



A Complete Honolulu Travel Guide

The Best Places to Stay in Honolulu

Waikiki Beach is the jewel of Honolulu. It's a fun and vibrant area with outdoor restaurants, shopping, and of course, the world-famous beach. Parking can often be a headache, so I recommend staying within walking distance of the beach.

You'll find that Waikiki has the highest concentration of hotels than anywhere else on the island, so you're bound to find something for every taste and budget.

Sheraton Princess Kaiulani Waikiki Beach Resort

One of our favorite hotels is the [Sheraton Princess Kaiulani Waikiki Beach Resort](#). It is located on the former estate of Princess Kaiulani, just across the street from Waikiki Beach. The rooms are spacious with amazing ocean views from the outdoor balcony. The resort is family-friendly with an outdoor pool and daily activities.

Royal Hawaiian

The [Royal Hawaiian](#) is an iconic hotel that was built on the shores of Waikiki in 1927. It is known as the "Pink Palace of the Pacific", and after almost a century, it is still considered one of the best luxury resorts in Honolulu.

Moana Surfrider

The [Westin Moana Surfrider](#) is another beautiful historic hotel. We especially love the private beach area and beachside pool.

Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort

The [Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort](#) is great for families, and even features an impressive fireworks show every Friday night.

Halepuna Waikiki by Halekulani

If you're looking for a smaller boutique hotel, I have a feeling you'll love the beautiful rooms, property, and amenities at [Halepuna Waikiki by Halekulani](#).

The Best Places to Eat in Honolulu

There are so many delicious places to eat in Honolulu, but here are just a few of our favorites.

Scratch Kitchen

This is one of our favorite places to grab brunch. They are known for their signature Milk & Cereal Pancakes.

We also love their Braised Pork Belly Benny and Deep-fried Deviled Eggs.

Marugame Udon

Although this is a chain restaurant that has locations on the mainland as well, we always love stopping by after shopping at the International Marketplace. Their steaming bowls of handcrafted udon noodles always hit the spot!

Leonard's Bakery

This bakery is a Honolulu institution! Leonard's is THE place to go for the best malasadas on the island. These sugar-dusted, pillowy-soft Portuguese donuts literally melt in your mouth. The vanilla custard-filled malasada puffs are my favorite!

Monkeypod Kitchen

Monkeypod Kitchen is a farm-to-table restaurant featuring fresh and flavorful dishes using locally sourced ingredients. We have always loved everything we've tried on the menu, and it is also one of our [favorite places to eat in Maui](#).

Duke's Waikiki

Duke's is another iconic Hawaiian restaurant with a few locations on other islands. It is one of our [favorite places to eat in Kauai](#) and is known for its breezy outdoor dining and legendary Hula Pie!

Uncle Clay's House of Pure Aloha

This is one of our favorite places to get shave ice on the island. They make their homemade syrups using fresh and natural ingredients, and you can really taste the difference! My favorite is the Strawberry Dream made with homemade strawberry syrup and topped with sliced strawberries, mochi condensed milk, and Tahitian vanilla ice cream.

For more recommendations, see our guide, [15 Best Places to Eat on Oahu](#).

The Best Things to Do in Honolulu

Honolulu is a great home base for exploring the south side of Oahu. Here are our top recommendations for things to do in the city and its surrounding area.

Relax at Waikiki Beach

Obviously, you'll want to spend time relaxing on the shores of the world-famous Waikiki Beach, taking a [surf lesson](#), embarking on a catamaran snorkel tour, or enjoying lunch at a beachfront cafe.

We picked up pool floats at the corner souvenir shop, and our kids had the best time floating in the protected swimming area.

The paved boardwalk is nice for evening walks, and they have a great park just south of the beach with picnic tables and massive banyan trees.

Visit Pearl Harbor National Memorial

Every visitor to the island needs to visit Pearl Harbor at least once.

The memorial complex includes the *USS Arizona* Memorial, a museum, a walking path with interpretive exhibits, and a Remembrance Circle.

