



# ONCE AROUND THE BIG ISLAND



Story by Willie Weir

Photos by Willie Weir & Kat Marriner

*Clockwise from top left: Ki'i (wood carvings of ancient gods) look over the City of Refuge; camping in the glow of Kilauea; Waipio Valley lookout; pedaling along an old sugar plantation rail bed; a gold dust day gecko; plumeria flower, as fragrant as it is beautiful.*

## I'D NEVER BEEN TO HAWAII.

Wait — that's not completely true. I was once on the tarmac of the Honolulu airport on my way back from a bike trip in New Zealand. Without ever visiting, I had already deemed Hawaii too expensive and too touristy.

I'm also not a beach person. My wife, Kat, can vouch that I'm good for about three minutes of lying surfside. I've never been a good swimmer (I sink), my Irish/Scottish/German skin doesn't tan (it reddens), and I don't like tropical drinks (bourbon, please).

So why did we pack our bikes and gear for a month-long trip around the Big Island? To be honest, another bike trip had fallen through and we had just enough frequent flier miles to get to Hawaii.

I have to admit, the more I studied the map of the Big Island, the more intrigued I became. There were more cycling opportunities than I'd imagined, and there were campgrounds too. Campgrounds were important because we didn't have enough money in our budget to stay in pricey hotels and B&Bs for a month.

Then the budget bomb hit in the form of news that a dengue fever outbreak had closed the first two campgrounds where we had planned to pitch our tent. How many more campgrounds would be closed by the time we arrived? Should we cancel our trip?

We put out the word via emails and social media, "Hey, friends. Do you have family, ex-lovers, or acquaintances on the Big Island who would be willing to allow a couple of frugal cyclists to pitch a tent?"

We got responses! Our dentist friend had family there. There were a few WarmShowers hosts sprinkled about. Another friend had a friend who could possibly put us in touch with her friends who had a beekeeping business on the island.

Our budgetary panic subsided.

Hawaii has a dry side (Kona) and a wet side (Hilo). We flew into Kona and pedaled counterclockwise around the island.

We stayed a couple of nights at Uncle Billy's Hotel, which allowed us to assemble our bikes, pack up our gear, and ease into island life. Kailua-Kona is the tourist hub and the birthplace of Ironman. We saw a whole lot of spandex and aerobars. Racks and panniers? Not so much.

On the third morning, we pedaled out

of town and avoided the busy highway by hugging the coast. There was a price to pay, however. The main highway gradually climbs 1,500 feet on its way to Captain Cook. We had to make up that elevation in just a couple of miles. The pitch of the streets heading up to the main highway reached crazy steep. They're the kind of hills you want to encounter after you've pedaled hundreds of miles — not 20.

We were within a quarter-mile of the main highway and running on empty. What had looked like a boat repair business became one of the best food stops on our journey. Sun Dried Specialties must rely on word of mouth because their sign can barely be read from the street. A nondescript building leads to a no-frills counter with several bowls of fresh poke. This classic Hawaiian raw fish salad comes mixed with green onions, sesame seeds, soy sauce, chili peppers, and sesame oil, all served on a bed of cabbage or rice. Fortified, we climbed the last stretch to the highway and within minutes were coasting downhill with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean while breathing in the fragrance of a sea of flowers. We camped on private property that had been graciously offered to us and spent the next day exploring Pu'uuhonua O Hōnaunau National Park and the adjacent snorkeling paradise known as Two Step.

The route around the Big Island is a gentle roller coaster — up to a vantage point, down to a beach, up to the crest of a volcanic ridge, down to a small town near the sea.

Our request for places to camp led us to Biz and Phil's. Biz was born on Hawaii, the daughter of a sugar plantation manager. Phil was born on Long Island and fell in love with Hawaii when he was in the service. Their modest yet lovely home sits near the road down to South Point (the southernmost point on the island). Due to the lovely climate, the only shower is outside (Kat instantly fell in love with it). Biz has raised two daughters in this house, and only the month before we arrived, it had been connected to the electric grid.

