

Hawaii: The Big Island – Visiting Hilo

One of the fascinating aspects of the Big Island is that half of it, the Kona side, resembles the surface of the moon thanks to all the roads and hillsides covered in volcanic trails and rock leftover from past eruptions. This is the youngest of the Hawaiian isles and still has active volcanoes.

The other half of the island, the Hilo side, is rainforest. It's the lush paradise most people think of when they think of Hawaii.

Travel Tip: If you're planning a substantial stay here, I highly recommend splitting your time into two parts, a few days in Kona and a few in Hilo. It's much easier to explore each side of the island from those vantage points without as much driving.

I mention this as I stayed in Kona during the entirety of my nine-day visit and on the day I traveled to Hilo it took well over two hours to make the trek from my hotel to that easternmost side of the island. And while it's delightful to take in the ever-changing scenery along the way, it's also tiring after a full day of sightseeing.

Drive-time aside, I happily took to the road to discover some of the sights and sounds that make Hilo special.

First stop: Umauma Falls. Found in the midst of a large botanical garden that also offers zipline tours, this gorgeous three-tiered waterfall is a stunning sight. A light sprinkle of rain fell as I wandered the grounds, this being a rainforest after all, but failed to dampen my spirit during a lovely stroll through the area.

Next on the itinerary was 'Akaka Falls. The state park where these falls are found is exquisite! It truly feels prehistoric, like stepping into a real world Jurassic Park. I fully expected a dinosaur to cross my path. There are actually two waterfalls here, Kahuna and 'Akaka and it's an easy walk to both with paths circling around the entire area. Don't be surprised if it takes you a while to work your way through the park; it's easy to get caught up in the beauty of it all. Kahuna Falls is somewhat shy and hidden by the greenery, but 'Akaka Falls stands loud and proud at 420 feet from top to bottom.

Needing to refuel both my rental car and my belly, I stopped for a delicious lunch at the Hilo Bay Café. Located in the center of a simple strip mall, it doesn't give the appearance of anything fancy on the outside. Inside, however, the décor is simple, sleek elegance. A popular stop for locals and tourists, they pack a lot of people in without feeling crowded or lacking intimacy. The food is locally grown and beautifully prepared, with their Hilo homemade ice cream being the perfect palate cleanser.

It was a day of water and fire. After drinking in some waterfall splendor, including one final photo op off a four-mile scenic route with a gorgeous overlook of Onomea

Bay, it was time to head south into the heart of one of the Big Island's biggest attractions: Volcanoes National Park. Tune in next time for a taste of the goddess Pele's power!