It is free to visit the memorial complex, but the *USS Arizona* Memorial can only be reached by boat, and you'll need to [reserve a ticket](#) in advance to secure your spot.

You can also tour the nearby *USS Missouri Battleship*, the *USS Bowfin Submarine*, and the Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum for an additional charge.

Tour Iolani Palace

You may be surprised to learn that there is a royal palace in the United States, I know I was!

The 140-year-old Iolani Palace is the only official royal residence in the US, and it is open for guided tours.

The 4-story, 7,000 square foot palace is stunning, and the history is equally as fascinating.

One of the most interesting things we learned on the tour was that in 1893, the monarchy was illegally overthrown, and Queen Lili'uokalani was imprisoned in her room for 8 months. During that time, she hand-stitched this beautiful quilt. Each square tells a little story and a bit of history.

Watch Sunset from Tantalus Lookout

Tantalus Lookout is one of my favorite places on the whole island to watch the sunset.

The lookout point is located up a winding road at the top of Puu Ualakaa State Park, about 20 minutes from downtown Honolulu.

The grassy hill sits high above the city with panoramic views of the twinkling city lights as the sun sinks below the horizon.

Hike the Olomana Trail to Three Peaks

This 4.5-mile out-and-back trail is challenging, but it leads to an incredible view of the iconic Three Peaks.

The trail follows a steady incline through the dense forest until you reach the base of the first peak and start climbing above the tree line.

You'll be using ropes and doing a little rock climbing as you make your way to the summit of the first peak.

The trail continues to the summit of the second and third peaks, but it becomes quite dangerous and even deadly after this point, so I recommend turning back after the first peak.

For more information, see our [Olomana Trail Hiking Guide](#).

Snorkel at Hanauma Bay State Park

Hanauma Bay State Park is a picturesque bay located within an ancient volcanic crater, and it offers some of the best snorkeling on the island.

Visiting Hanauma Bay requires some extra planning as you'll need to [make a reservation](#) in advance. It is only open Wednesdays through Sundays from 6:45 am until 4 pm, with the last entry at 1:30 pm.

Visit Ho'omaluhia Botanical Garden

In my opinion, Ho'omaluhia Botanical Garden is one of the most beautiful and underrated spots on Oahu.

The 400-acre garden is set against the dramatic Koolau Mountain Range and features imported tropical plants from around the world.

There is a 4.2-mile scenic drive through the park, as well as several hiking trails, and a catch-and-release fishing pond.

For more information about the gardens and other hidden gems, see our guide [11 Secret\(ish\) Spots on Oahu](#).

Hike the Lulumahu Falls Trail

Surprisingly, Oahu doesn't have as many waterfall hikes as the other Hawaiian islands, but Lulumahu Falls is one of the more popular ones.

The beautiful 1.6-mile trail will take you through a dense bamboo forest and alongside the Lulumahu Stream until you reach the waterfall and refreshing swimming hole.

Hike the Judd Trail to Jackass Ginger Pool

The Judd Trail is located near the Lulumahu Falls trailhead, so it's easy to combine both hikes on the same day.

The 1-mile loop trail is beautiful as it leads through a mixed forest of guava trees, Norfolk pines, and bamboo. It's easy to see why this area was chosen as a filming location for *Jumangi*.

What makes this trail extra fun is that it leads to Jackass Ginger Pool. With a name like that, you know it's going to be good! This swimming hole has small waterfalls, a natural waterslide, rope swings, and cliff jumping.

For more trail recommendations, see our guide, [8 of the Best Hikes on Oahu](#).

Stop at the Nu'uuanu Pali Lookout

The Nu'uuanu Pali Lookout is a quick roadside stop along the scenic Pali Highway, near Lulumahu Falls and the Judd Trail.

It's worth stopping to see one of the most scenic viewpoints over the rugged windward coast of Oahu.

Not only is the view breathtaking, but the area is also steeped in history. This historic landmark was where the Battle of Nuuanu was fought in 1795.

Hike to Maunawili Falls

If you're up for an adventure, the Maunawili Falls trail can be accessed from the parking lot of the Nu'uana Pali Lookout.