We instantly bonded with these two delightful people. We chatted and laughed for hours. They felt like family (in a good way). We pitched our tent on a small patch of grass below the house. Lani, their large but extremely shy Rottweiler, watched us intently from a safe distance. We didn't



*Top: The wind often howls at South Point but we enjoyed a calm breeze.  
Bottom: Looking down at the Kohala Coast on the northern edge of the island.*

attain our goal of petting her, but she did finally accept a biscuit.

The next morning, we were able to leave our gear and gently coast down 1,500 feet in elevation along 11 glorious miles to South Point, with panoramic views of pastureland, the looming wind turbines of the Pakini Nui wind farm, and the vast, icy blue Pacific Ocean. The crowd at South Point was a mixture of tourists there for a quick look and locals set up for a long day of fishing from the cliffs.

After an hour of gazing out at the ocean (including a sighting of spinner dolphins), we pedaled along the bumpy dirt tracks

to Papakolea Green Sand Beach. We were the only ones on bikes. Everyone else walked or paid locals to shuttle them in Land Rovers to the beach. As we passed a group of hikers, one called out, "Now that's the way to go." I replied, "It may be faster, but it isn't easier." By whichever mode of transportation, the destination was worth the effort. How often do you get to hang out on a beach that used to be part of the cinder cone of a volcano formed 50,000 years ago?

We then made the long, slow climb back to Biz and Phil's. Thankfully, we didn't experience any wind. South Point is known

as one of the windiest places on the island. We had barely a breeze.

From Punaluu Beach Park with its black sand beach, where both tourists and sea turtles swim and lounge, the road climbs gradually 4,000 feet over 26 miles to Namakanipaio Campground in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. We'd heard that this campground was both beautiful and free (at least for tent sites). Unfortunately, it was also closed because some large eucalyptus trees had fallen.

Our only option — other than a crazy expensive room at an overbooked lodge — was to pedal 10 miles to Kulanao'uaiki Campground in the middle of the park. We were told that the campsite had no water and a pit toilet. Great.

The asphalt road winding down to the campground was barely a lane wide. We descended through a tree canopy that suddenly opened up to the stark beauty of the volcanic rock landscape. At times, it looked like an enormous paving project that had gone horribly wrong. The massive volume of material that had burped up from the earth's core is hard to comprehend. Only the most resilient of

shrubs, small trees, and ferns had managed to emerge in the aftermath.

But the contrast of the harsh landscape with the blue sky was amazing. The campground was bare bones as described. There were five or six vehicles parked for the walk-in campsites. We had wanted to get a good look at the Halema'uma'u Crater, but that was 10 miles back up the road.

So we asked our neighbors who immediately offered us a ride in their rental car. The couple and their young daughter were from Mexico City but now lived in northern Saskatchewan (talk about a contrast of climate and culture). We drove up to the visitor center, passed hundreds of steam vents, and were rewarded with a view of the spectacular caldera — a view we shared with over 300 tourists. We returned to our secluded campground. Bundled in sweaters and jackets, we shared laughs, food, and wine around the small camp stove.

This alternative campsite was one of the highlights of our trip. In fact we stayed an extra night, which gave us time to pedal farther down the road to an ocean

lookout and to wander the stark paths. The view from the visitor center had been impressive, but alone at our primitive campsite, the sight of a million stars with the red-orange glow of the caldera as a ghostly backdrop was a vision we will never forget.

While you climb up and out of Volcanoes National Park, you transition quite drastically from the dry side of the island to the wet side. The contrast was immediately seen in the vegetation and felt in the humidity, but it was most drastically heard in the birdsong. The dry side was stone silent. The only birds we encountered in our campsite were a pair of endangered Hawaiian geese (nenes). As we crossed the rain shadow, within seconds there was a cacophony of birdcalls. I have never been anywhere on earth where the contrast in climatic zones can be experienced in such a dramatic way. By this time my "Hawaii is just beaches and tourists" impression had disappeared, never to return.

