

Design a Nordic Winter Wonderland // Escape to the Sun

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BIG

by NEAL McLENNAN

Time Island

With soaring volcanic peaks, endless black lava flows and the most superlative resorts, the Big Island of Hawaii is the 50th state at its most raw, impressive and luxurious.

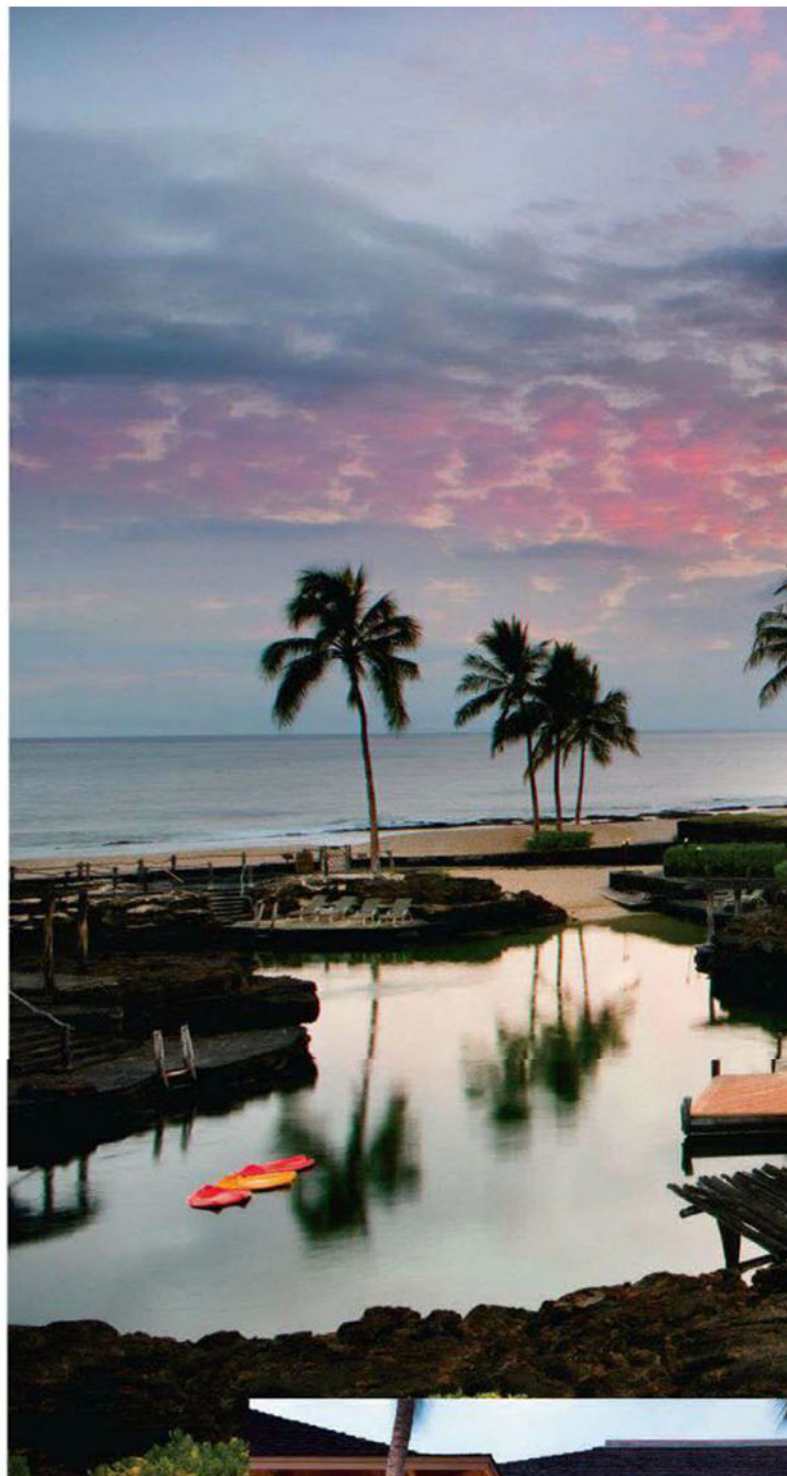
Hawaii Tourism Authority (HTA) / Tor Johnson

WELCOME TO THE WORLD'S BEST HOTEL



Trip Advisor says the Four Seasons Hualalai is the number-one hotel in the world, which basically means we all say it's the number-one hotel in the world, doesn't it? The property has only been open since 1996, but Tiger Woods has only been a golfer since 1996—and both have racked up the sort of accolades that have people in a historical frame of mind. I hang a left on the Queen Kaahumanu Highway and drive a short spell on a windy private road set atop black lava flow until I come to the resort's security gate. A name, a nod and suddenly the door to the kingdom slides open. "Welcome to Hualalai," the guard says as I slip by in what I assume is one of the few Nissan Sentras to grace the property. Ever.

