. Very Japanese vibe. Must make a reservation at least 2 weeks in advance.

Sushi ii

¹ Per capita

Honolulu is the only place I've been to outside of Japan where you can walk into a random sushi restaurant and it will likely be fresh and good. This was our favorite of the many places we tried because of its casualness (it's in a strip mall) and quality.

Sushi Sho

If you've got \$300 to drop on a meal, this is the place to do it. It's a 7 person counter in a cozy den on the second floor of the Ritz. Every piece of sushi was incredible. The chef was very funny, engaging and laid back – not something you'd expect from a restaurant like that. For reservations, go in person as they rarely pick up their phone. Book two weeks out.

I-naba Honolulu

Bomb lunch spot for handmade udon and soba.

Lahaina Shaved ice

Like poke, there's lots of shaved ice in Honolulu and most of it is pretty good. This was our favorite. Get the Ube. The serving size is huge! Very shareable.

Mud Hen Water

Went here for a rainy Sunday brunch. The food and drinks were really delicious. I had such a good bloody mary and excellent banana pancakes. I want to go back and try more things. I also like this neighborhood because it feels a bit younger, hipper and more like a locals scene.

[DRINK]

Bar at the Halekulani

They make the best Mai tai I've ever had and the vibe is weird in a good way. The pool bar is chill, you need closed toe shoes for the inside bar. If you see a young man with a mullet and a bathrobe eating a steak with rice at the bar, don't engage. He is not well.

Bar Leather Apron

Cocktail bar that's on the second floor of an office building in downtown. The drinks were very good. Great date spot.

Alex's note on Hawaiian coffee beans: you'll come across Hawaiian beans and might be intrigued by the allure of a premium local product (2-3x the price of other beans). People will tell you they're special, but it's bullshit. I think they taste worse than something from Costa Rica or Kenya. So go ahead try the \$9 pour over with Kona beans, but don't say I didn't warn you.

[WAI]

Big wave surfing on the north shore

To spectate, not to do of course. Check the waves and local competition schedule online. Pack a poke lunch and head north to Waimea Bay or Pipeline to watch some crazies surf enormous waves.

Hawaii Surf Guru

Go out surfing with Kimo, the guru himself, at a local's only beach just off of Waikiki. He's a 60 something year old who learned how to surf at that very beach when he was just six. He'll talk to you about your inner child, the *wana wana*, and more. He also knows where the shallow parts are which is vital knowledge on those reefs. And you get instant wave cred by just being out with Kimo and co.

Surfing in Waikiki

Waikiki, the birthplace of surfing, is great for beginners because of the long gentle breaks. But be careful, there's also a lot of exposed reef and territorial locals. Our spot (in January) was [Rockpiles](#). Check Surfline for conditions.

Quality Surfboards

Most people who work there are incredibly cranky. However, if you're lucky, you may get one of the sweet teenagers or a very nice Swiss-German man. They have the best deals out there, you can get a surfboard for a week for not that much.

Bellows Beach Park

If you're looking for a nice beach in Honolulu, get out of Waikiki and go to Kailua on the east side of the island. The weather here is a bit more spotty in the winter but the beaches are much less crowded and nicer than anything you'll find in Waikiki. If you're with a friend who's an active military member then you have access to even better beaches and surf breaks at the nearby marine base.

[NEXT TIME]

Doris Duke's house

Didn't make it here because you have to make a reservation 1 month in advance but it looked cool.

Kaua'i

Kauai is Eden on earth. Lots of unspoiled nature free of snakes and mosquitos.

[TO DO]

Hanalei beach

One of the most stunning beaches I've ever seen. It feels like you've discovered a little slice of heaven at the end of the earth because of how undeveloped it is. But many people know about it as evidenced by looking at beachfront houses on Redfin.

Jacqueline's Hawaiian shirt shop

The woman who runs this shop is a certifiable nut. This isn't on google maps presumably because she thinks she's being tracked. She has some cool shirts and photos of her with celebrities - mostly Steven Tyler.

Waimea canyon state park

Absolutely breathtaking. Very treacherous hiking. You'll need real hiking shoes and even poles maybe. But you can also just drive up and take some pics.

[EAT AND DRINK]

Dark horse coffee

Great coffee and vibe.

Ama Ramen

The ramen's just decent but the setting is very pretty. Go before sunset.

A tip on driving in Kauai: Avoid driving at night! In Lilo & Stitch, the animated Disney movie set in Kauai, the protagonist's parents die in a rainy car accident. While driving in Kauai, you'll see how easy that this too could be your fate. It rains a lot in Kauai (the rainiest place on earth) and often suddenly in buckets. Most of the island is connected by two lane roads that are in excellent condition because they have to be.

[WAI]

Kalapaki Beach

Had a really idyllic few days surfing here. It's a very approachable beginner spot. You can rent a surfboard on the beach and just swim out. Nice, long waves and the water is not shallow at all.

It was also a really nice vibe, there were families, stand up paddlers, canoes, and everyone was really friendly. It was a welcome break after the territorial surf beach in Honolulu.

The Big Island (Hawai'i)

Some people just call it 'Big Island'.

[STAY]

Treehouse in Kailua-Kona

At first glance, Kona can feel like one big stretch of resorts and vacation homes and not really like a place where people live. It was ideal to explore the area while staying at this treehouse, away from all that. The house is located in a forest and it's always a little bit overcast and foggy, which I thought was really cool. The house was so thoughtfully designed and very cozy. It felt like being held by a cloud.

Volcano Rainforest Retreat

If you visit Volcanoes National Park (and I really think you should), this is a really lovely place to stay. You get a whole cottage to yourself. It's very peaceful and just the right amount of rustic. Make sure you book one of the cottages that have a Japanese soaking tub.

[TO DO]

Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

This is a huge park with many different wonderful walking and hiking routes. A person who lives there recommended that we go for a late night or early morning hike when you could see the difference in light, especially because Kīlauea was erupting when we were there. It was really cool to see the specks of bright red lava, even if from a distance.

Pua Ka 'Ilima 'O Kawaihae Cultural Surf Park

Historical surf spot (with photos of how it used to be and all that) and I think you can surf from there but there were no waves when we were there. It was a beautiful viewpoint, you just look out and see an expanse of ocean. We also saw whales in the distance. There were lots of locals, grilling, chilling and swimming. You can use a ladder to take a dip, there's a shower to rinse off too.

A note on surfing: We had a hard time figuring out the surfing situation on the Big Island. [Honoli'i Beach Park](#) was recommended to us by two locals but we didn't actually surf there because the one place we found to rent surfboards had odd business hours. Not much to do in Hilo otherwise though, so don't go out of your way. People also recommended [Pine Trees](#) and [Kahalu'u](#) on the Kona side, but it was really flat when we were there and looked very reefy.

[EAT]

[Pau Pizza](#)

This is one of those times when you find a really good slice in a surprising place. I don't know if it was because I missed pizza or if it was actually correct. It really hit the spot. This spot is in Waimea, which is a town that's worth checking out. It has the largest privately owned ranch in the US and a huge farmers market on Wednesday. It's a bit cooler there because of elevation, so be sure to have a sweater with you. If you didn't pack one, hit up [Surf Camp Waimea](#) next door.

[Punalu'u Bake Shop](#)

If it's on your way somewhere, stop by here and get a malasada. I hadn't had a good one till I crushed a few of these. Make sure to get ones that are filled or glazed, and not the flavored ones. It's also the "southernmost bakery in the US," if that's something that interests you.