Hilo is the largest city (or should I say town) on the Big Island, with a population of just over 40,000. It is the wettest town in the U.S. with an average 120 to 140



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inches of rain each year. I could give you a rundown of some history and local sites, but, as a touring cyclist, I'm going to cut to the chase and tell you about one place you must visit — Big Island Candies. This local gem produces the most amazing confections: macadamia-nut shortbread dipped in chocolate, orange-cream chocolate brownies, and guava macadamia-nut cookies, to list just a few. And they have samples. Not the kind of samples where you have to wait in line for a white-gloved employee to dole out a pellet-sized nibble. We're talking unguarded baskets of samples. Now please don't give traveling cyclists a bad name by wandering through and trying to fill a pannier. Be polite, show discretion, and enjoy the best free sample selection I've ever seen on the planet Earth.

Okay, there is one other place you should visit. Hawaii is a land of fire and water. It is some of the youngest land on earth, born of volcanoes. But it is also shaped, and occasionally ravaged, by water. The Pacific Tsunami Museum is dedicated to the history of the 1946 Pacific Tsunami and the 1960 Chilean Tsunami. Both hit the east coast of the Big Island and Hilo. A dear friend of ours was a young boy living in Hilo when the 1946 tsunami hit. Their home was torn off its foundation. His sister (Jeanne Branch Johnston) is the cofounder of the museum, along with Dr. Walter Dudley. This small museum in downtown Hilo is packed with information. But what sets it apart the large collection of audio and video recordings that personalize the stories of survivors.

Stories bring history alive. The same is true for adventures.

We were pedaling along the Hamakua Coast and came upon a sign for the town of Paauhau. It rang a bell, so I got on my phone and called Itsu, a friend in his 80s in Seattle. I was pretty sure this was his hometown. When he answered the phone, I told him where we were.

"Spell it," he said.

I did.

"Yeah," he said. "That's it."

"Should we go down and see it?" I asked.

I had a reason to ask. The road down to Paauhau was the steepest road we'd seen so far.

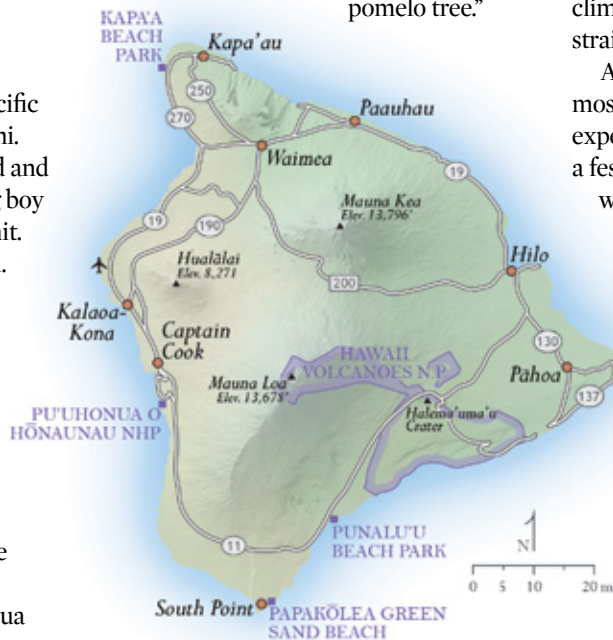
"No. There is nothing there," he said. "My kid sister still lives there though. Four houses down from the wading pool."

That was reason enough for us. We burned up some brake pads getting there, but we made it. Unbelievably, we had been able to book a room in Paauhau in an old, renovated house on our cell phone via AirBnB from up on the highway. The guy who took our reservation lived in Pakistan. It truly is a small world.

Paauhau is an old sugar town. The three small streets were lined with modest, old homes where immigrants lived while working in the fields and the mill. I asked around. There was no wading pool. Finally a young woman in a black SUV said, "See that guy over there? If he'll talk with you, he'll know. He's been here all his life."