The hotel is a low-slung affair of bungalows, where modified golf carts zip you from destination to destination on the sprawling 865-acre property. Shortly after unpacking, by which I mean dropping our bags and opening the zippers on them, my wife and I slide open the double sliding doors and stroll out toward the beach. Those expecting a Tahitian atoll dusted in icing sugar sand will be... underwhelmed. It's beautiful, of course, but sections of ever-present black lava outcroppings make it the sort of beach where you have to pick your spots (this is the case with nearly all the resorts on the Big Island, with only Mauna Kea having what would pass for beach in Wailea). But if we're not 10 feet from body boarding, that's okay, because we're 10 feet from some nesting sea turtles and another 10 feet from tide pools teeming with life. And all of it is pretty much ours, alone. Despite





Dive Site

The King's Pond at Hualalai—a 1,800,000 gallon swimmable aquarium—is one of the amenities, along with a climbing wall, two golf courses (clubhouse, below) and resident elder named Uncle Earl, that have made Hualalai Resort the unquestioned champ of Island lodging.



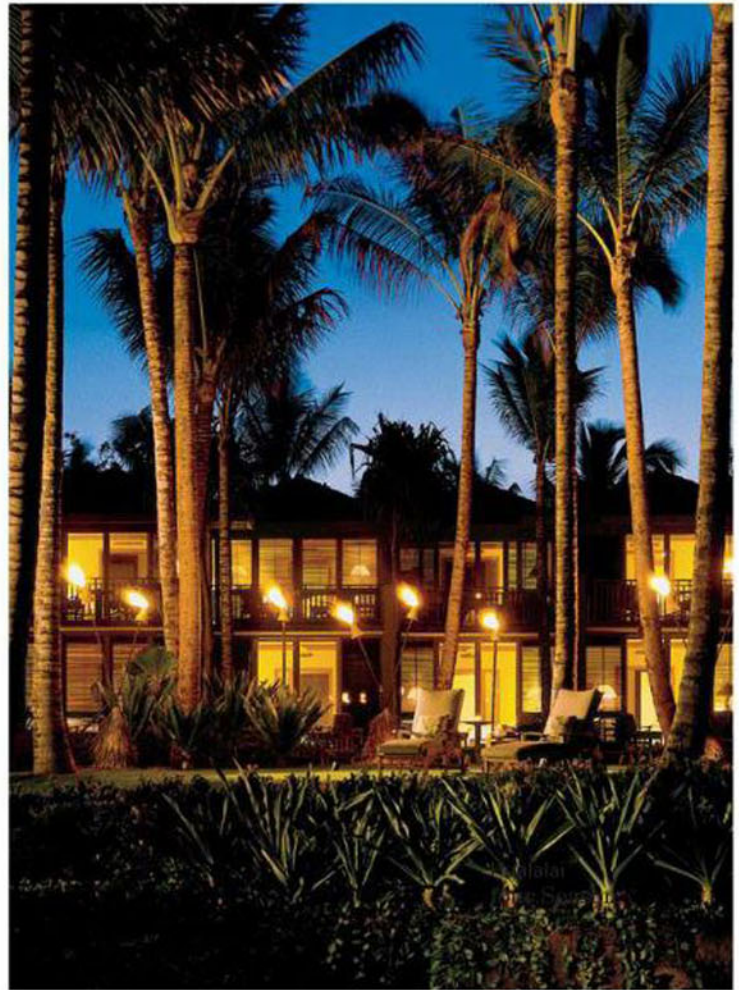
|| *“Cher, it turns out, just sold her home here. Not only is Charles Schwab a real person, but he lives here too.”*

the resort's 234 rooms being almost fully booked, we seem to have the beach and walkway to ourselves.

The hotel is actually the *affordable* option for Hualalai. Your other choice is to rent one of the private villas (*hualalai villasandhomes.com*) that are dotted throughout the property. After unpacking in a 3,000-square-foot "room," one is left to wonder what is above the "Best in the World." Cher, it turns out, just sold her home here. Not only is Charles Schwab a real person, but he lives here too. Edmonton Oilers owner Daryl Katz just secured a smoking-big place on the water. There is a private golf course—an amazing Tom Weiskopf design that's just for homeowners—and you never need a tee time. Homesites start at \$2,300,000, and a villa like the one I'm staying in is around \$4,500,000. It's so rarefied as to be laughable, but at the same time it makes me proud to be from the West. The Eastern equivalent to this, the Hamptons, is all posturing and pomp—here, there seems to be a law against not wearing flip-flops to dinner.

