

# Luxury USA

## Say aloha to the coolest, wildest island in Hawaii

Kauai's lush jungle and idyllic sands are best explored from the Ko'a Kea hotel, says **Helena de Bertodano**

At first the only signs of life on this remote, idyllic beach are the turtle tracks. There are no surfers in the waves breaking gently off the shore here on the northern coast of Kauai, no footprints in the wet sand, no boats on the horizon. As far as the eye can see there is only crystal water, golden sand, black lava rock and dense green foliage.

I take a seat on an old wooden swing that hangs from a tropical almond tree, and as I do I get the distinct feeling that I am being watched. I look round and glimpse movement: a vehicle is quietly pulling away, up an unseen track. Then I notice two camouflaged tents in shadow beneath a tree.

Halfway up the tree-tangled cliff is a sign pinned to a trunk. I can just make out the words: "Thank you for not trespassing." To be clear, the beach — like all beaches in Hawaii — is public property, although it is a tricky hike down an unmarked path to get here. It seems unlikely that anyone could make it up the precipitous slope to the sign, but the new owner is not taking any chances. He is, after all, one of the richest and most famous men on Earth: Mark Zuckerberg, the owner of Meta (formerly Facebook).

Perhaps it is not surprising that the man who has connected three billion people now wants to escape them. Over the past few years he has bought three large plots on Kauai and now owns at least 1,300 acres of the island — more than the local government does. He is not the only outsider to find Kauai hugely attractive. Dozens of Hollywood movies, from *King Kong* to *Avatar*, have used it as a backdrop, and it has long been a favourite of celebrities. Pierce Brosnan owns a home here, and Dwayne Johnson got married here.

The oldest island in the Hawaiian chain, Kauai is cloaked in lush jungle, with jagged mountain steeples framing deep gorges and innumerable waterfalls, rainbows often dancing in and out. It has a vast canyon, nicknamed the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. Four fifths of the island is uninhab-



ited and inaccessible. Roads are mostly single lane, and shared with chickens (the feral population is out of control after Hurricane Iniki blew open most of the coops in 1992). I lost count of the number of times I stopped my car to let a bird and her brood cross the road in front of me. There are special crossing points for nene, geese unique to Hawaii and once almost extinct.

I am here with my 16-year-old daughter, who has no interest in anything involving the words "hike" or "view". I did trick her into accompanying me on a drive to a viewpoint overlooking Waimea Canyon

by saying we were on our way to a thrift store. "I'm not getting out of the car," she declared when we reached the top. Not a bad decision — rain clouds shrouded much of the view. On the way back down we did visit the thrift store in the pretty bohemian town of Hanapepe, where she snagged a remarkable pile of vintage clothes for \$16.

In other words, there is something here for everyone. And the beautiful boutique hotel where we are staying ticks every box for both of us. Long known as the island's most romantic hotel, the Ko'a Kea Resort



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One of Kauai's north shore beaches

on Poipu Beach has undergone a \$5-million refurbishment and now rivals the very best on Hawaii's larger islands. Boutique in style but with a modern vibe, the 121 rooms are built in a horseshoe shape around a lobby that looks directly over a tropical pool to the ocean beyond.

When I open the door to our room — with the wooden disc that serves as an eco-friendly key — all I see at first is wall-to-wall ocean. As I step out onto the lanai, or porch, the crash of the waves is so loud it drowns out any other noise. But inside, the design is calming and playful, predominantly soft browns, golds and greens, echoing the colours of the island.

The railings of the lanai are shaped like interlocking leaves. Impressive headboards are decorated in capiz shell and coral: the name Ko'a Kea means "white coral" in Hawaiian. Capiz shells hang from light fixtures. The rooms used to have a more corporate feel, with swirly patterned carpets and aggressive colours. If I were to pick one nit — and frankly, it's not easy — I would ask why it is necessary to have a television screen wider than the bed. It feels like sleeping in a cinema.

Several restaurants are within walking distance — one of the best for seafood is the plantation-style Merriman's — but Red Salt, the hotel restaurant, is gloriously inventive. For breakfast we ordered pineapple soufflé pancakes: clouds of burnished egg-white soufflé arrived studded with pineapple and covered in a light caramelised sauce, scattered with orchids. At dinner the menu includes seared monk-chong, a delicate pinkish-white fish. Cocktails are mixed tableside: I tried a Poipu Surf, which combined mango vodka, passion fruit and sparkling wine. It hit every spot so efficiently that I found myself ordering the drink the next night.

Even the 24-hour shop next to the lobby is unlike any other hotel store — it

offers almost nothing except visually stunning waterproof bags from the Aloha Collection, founded by two Hawaiian women. They start at \$20, a percentage of the profits going to local conservation, and adorn the lobby, becoming part of the design.

It is at night-time that the place really comes alive. Local musicians play at sunset, while torch flares and fire pits light up the lawn. Early morning is special too. At sunrise a yoga class is held, overlooking the ocean. We lie on towels on the grass, wearing headphones while the instructor Terry speaks softly into a headset so as not to disturb sleeping guests: "The aloha that is within me salutes the aloha that is within you. Enjoy this beautiful day."

