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# Kauai for Less: Save Up on the 5 Cheapest Thrills



Known as Hawaii's Garden Isle, Kauai Island features lots of different adventure activities for both the young and the young at heart. The Kauai activities range from exciting water and surf activities, hiking a steep mountain trail, to camping in a remote valley. Or if you want enjoyable Kauai activities that are equally fun but are less strenuous, then try their Golf and helicopter flights, snorkeling, leisurely kayaking, and short, easy hikes. You can even rent a motorcycle for a proper island adventure tour around the island.

The island of Kauai is just the right size to allow you to do all these Kauai activities from different locations even as you stay in one single accommodation and you travel on a budget. However, with development coming to the island in giant steps, more hotels, condos, and timeshare properties are cropping up along with more tour companies offering more activities. All these come at a cost, of course. So what happens now to your meticulously planned Kauai budget travel?

No worries, because the best activities on the Garden Isle are still free or nearly so. Below are some of our favorites:

## 1. A Kingdom by the Sea

"It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea, that a maiden there lived, whom you may know by the name of Annabel Lee, and this maiden she lived with no other thought than to love and be loved by me."

Find that line familiar? That's because Edgar Allan Poe, the genius poet, wrote it centuries ago. Of course, he was probably talking about a real person when he wrote that poem, but if during his lifetime he had seen Kauai from the deck of a catamaran, he would have been moved to write the same beautiful line of this charming island in the midst of the great Pacific. Or not. But that's not the point here.

Kauai may not have the best snorkeling in the islands but snorkeling Kauai is a heck of a lot better than snorkeling hyped places like Des Moines. In fact, the most popular and unforgettable attractions on Kauai *is* snorkeling. Indeed, there are only a few things in life that can compare to drifting effortlessly among a school of brightly colored tropical fish in the clear, warm seas of Kauai.

If you want the best places for snorkeling, check out the inside of an island's many protected lagoons. In Kauai, the North Shore where the stunning cliffs of Na Pali Coast provide you with the perfect amber and blue backdrop is a perfect place to enjoy Kauai's teeming marine life. Nevertheless, almost any cove or reef will suit the casual underwater spectator.

Kauai, Hawaii is home to hundreds of species of fish and one third of this cannot be found anywhere else in the world. These fishes thrive in coral reefs that abound Kauai's calm waters. And since Kauai is millions of years older than the other inhabited islands in the Hawaiian island chain, it is here that you will find the most protected reef lagoons.

Here are some favorite snorkel locations in Kauai. As previously mentioned, all these places can be reached no matter where your accommodations are.

### ***Poipu Beach Park at Kauai's South Shore***

One of Kauai's safest beaches, the Poipu Beach Park boasts some of the clearest waters in Hawaii. It has also been repeatedly ranked as among the best family beaches in the islands. No small wonder really when you consider its sheltered, shallow beach suitable for tiny tots and the world-famous Brennecke Beach renowned for excellent body surfing.

Poipu Beach Park encompasses two of Poipu's most popular beaches, Poipu Beach and Brennecke Beach, where swaying coco palms accentuate a vast lawn, providing shade and silhouetting dramatic sunsets. A few pavilions and picnic tables are scattered all around, offering respite from the sun and a perfect spot for lunch.

Rest rooms? Shower facilities? Poipu Beach Park has those as well as a convenience market and a restaurant-bar just across a small street. Dive shops selling or renting gear are also not hard to find, so you don't have to spend too much time trying to find one.

Poipu Beach Park also has a sheltered cove which is ideal for small children and novice snorkelers. But if you want to get more out of Kauai snorkeling, drift over to the far right side of the beach park, west of the tombolo or sand split where the waters are far deeper and a far more spectacular aquatic display awaits you.

### ***Anini Beach in Kauai's North Shore***

In parts of Anini Beach, the waters are very shallow, however, the reef appears to go on forever at this beach. Gifted with the largest reef in Kauai, Anini provides more than ample exploration of the underwater canyons at the reef's edge. It is here that the larger reef and pelagic or deep-sea fish can sometimes be seen.

Anini is suitable for both beginners and experienced snorkelers alike. But for safety sake, only venture deeper during an incoming tide. You can tell that tide is coming in because it occurs immediately after a low tide.

**Beware:** Currents draining the reef on an outgoing tide can be strong, so avoid them if you can. Always remember to snorkel with a buddy.

