

Travel and Adventure: Fun, offbeat things to do on Hawaii's Big Island

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

KOHALA, Hawaii - OK, so you've already toured the volcano area, taken a helicopter ride over the mountains and valleys of Hawaii's youngest and largest island, swam and played with the dolphins, and enjoyed the gorgeous beaches and golf courses. What to do next?

MADE IN HAWAII - Visitors to the Waimea Hawaiian Homestead Farmers Market look at a wide variety of local products such as produce, flowers, baked goods, potted plants and crafts. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. KING OF KONA VILLAGE - Johnno Jackson is the developer who transformed an old fishing village into Kona Village Resort. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen NO DISTRACTIONS - Kona Village Resort is in a secluded beachfront area along the Big Island's Kohala coast. Guests stay in thatched-roofed bungalows with no radio, telephone or TV. Photo courtesy of Kona Village Resort. Or maybe this is your first visit to the Big Island and you're looking for something unique to add to the usual touristy jaunts.

Three suggestions:

WAIMEA HAWAIIAN HOMESTEAD FARMERS MARKET

On Saturdays - particularly the first Saturday of the month - enjoy blending with the locals at this unique farmers market, about a 40-minute drive from the Kohala coast. Here some 30 vendors (up to 50 on the first Saturday) sell handcrafts, baked goods, plants and produce, many from area farms, that range from delicious mangoes to malassadas (more about them in a minute).

"This started about 12 years ago by Hawaiian homesteaders," explained food writer Joan Namkoong, a resident of charming and tiny Waimea (population 7,000), "which has always been a farming and ranching community."

During the mid-1800s, it was the area's breadbasket; the region's dairies were later known for their butter. And in 2006, the farmers market expanded.

"We invited more people in, and it has become a big community event," Namkoong explained. "Everyone wants to come here because it's such a great little community. Most everything you see is grown on the island. Because of the weather in this area you can grow lots of citrus and different flowers that you can't grow elsewhere.

"The lettuce is really good!" she said with a smile.

As I learned, so are the strawberries, sweet corn and durian. In fact, chefs from the Kohala coast's high-end restaurants purchase the region's fresh, organic ingredients, and a few even man their own booths selling their mouthwatering items.

One is the family run Nakamoto Farm Booth, where Joung Nakamoto - a cook at the Hilton Waikoloa - and her husband Bob keep busy serving breakfast comprised of their farm items to a hungry crowd. People line up for omelets made with eggs from the Waimea Hawaiian Fresh Egg Farm and traditional Hawaiian food, including kimchee, cone sushi and saimin. According to Namkoong, author of the "Food Lover's Guide to Honolulu," saimin is "Hawaii's favorite soup: Chinese egg noodles served in a steaming bowl of Japanese broth, topped with green onions, char siu, luncheon meat and fish cake. It's like chicken noodle soup, only much better ... It is unique to Hawaii, found nowhere else in the world."

On the sunny morning that I wandered the farmers market, I noticed two relaxed people stretched out, enjoying \$1-per-minute lomi-lomi massages in one tent. Others were purchasing the eat-on-the-spot international fare, which includes, of course, the requisite poi, pineapples, coconuts, papaya, Big Island beef, pork teriyaki and tamales, French crepes, Indian food, pizza and malassadas. I learned that these are egg-size Portuguese doughnuts without the hole.

"Very popular in Hawaii," Namkoong explained.

There are also locally grown flowers and handmade crafts, including beeswax candles and "coconut boys." I purchased a few brightly colored sari beach wraps for souvenir gifts, and some organic Macadamia Nut Blossom Honey from Whendi Puett Grad ("The Queen Bee"), whose husband hails from the fourth-generation Big Island Bees beekeeping family.

"I come here as often as I can," said Lynette Kanda, a longtime customer who frequently flies over from her native Honolulu to enjoy a farmers market weekend. "This is my favorite of all the islands. It's such a powerful island; I think it has the most mana, maybe because the volcano is more active. It's a sacred place."

"The farmers market first Saturdays have really become the event," summed up Namkoong.

KONA VILLAGE RESORT

This is no doubt the most unique hotel in the area. Guests stay in 125 "hales" (pronounced "ha-lay" - individual, thatched-roof bungalows) that reflect the Polynesian architectural style found throughout the Pacific. Formerly a Hawaiian fishing village until the mid-1930s, this 82-acre area was the vision of developer J.M. "Johnno" Jackson, a Texas oil company geologist, World War II pilot and later California oil millionaire.