So is it the "Best in the World"? Well, everyone seems to be having the very best time of their lives, so I suppose that's one standard. But it's not the rooms, the villas, the golf, the climbing wall, the spin classes or the beach, or at least it's not just that. It's the vibe. It's the time saved not waiting around for a dinner reservation or a tennis court or anything. It's deciding you want to do something, a something that could be pretty much anything, and simply doing it.

If the best means immediately upon leaving I'm dying to go back, then yeah, it is.



Don Riddle

You may think you know the Big Island. You know the volcanoes; you know it's so large that all the other islands fit inside it; you might have caught a glimpse of the island when you did Maui's Road to Hana. But if you haven't been here, know this: it's simultaneously the most rugged and the most luxurious of the Hawaiian Islands. It does beaches and altitude equally well. The world's best astrologist and the world's richest hedge fund managers call it home. And until we strolled out of Kona's beautiful open-air excuse for an airport, we realized what we thought we knew was just a slice of what it really is: great.



Things You Need to Know About the Big Island

1 Of the 10 most expensive homes in the Islands, nine are here People think of Oahu's Diamond Head (home to Thomas Magnum, P.I.) or Maui's Wailea as the top dogs, but it's actually Hualalai and its neighbour, Kukio, that are the most rarefied. The 3-acre, 18,500 sq/ft **Kukio residence of Michael Dell** (yes that Dell) was assessed at \$61,800,000. Dollars, not



lira. Charles Schwab's house at Hualalai, a keeping it real 4-bedroom—is a downright modest \$23,100,000.



2 But it's not all for millionaires Finding a restaurant the locals frequent (but not one so local that Howlies like you aren't welcome) is the holy grail of any Hawaii trip. That place is **Da Poke Shack** (dapokeshack.com). For \$12 you get a scoop of white rice and a quarter pound of ultra-fresh fresh tuna poke and a side. And if you're in pricey Waikoloa, the deli at the **Foodland Farms** grocery store (foodland.com) is a great bet for fresh food at decent prices.

5 The public beaches are

The waves at **Hapuna Beach** are awesome, and you should have a heavy dose of respect for them. But if you're cautious and follow the locals' lead, it's a great body-boarding beach. If it's too crowded, as it is during holidays, head to **Kuki'o Beach**, which, although it's on the Kukio Property, is required by Hawaiian law to grant the public access to all oceanfront. Simply pull up to the gate, indicate you want to head to the beach, and you'll be given a pass. The beach itself is tame—great for kids—but the mansions here are the draw.



6 It has the best bookstore between Portland and Tokyo

The cavernous **Kona Bay Books** (konabaybooks.com) is a tropical Powell's, holding everything from vintage design tomes to Japanese cocktail guides—there's even an entire section devoted to books on fondue. And if you like Stephen King, they have about a million copies of *Pet Semetary*.

3 Modern Hawaiian cuisine was invented here Peter Merriman pretty much brought locavorism to the Islands back in the late '80s, and it was **Merriman's** (merrimanshawaii.com) original space in upcountry Waimea that secured the chef's place in the firmament. (He now has a multi-restaurant empire throughout the Islands.) This out-of-the-way address is a tropical **Chez Panisse**: an obligatory culinary pilgrimage that still yields amazing memorable meals. Lunch, with dishes like a locally sourced niçoise salad (with large chunks of tuna), is the hidden deal at \$13—here, twice the quality and half the price of most resort options.

4 It's serious cowboy country In its heyday (circa 1913), the Parker Ranch sprawled over 500,000 acres, making it one of the biggest in the world. (It still clocks in at an 250,000.) They have a gift shop, but you're better off heading up to North Kona via the beautiful Kohala Mountain Road to get a feel of what it was like when cattle were king here. If you like the vibe, spend a few days at **Puakea Ranch** (puakearanch.com) near Hawi town in the north. It used to be part of the Parker Ranch, and now it's a luxe rustic property with four quaint on-site houses, each with their own pool, recently retrofitted. It has horses, fresh eggs you fetch yourself, and a Ralph Lauren Ranch vibe. A superlative and luxe antidote to the big resorts.



7 The volcanoes are popular because they're unspeakably awesome Everyone visits them, but everyone read *The Corrections* too, and that doesn't make it bad. If you're staying on the Island's west coast, start your day at **Tex Drive-In** (texdriveinhawaii.com), a roadside stop just past Waimea, for a world-famous Portuguese doughnut. As for the volcano, take a hike: the **Kilauea Iki** is a great one for feeling the heat and smelling the sulphur. You'll be glad you did. *ML*

Puakea Ranch: Giselle Thompson