### ***Ke'e at the Very End of the Road on Kauai's North Shore***

Offering great snorkeling destination during summer months, Ke'e can also be a great place for underwater spectators during calm seas. It's right off the towering cliffs of Kauai's Na Pali Coast so just for that, it's certainly worth the dive. But Ke'e has more to offer than the spectacular view

of the famous Na Pali Coastline. The azure waters of this lovely lagoon sparkle like a rare gem even as you approach from the deck of your chartered boat. Ke'e's natural beauty alone recommends it to snorkelers who know how to appreciate Kauai's great natural vistas.

And if you want sightings that feature more than fish plying the coral reef, Ke'e has Pacific green sea turtles in store for you. These charming creatures often congregate in an outer lagoon beyond the inshore reef. While here, you might want to walk the world famous Kalalau Trail to the first lookout (about one mile).

There are several more great snorkeling spots in Kauai. There's Lydgate Park near Wailua on Kauai's East Side, a man-made lagoon featuring protected waters, ideal for beginners. At Tunnels just beyond Hanalei, the place offers a vast labyrinth of pathways that intersect its wide fringing reef. If you want a splendid way to combine adventure, scenic beauty, and snorkeling in Kauai, then book yourself a boat cruise.

**HINT:** Bring your own snorkeling gear – mask, fins, and snorkel. If you're traveling light, you also have the option to buy a set when you arrive. Having your own gear is infinitely better than renting. Not only is it cheaper, you won't be sucking on somebody else's cooties!

## 2. Jungle Island

So okay, Kauai is not exactly known for its rainforests. The island is, however, known for some of the most excellent hiking trails in Hawaii. In fact, if Kauai activities are spectacular, then Kauai hiking tours or hiking on Kauai in general is at the highest level of spectacular.

### ***Kalalua Trail***

Probably the most popular of these hikes is the one along the ***Kalalua Trail***. And although it is extremely popular, it is not that crowded either. Keyword here is "extreme" and that's exactly what hikers are going to say when you ask them what it's like.

Hiking along the Kalalua Trail may not be easy, but the views you get to see along the way are better than energy bars to boost your spirits up. Hiking the entire 10.8 miles of the trail takes several days and requires camping equipment. Most people, however, just see how much distance they can cover in one day. If you are in fairly good shape – and you aren't dragging along kids – trust me, it's definitely worth the effort.

The trail starts at the end of the road on the island's rugged North Shore. From there it heads on down to areas offering spectacular views of the Na Pali Coast's famous cliffs. The trail is narrow, rocky, and muddy since this part of the island is one of the wettest spots on earth.

The first two miles have you stopping at Hanakaipiai Beach. From there, you have three choices: Continue on to Kalalau (only serious backpackers seem to brighten up at the challenge), ford the stream and turn inland to Hanakapiai Falls (another and a more strenuous two miles to a fantastic 300-foot waterfall) or return (uhm...).

**HINT:** Slipping is going to be commonplace so be sure to wear sturdy shoes. Don't hesitate to walk on water or mud. There's going of those to go around and if you get picky, you might find yourself having to walk on air (trust me, not very pretty).

### ***Princeville Ranch Hike Tours***

Another hiking trail popular with guests to Kauai is the ***Waterfall Excursion***, yet another one of Princeville Ranch's Adventure tours. This four-hour, four-mile hike gives you incomparable scenery and a multi-waterfall experience.

The trail offers a 360 degree lookout where you can see the beautiful sparkling waters of the Pacific off the North Shore and astounding views of Kauai's dragon-backed mountains.

From there, the Waterfall Excursion takes you to a jungle trail leading to the ultimate Hawaiian waterfall where you can have lunch, enjoy a little swim, and relax to the soothing sound of the jungle come alive. Afterwards, hike to another beautiful waterfall swimming hole so deep you can dive in or just play on inner tubes just for the fun of it.

**HINT:** Bring light comfortable clothing, comfortable shoes (hiking boots or tennis, running shoes). Bring also a swimsuit, a towel, sunscreen, hat, sunglasses, and rain gear.

### ***Na Ala Hele Trail***

Experience a great Kauai hiking trip at the ***Na Ala Hele Trail***. Here you can get a glimpse of Kauai's natural wonders from a perspective few visitors ever get to see. Most tours passing through this trail operate in the Wailua Forest Management Area, under a permit issued by the Na Ala Hele Trail Access program of the Department of Land and Natural Resources. With expert guides and traveling in air-conditioned 4x4 vans, the Na Ala Hele Trail gives "off the beaten path" a whole new meaning.

The adventure starts right when you cross several streams one after the other. Afterwards, you go then go through the rainforest to the gate used in "Jurassic Park." From there, you go by foot into the center of the island where you can learn about the history, culture, flora, and fauna of Hawaii.