The original [Maunawili Falls Trail](#) was a fairly easy 2.8-mile out-and-back trail, but that trail has been undergoing an improvement project for the past several years and still does not have a finish date.

The good news is that you can still visit the waterfall, but you'll need to do so via the challenging [6-mile trail](#) that starts at the Pali Lookout.

It's worth the effort to reach this beautiful waterfall and swimming hole. It was rainy and muddy the day we hiked to it, but the water is usually much clearer than this.

Watch the Surfers at China Walls

Koko Kai Mini Beach Park, better known as "China Walls", got its name from the quarter-mile-long wave that resembles the Great Wall of China.

At the park, you'll find lava cliffs where you can sit and watch the surfers. On big surf days, this massive swell can be deadly and should only be attempted by experienced surfers. When the water is rough, you'll also want to stay far away from the cliff's edge, as the waves have been known to knock people into the water.

On calm days, this is a fun place to cliff jump into the placid water. Just use extreme caution as the weather and waves can quickly change.

Visit the Byodo-In Temple

The Byodo-In Temple is one of the most photogenic buildings on the island.

The architecture of this small-scale replica of the 950-year-old Byodo-in Buddhist Temple in Japan is stunning, but the scene is extra beautiful as it is set against the Koolau Mountain Range.

The open-air temple is not an active place of worship, but visitors are welcome to walk inside to see the massive Buddha statue. You can also stroll around the peaceful gardens, see the colorful koi ponds, and ring the bon-sho (sacred bell).

Hike Diamond Head Crater

The Diamond Head Summit Trail is a 1.6-mile out-and-back trail that takes you to the summit of Diamond Head Crater.

The trail can be challenging with some elevation gain and a steep staircase, but it is worth it for one of the best viewpoints in Honolulu!

Hike the Makapuu Lighthouse Trail

Makapuu Lighthouse Trail is one of the best family-friendly hikes on Oahu. The trail is 2 miles out-and-back, and is paved the entire way.

You'll see spectacular coastal views along the way, and can even spot whales during migration season from November through April.

There is a viewing platform at the top of the trail with panoramic views over the Kaiwa Scenic Shoreline and the Makapuu Lighthouse.

If you've watched the 2004 movie *50 First Dates*, you may recognize this spot as the filming location when Lucy (Drew Barrymore) and Henry (Adam Sandler) share one of their first kisses.

The trail is exposed and can get quite hot, so I recommend doing this hike during golden hour and sunset. For more tips and recommendations, see our [Guide to Hiking the Makapuu Lighthouse Trail](#).

Visit Halona Blowhole & Beach Cove

The Halona Blowhole and Halona Beach Cove are a quick roadside stop between Diamond Head Crater and Makapuu Lighthouse.

You'll find a viewing deck where you can see water spraying through the lava tube blowhole when the waves are big.

The Halona Beach Cove is a secluded little beach that can be accessed from the same parking lot. This small stretch of sand was the filming location of Whitecap Bay on *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and was also featured in the 1953 Hollywood classic, *From Here to Eternity*.

Boogie Board at Sherwoods Beach

Waimanalo Bay Park, also known as Sherwoods Beach, is one of our favorite underrated beaches on Oahu!

It is such a beautiful beach with soft sand, a forest of ironwood trees, and views of the Makapuu Lighthouse cliffs. But the best part is that it's not nearly as crowded as other popular Oahu beaches.

The beach spreads across 3 miles on the windward side of Oahu, although the northern portion is part of the Bellows Field Air Force Station and can only be accessed by military personnel and their families.

It also shares the same shoreline as the popular Lanikai Beach, which is often touted as one of the most beautiful beaches on Oahu.

We also love this beach because it is one of the best beaches for boogie boarding. Just use caution and common sense if the waves are too big during the winter swells.

Final Thoughts

There is so much more to Honolulu than just Waikiki Beach! I hope this guide will inspire you to spend at least a few days exploring the hiking trails, visiting historic sites, relaxing on hidden beaches, soaking in the views, and eating your way through the city!

