



Heaven in HAWAII

From helicopter tours to magical movie locations, **ISABEL CONWAY** goes off grid to get the best out of the Pacific's paradise islands



beach), familiar US restaurant chains and mega retail opportunities attracts unending hordes of tourists from the US year round, day and night, from all parts of the mainland. Most of the package holidaymakers converge on the retreat for the masses, Waikiki.

Waikiki is also home to the historic Hilton Hawaiian village, where we stay — once the favourite lodgings of Elvis Presley, who made the movie *Blue Hawaii* here in 1961. The swathe of beach has gone upmarket in recent years it's said, and remains the authentic home of surfing, immortalised by Olympic swimming champion and king of the surf Duke Kahanamoku.

A surf crash-course is a fun must-try-once experience and legendary Pearl Harbour, less than an hour's drive from downtown Honolulu, is the not-to-be-missed Oahu landmark where, on December 7, 1941, more than 350 Japanese planes launched a surprise attack on

the unsuspecting US Pacific fleet, drawing America into WW2.

They say legends are made at Kualoa — one of Oahu's historic sites on the northern coast. Here we come across more *Jurassic Park* memorabilia in the midst of a beautiful nature reserve. Our mini bus pulls up and we all pile out to pose beside that same fallen tree behind which the movie's children watched in terror as a T-Rex made a meal out of his opponent.

Having viewed the awesome Na Pali Coast of Kauai from the air, the next best thing is to take a Catamaran cruise around the island to admire sea caves, castaway crescent beaches and Hawaii's renowned aquatic wonders — from pods of dolphins to humpbacked whales (I catch the tail slap of one that churns up a wall of water) and snorkelling alongside green sea turtles. Every winter, thousands of humpback whales migrate to the warm waters off Hawaii where they mate, give birth and build up their blubber in preparation for a return to Alaska.

It takes at least a month to properly explore Hawaii's six diverse islands. We manage two, Kauai and Oahu, with barely time to shake off the jet lag of the 7,000 mile outward journey and 11-hour time difference before the spell is broken and it's time to leave paradise lost.



GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) flies direct from Dublin to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle, with onward connections to Honolulu. United Airlines (united.com) flies daily from Dublin via its US hub in Newark onwards to Honolulu. For more info, see gohawaii.com/uk



WHERE TO STAY

The Hilton Hawaiian Village Waikiki Beach Resort on Oahu (hiltonhawaiianvillage.com) offers seven-night stays starting from €1,462 (double). On Kauai, the luxury oceanfront Grand Hyatt Resort & Spa overlooks a wondrous bay with a bleached white sandy beach and beautiful walks (kauai.grand.hyatt.com) from €2,559 (two sharing).

For more tips, deals and inspiration log on to independent.ie/travel

WHAT TO PACK

Easy going and casual. Hawaii is the home of aloha shirts, sarongs and 'rubba slippahs' (flip flops) — nobody dresses up here, and informal clothing is worn everywhere, including smart restaurants. For active excursions, sturdy footwear is advised, with water-friendly shoes for reef swims and surfing.



It's not just a tour, it's an adventure in paradise. So says pilot Issac, as our five-seat helicopter soars into the sky and hovers briefly above Kauai's pristine, magnificent landscape, before dipping inside the sheer walls of a forested canyon, and landing beside a spectacularly high waterfall.

We've arrived on hallowed ground, the very spot of that famous helicopter landing from Stephen Spielberg's original *Jurassic Park*. Ducking out from under the spinning rotary blades, I sense the presence of mad scientist John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) breaking through the luxuriant undergrowth with his team of palaeontologists on the trail of a Triceratops or herds of Velociraptors.

Formed over six million years ago, Kauai is the oldest and most northerly of the main Hawaiian Islands and rates at the top of most travel wish lists to the Pacific volcanic archipelago — a five-hour flight from the US mainland.

After years of petitioning, Island Helicopters (islandhelicopters.com) became the only helicopter company allowed to

land at Jurassic Falls — or Manawaiopuna Falls — which is on privately owned land. Landings are restricted and passengers must don plastic shoe-protectors and vow to touch nothing to safeguard the environment — all of which heightens our sense of being somewhere extra special. We feel seriously privileged.

Helicopter tours that take in much of Kauai's interior do not come cheap, but this one (from \$275/€223), swooping down over extra-terrestrial gorges, valleys and cliffs, including Waimea Canyon — popularly known as 'the Grand Canyon of the Pacific' — is worth every cent. It really is a once in a lifetime experience, we all agree, as Issac turns the familiar soundtrack of *Jurassic Park* up full blast.

We fly across Waimea's gargantuan chasm of ancient lava rock — 10 miles long and over 3,500 feet deep — before following the famous Na Pali coastline where whales are spotted and immense rollers thunder to shore. Nearing a mountain shrouded in mist, Issac says: "Welcome to the wettest place on earth — Mount Wai'ale'ale". It translates as 'Overflowing

Water', he tells us, and gets more than 452 inches of rain a year.

Kauai has starred in numerous movies and TV shows from *Lost* to *The Descendants* starring George Clooney — that storyline closely matches historic events in Hawaii, much of whose terrain is privately owned since the sugar plantation tycoon times. Those movie images are familiar to us all — from blood-red and sizzling orange sunsets to monstrous surf waves, rustling palms, talcum powder fine white beaches, cobalt blue seas, Mai-Tai cocktails and Elvis Presley strumming his ukulele, serenading a swaying dancer with hair as long as her hula skirt... but the reality is surprisingly similar, too.

Back on the ground, us new arrivals were welcomed with 'aloha' (love, honour, peace) in the form of the exotically delightful 'lei', a handcrafted garland of beautiful fresh tropical flowers that's draped about our necks, not once but several times during our island hops.

As you would expect, Honolulu with its dedication to towering condos (they are like small towns fringing Waikiki

3 must-dos...



EAT LIKE A LOCAL

Liliha Bakery and Diner (lilihbakery.com) is a cosy Honolulu institution famous for its delicious choux pastry puffs and hearty Hawaiian staples like Loco moco (rice, fried egg and hamburger patty with gravy). Also, try the 'gourmet' spam introduced by the US military during WWII in many restaurants!



ON AN IMPULSE

Take to the air and feel like you're auditioning for Cirque du Soleil with Kauai Backcountry Adventures (kauaibackcountry.com), harnessing up, then gliding and soaring above the lush tropical rainforest canopy on Kauai's remotest fringes. It's the ultimate thrill on these paradise islands.



INSIDER TIP

Hike up to Diamond Head State Monument and enjoy fabulous views of the Pacific and Honolulu. Old timer buses (Line 23 and 24 from downtown) take you to the start point and the trail reaches the edge of a 300,000-year-old volcanic crater. It takes roughly 1.5-2 hours. See hawaii.stateparks.org.