It is 7.30am when the class finishes, so I set off down the beach and nearly trip over what looks like a black slippery rock — actually a resting monk seal. Luckily Dave, wearing a T-shirt saying: "Monk Seal Response Team", is standing watch, diverting early-morning joggers. Like many residents of the island he first came here on holiday, from Colorado. "It's the typical Kauai story: you come for a week, then two weeks, then you retire and come for a month. And then you go home and get depressed. So we decided to move here."

He spends several hours a week monitoring the endangered seals, and knows this one well. "He's a pup, born in August 2020. Why he chooses this beach when there are so many isolated ones, I do not know." Further down the beach another retired person, Cindy from Kansas, is standing watch over three green turtles.

I rent a car from an excellent mom-and-pop company called Aloha Car Rentals, which is wonderfully hassle-free: there's no paperwork before I am handed a reliable



Ko'a Kea Resort on Poipu Beach



The resort's pool

### 3 hot hotels in Hawaii

#### Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa, Kauai

Built into cliffs overlooking a dramatic coastline, the handsome Grand Hyatt has 604 rooms — from some balconies you can see the cliff from which Harrison Ford jumped in *Six Days, Seven Nights*. Fresh and saltwater swimming pools are spread over acres of space, and an impressive water slide is a big hit with squealing kids. Among the several excellent restaurants is Stevenson's Library, a flamboyant sushi spot with an old-fashioned club feel — it's named after Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent much of his time in Hawaii. Or dine on local seafood in the open-walled Tidepools, set among koi ponds overlooking the sea. **Details** Room-only doubles from £670 ([grandhyattkauai.com](http://grandhyattkauai.com))

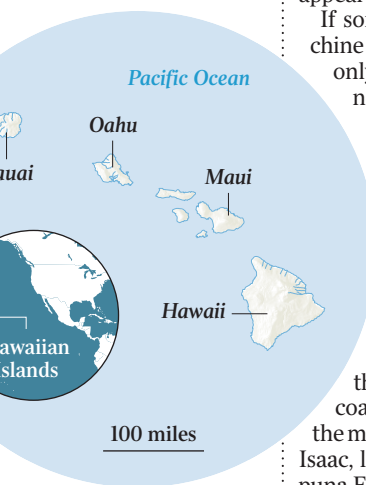
#### Andaz Maui at Wailea Resort, Maui

This beachfront affair is serene, with four infinity pools on different levels cascading down towards the sea. Everyone working here goes above and beyond — hearing of an interest in fishing, say, pool attendants might take you off to the best spot with bamboo rods, leading the chef to send seasoning and salads to your villa so you can cook your catch on its Weber grill. There is private access to the beach, where you can take guided outrigger canoe tours and paddleboarding lessons. **Details** Room-only doubles from £787 ([andazmaui.com](http://andazmaui.com))

#### Waimea Plantation Cottages, Kauai

Built in the early 1900s, these 60-odd refurbished one to five-bedroom sugar-plantation cottages are on the more remote west side of Kauai, scattered among coconut palms. Close to Waimea Canyon, they have old-style porches and lead down to a black-sand beach, lovely for walks but not suitable for swimming. There is a swimming pool and a restaurant, as well as fully equipped kitchens, plantation-era furnishings and multiple hammocks. **Details** Room-only cottages from £262 ([coasthotels.com/waimea-plantation-cottages](http://coasthotels.com/waimea-plantation-cottages))

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#### Need to know

Helena de Bertodano was a guest of Ko'a Kea Resort on Poipu Beach, which has B&B doubles from £576 ([meritagecollection.com](http://meritagecollection.com)), and Island Helicopters, with tours from £193 ([islandhelicopters.com](http://islandhelicopters.com)). Fly to Lihue via Los Angeles

ble four-wheel-drive vehicle. (At the end of my stay I park it in an agreed spot, leaving the keys in the glovebox.) Nature comes first everywhere on the Garden Isle, as it is known. The pace is slow. Near a shaved-ice stand a rooster is perched on a handwritten sign that reads "Slow yourself down" — less an exhortation to cars and more an appeal to the psyche.

If something breaks (say, the acai machine at the local café) it can be repaired only when a technician flies in from neighbouring Maui. My daughter, an acai addict, asks for updates every day. "Maybe tomorrow," she is told. On our last morning, the machine is fixed. The acai, scattered with bee pollen and goji berries, is, of course, exceptional.

It is only on the last day, when we take a tour with Island Helicopters, that I truly understand the magic of Kauai. We soar over the mountains and fly low along the coastline past hidden caves and over the mouth of the Hanalei river. Our pilot, Isaac, lands at the foot of the Manawaiopuna Falls, famous as a backdrop in *Jurassic Park*. He reckons he has landed here at least 10,000 times. "And it never grows old," he says, watching in awe as water hurtles down 120m or more.

There is so much rain on Kauai that the waterfall never dries up. "One of the wettest places on earth," declares a sign at the top of Mount Waialeale. The unpredictability of the weather feeds into the phlegmatic local spirit — and explains the extreme lushness of the island. But the rain is usually brief and tropical, the sun not far behind.

It is said that Kauai is like Maui was two or three decades ago, relatively unscathed by tourism. So visit soon before it changes. Or before Zuckerberg buys the whole island.