**HINT:** A portion of the price of the tour is paid to Na Ala Hele for the maintenance and improvement of trails on Kauai. Advance, paid reservations are required. Reservations are generally non-refundable. However, in the case of weather cancellation, you can have your tour refunded.

### **3. Life is a Beach and Kauai has Plenty of 'em**

As the fourth largest island in the Hawaiian chain of islands and the one island with the most number of beaches, can you just imagine how much fun you can have in Kauai's beaches? And the great thing about it is that 45% of these beaches are mostly secluded, so there's less crowd to tackle with and more beach to enjoy. If you want a stretch of sand all to yourself, just pick anywhere you like. But if you want the ultimate privacy, then head on to Polihale State Park – a two-mile long beach with very few folks around.

Wherever you go, remember that there are only seven beaches in Kauai that are protected by lifeguards. These beaches include Anahola Beach Park, Lydgate Park, Wailua Bay, Po'ipu Beach Park, Pine Trees, Hanalei Beach Park Pavilion and Salt Pond Beach Park.

There are a few unguarded beaches that can be dangerous, such as the Lumahai on the North Shore, the Polihale on the West Side, the Kealia on the East Side, and the Hanakapiai on the Na Pali Coast.

Next to Poipu Beach, the second most popular is the stunning Lumahai Beach. This fine-sand beach is located around the bend from Hanalei Bay on the north shore with two different accesses. The first access is closest to Hanalei Bay where you take an easy hike from roadside parking. This beach was made famous years ago when it was featured in the movie "South Pacific."

Further up the highway is the Lumahai Valley River Mouth. This is the second entrance to the beach. The river provides calm, fresh water for swimming. There's a small bridge just across the river mouth. Just for safety sake, don't try to dive off here or from the rocks nearby because the water can be pretty murky and hides submerged rocks and tree branches.

#### ***Kauai Beach Safety Tips:***

- Watch the ocean at least 20 minutes before entering. You can tell hazardous conditions by the telltale signs of water moving rapidly. Also constant swirling in seemingly calm water and waves breaking far offshore can be another sign that water may not be right for swimming.
- Always swim or snorkel with a buddy.
- The most frequent and dangerous hazards are strong currents near shore. Areas near river mouths are particularly dangerous.
- At least two of the island's beaches have been widely promoted as nude beaches. Nudity is not permitted on Kauai's beaches, but don't be surprised to see more skin than usual.

**HINT:** The Kauai Ocean Rescue Council (KORC) has published an excellent beach safety guide. Copies are available at airport kiosks and at most hotels.

#### **4. Check out the Boobies**

We meant the bird variety. Not the Sports Illustrated kind (sorry, boys). Red-footed boobies, brown boobies, red-tailed tropicbirds, wedge-tailed shearwaters, and great frigatebirds – these are only some of the rare species of birds you will get to see on Kauai.

Kauai's active volcanic days are long gone. What is left now is an island of emerald green lushness, highlighted to the north with sheer scenic canyons and coastal cliffs. In the lush Kauai rainforest, honeycreeper specialties as Anianiau, Akekee, and the Kauai Amakihi abound, while on the flooded taro fields can be found Hawaii's endangered wetland birds, including the scarce Koloa (or the Hawaiian Duck).

The best time to go boobies-watching in Kauai is in March, the month when seabird diversity is at its peak. Many seabirds nest in these distant Pacific Islands. At Kilauea Point can be found some of the most spectacular of all seabirds, including the nesting Laysan Albatross. Don't be surprised if some of the adults glide by you at eye-level and see huge nestlings sitting in the shade of ironwood trees.

Perhaps the most elegant of seabirds in the world, the Red-tailed Tropicbirds are also a regular sight on the island. See fantastic show of aerial courtship between these glistening red-tailed species or get a glimpse of the rare White-tailed Tropicbirds winging by to their cliff ledge nests.

If you move on to the Kona Coast not far away, you will have an excellent chance of seeing the endemic Hawaiian Hawk as you traverse the forested slopes of the extinct giant shield volcano, Mauna Kea. Here, you will also find a good share of the more widespread indigenous Hawaiian bird species, including the Amakihi, Apapane, Elepaio, the comical scarlet liwi, and Hawaii's beautiful and unique goose, the Nene.

But if you don't like to trek too far away from convenient accommodations, you can always tap the Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge which offers a fantastic array of surprises, including a little history, a little nature, and a grand view of the Pacific all for a \$2.00 entrance fee. To top it all off, the Wildlife Refuge is one of the best places to catch sight of humpback whales as they migrate from Alaska.

**HINT:** Don't forget to take a pair of binoculars to spy on more boobies. You'll be surprised at how fascinating and engrossing the lives of these cliff-dwelling birds can be. If you are there between December and April, you might even spot a humpback.