I approached a thin man, well over 80, cutting down a small tree with a chain saw. I introduced myself and explained about my friend's kid sister.

He took a drag from his cigarette. "Next street up. Find the pomelo tree."



Those were easy directions to follow — pomelos are the size of basketballs. I went and got Kat. Our place was just down the street.

We walked up the stairs, lined with potted plants. The entire property was a garden of fruits, flowers, and ferns. A man answered the door, and his wife (Itsu's kid sister) soon came out and joined him on the steps. They both had lived in this small company town all their lives. Hard working conditions on the edge of paradise. There is no longer a school here, nor a store. The mill closed in the 1980s. Expensive homes



Want to pedal the Big Island? Both of Adventure Cycling's self-supported tours for 2016 have filled. Get on the waiting list for 2017 at [adventurecycling.org/tours](http://adventurecycling.org/tours).

are sprouting up around them as investors seize the opportunity for vacation rentals.

It was a short visit — a chance to peek into a bygone era. We felt very welcomed. They gave us a box of cookies as we left.

In the morning, we had the hardest climb of our trip. It was less than a mile, straight up to the highway.

Any day on a bike tour is better than most, but every once in a while you experience travel magic. You wander into a festival or get invited as strangers to a wedding. On our Hawaiian journey, we found magic at a primitive campsite among thorny kiawe trees at

Kapa'a Beach Park. The weather was perfect, the strong surf crashing dramatically on the rocks below, and there were humpback whales spouting and breaching out in the vast blue sea with the island of Maui hazy in the distance. It easily entered into the annals of our travel lore. But it just so happened that we had arrived unknowingly on the night of a full moon. So after we watched a drop-dead gorgeous sunset, there followed a moonrise so bright that it woke me at 2:00 AM. I thought someone was aiming a searchlight at our tent. I got out and wandered about sans flashlight.

We lingered over a camp breakfast of scrambled eggs heaped with enormous slices of local avocado and we searched for more humpback whales as the full moon slowly disappeared into the Pacific.

But it didn't end there because our WarmShowers hosts from the night before had pointed out an old railroad grade that we could ride instead of the highway, right along the edge of the coast to another



Papakolea, one of only four green sand beaches in the world.

beach park. It was bliss. No traffic. Not a single person in sight. Just the ocean air, the blue sky, the tall, brown grasses waving in the breeze, and the crashing waves pounding against cliffs. It was a day I wish I could relive a thousand times.

With its combination of beauty, natural diversity, and friendly people, we couldn't

imagine why the Big Island isn't a more popular destination with bike travelers. In over three and a half weeks of travel, it wasn't until we came full circle that we met our first touring cyclists — three sisters, two from Alaska and one who had flown out from Philadelphia. They were stocking up for their tour at the big

supermarket in Kailua-Kona. Their faces beamed with the smiles of giddy, first-day travelers. We shared road and campsite information and updated them on the dengue fever situation. As we said our goodbyes, I thought, "Have fun. You have it all to yourselves."

Our final day was typical of many a trip — packing the bikes and gear in boxes, buying last-minute gifts, etc. We realized we had hit the jackpot, weather-wise. In 27 days, we had only two brief bouts of rain, and what's even more mind blowing, just four hours of headwinds.

Biz and Phil drove across the island, insisting that they'd take us out to dinner and then to the airport. As we said goodbye, Phil put a lei made from he'e berries around my neck while Biz adorned Kat with a sweet-scented lei of tuberose. I think everyone shed a tear.

I never thought I'd travel to Hawaii. Now I can't wait to get back. **AC**

Willie Weir rides, writes, and photographs for Adventure Cyclist. You can follow him on Instagram at @willie.weir.

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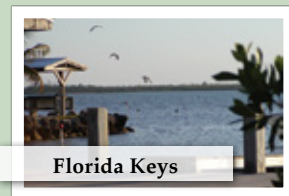
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