Sort of the Donald Trump of his day, in the late 1950s he fell in love with the secluded beachfront area - which reminded him of his beloved Polynesia, where he had sailed his schooner - and wanted to preserve its beauty and simplicity. There are no radios, phones or televisions.

"You'd be amazed you can live without CNN for a week," exclaimed Vicky Kometani, resort spokeswoman.

In 1965, after several years of resistance, toil, headache and expense, Kona Village officially opened.

"It was a really new concept then," explained Lei "Auntie Lei" Lightner, a longtime employee and my guide, as she toured me around in a golf cart. "People used to laugh at him."

It took Jackson three years just to clear the land, a portion of which was hard, barren lava. He had to drill for water, create a sewage system, install a power plant - basically, he had to be self-sufficient since the area was rather primitive and isolated. And he encountered many obstacles: This was prior to the mid-1970s opening of the Kona airport and the main Highway 19, so building supplies had to be brought in by boat or air dropped.

Jackson eventually opened a 2,000-foot runway (now closed) to fly in workers and guests. He planted the bougainvillea, palm and coconut trees. The hale roofs are recycled coconut fronds, and the Do Not Disturb signs placed outside doors are dried coconuts.

"It was like Adventureland for him!" exclaimed Lightner.

And even today Kona Village remains an adventure for repeat visitors, such as Darlene and Jim Halberson of Seattle, married 51 years, who've been coming here annually for a week since 1985.

"It's addictive," Darlene said. "It has a little more of Old Hawaii - there's not much to do, but that's all right. It's not touristy."

"During 1930-1935, the last Hawaiians left the area," Lightner explained. "It was rich with fish ponds and had been a large fishing village. Jackson wanted a dream paradise for people here in the U.S.A."

He discovered many of the native house sites, shelter caves, burial sites, and petroglyphs - ancient carvings in the lava fields - and lava tubes. And he wanted to preserve them.

Due to financial issues, in 1966 Jackson reluctantly turned over the property to other owners, several of whom have come and gone through the years, making their own changes and additions. But it still has maintained Jackson's unique dream and vision. After an absence of 19 years, he returned in 1985 for the 20th anniversary of its opening, to weeklong cultural festivities honoring him and the current and former employees.

"Jackson (who died in 1991) had definite respect for the land, the history," Lightner noted. "The land was not exploited, was not destroyed. The cultural concept of preservation was practiced."

BEHIND-THE-HOUSE TOUR, HILTON WAIKOLOA VILLAGE

After you've frolicked with the dolphins that live in a lagoon at this resort, you can take a below-the-scenes tunnel tour, observing the inner workings of this massive hotel, which boasts 1,243 rooms and a convention hall. It's the largest private employer on the island, with 2,000 employees, including vendors.

A 1.4-mile corridor leads past engineering and plumbing departments, a food and beverage storage area, a banquet department, the main kitchen (which served 14,000 meals one day), the employee cafe, a flower shop and a luggage-sorting area, much like an airport's, that distributes the right bag to the right room.

Out of sight of hotel guests, employees ride on tiny motorized vehicles through the narrow passageways, observing traffic signs. The laundry staff not only cleans employee uniforms, napkins, tablecloths and towels, but with the help of massive machines they dry, press and fold 700 sheets per hour. Outside, maintenance engineers keep the hotel's two trams and the canal boats running, and each landscaper is responsible for maintaining two acres of the 62-acre property.

"They take great pride in their work," said my guide, concierge Denise Kanda. "And the Wildlife Department, which also monitors our wild Hawaiian green sea turtles, takes care of everything with fins and flippers - except the dolphins."

IF YOU GO

Kohala Coast Resort Association: www.kohalacoastresorts.com.

Waimea Hawaiian homestead farmers market: Two miles east of Waimea Town, Kuhio Hale Building, Mamalahoa Highway (55 mile marker on Hwy. 19). Every Saturday, 7 a.m. to noon.

Kona Village Resort: www.konavillage.com.

Hilton Waikoloa Village: www.hiltonwaikoloavillage.com. Behind-the-House tours Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 10 a.m.; open only to hotel guests, no children under 12.

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