## 5. Kauai's Kokee State Park

Kokee State Park is a cool, mountainous state park encompassing 4,345 acres and containing 45 miles of trails. Located just up the road from the astounding Waimea Canyon (the Grand Canyon of the Pacific), Kokee State Park offers beautiful scenery and many things to do and explore.

The place can be accessed from the extreme west end of the island of Kauai. From centrally located Lihue Airport, it is approximately 90 minutes away if you take the Kaunualii Highway (Route 50) to either Waimea (23 miles, 40 minutes) or Kekaha (26 miles, 45 minutes). From there, two roads are available up the mountain to Kokee.

If you're coming from Waimea, just take the Waimea Canyon Drive (Route 550). If from Kekaha, then take the Kokee Road (Route 552).

There are numerous rent-a-car firms at Lihue Airport. You can rent one for yourself. However, if you are planning to explore the dirt roads and trails of Kokee, be sure to get a 4-wheel drive vehicle, the recommended vehicle type for Kokee's kind of trail. It's not a good idea to go exploring wet, dirt roads unless you have a 4-wheel drive vehicle.

The drive from Waimea or Kekaha up the mountain to Kokee can last up to 30 minutes. During that time, you'll be doing a lot of winding and "bending" down the dirt road. So if you are prone to car sickness, be sure to take motion sickness prevention medication at least 30 minutes before the drive. If not, there are also many quiet turn-off areas where you can ease yourself.

### ***Sightseeing***

One of the great aspects of Kauai is its tons of panoramic vistas. Kokee State Park is no different. The State Park has a total of four lookouts, all of which provide you with unmitigated views of various parts of the island.

Picture Kalalau Valley, featured in many postcards. You can view it at the ***Kalalau Lookout*** and the ***Puu O Kila Lookout*** at the end of the Kokee Road on top of the mountain. However, rolling fogs may sometimes obscure the view so consider yourself lucky if it's clear viewing day.

The second lookout, Puu O Kila Lookout, is also located at the end of the Kokee Road, but it starts of the Pihea Trail, instead of the dirt road from Waimea.

If you want to view the ocean west and southwest of Kauai, then it's **Puu Hinahina Lookout** that you want. Here, you can also see the "Forbidden Island", Ni'ihau, which can be seen by sailboat or by helicopter, but never landed.

The **Waimea Canyon Lookout** also provides a panoramic view of the island. Called the "Grand Canyon of the Pacific", this is the reason why people drive up to Kokee. The Canyon is ten miles long, a mile wide, and over 3,600 feet deep.

### **Picnic**

As you reach Kokee State Park, your first rest stop is the **First Pavilion**. Located on the left side of Kokee Road, these small pavilions have pay phones and restrooms. As an added bonus, across the road are spectacular views of Waimea Canyon.

The next stop is **Kalalau Lookout**, but there are fewer restrooms here and even fewer picnic tables. You can try picnicking on the ground but chances are the ground is going to be muddy because the place is higher up, which means climate is colder and wetter.

However, if you're looking for the best place for your picnic blanket, nothing can compare to the **Kokee State Park** itself. At mile marker 15, the park offers extensive picnic sites, pavilions, restrooms, grills, grassy park meadow, camping facilities, Ranger Station, Kokee Museum, and a restaurant.

### **Useful Hints for More Kokee Fun:**

- You may want to visit Kokee State Park when they celebrate the Banana Poka Festival. Despite its name, the plant is actually a vine pest with billions and billions of uses. Banana Poka is not related to the banana, nor does it dance, but you can use it for basket-weaving and other crafts.
- The Kokee Natural History Museum sponsors short-guided hikes, called the Wonder Walks, in the summer. If you're interested, register early.
- The State of Hawaii leases lots with unique, lessee-built cabins, for twenty-year terms. The current lease expires in about 2006. The lease prohibits permanent residency.
- "Kokee" means "to bend" in Hawaiian. Once you're through the trail up the mountain, you'll realize why they call it that.
- The Kokee Natural History Museum is the oldest museum in the state. A small, interesting museum located at the Kokee State Park at mile marker 15, it offers excellent maps and other hiking information.

Each of the activities mentioned above can fill up a single day. However, if you're feeling up for it, you can string a couple together, too. In Kauai, that is not a problem. Considering how small the island is, everything is just within easy reach by boat, car, or helicopter. Just make sure that when you do decide to squeeze in a lot in one day, time your travel properly. This is one way to avoid traffic and keep stress level down. Hey, this is supposed to be a vacation. Have fun!

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