

FAMILY GETAWAY GUIDE

Small Hands On Deck—Cruising the Hawaiian Islands

We hadn't been to Hawaii since our honeymoon 10 years ago. All it took was a colorful brochure of the "Pacific paradise" to convince us it was time to "hang loose" again. With Tyler, 6, and Kyle, 3, in tow, this wasn't going to be a lay-on-the-sand-drinking-mai-tais vacation, so we decided to go all-out tourist on American Hawaii Cruises. This proved to be a practical way to see four islands in one week, without the bother of changing hotel rooms.

The *S.S. Constitution* and *S.S. Independence* both leave Saturdays from Honolulu stopping two days on the Big Island of Hawaii, two days in Maui and one in Kauai. Sunday is a restful day at sea. The ships, carrying about 1,000 people, offer amenities like two fresh-water swimming pools, fitness center, shops, movie theater and a nightclub. The youth program was a big hit with Tyler, who made friends and learned his way around the ship in no time. Every day and evening, *keikis* (kids) 5 to 16 take part in activities including pool parties, arts and crafts, games and movies. Babysitting in your cabin is also available on a limited basis. No matter what your age, on-board Hawaiian *kumus* (teachers) share their native heritage, from ukulele to conch-blowing lessons.

Excursions and rental cars can be booked from the ship—at a better rate than you'd get on land. Our kids' favorite was the Atlantis Submarine ride off the coast of Maui (\$62 adults; \$30 children). Each seat faces a large window graced by a variety of colorful fish and coral and, much to the delight of the boys, we even saw a few large, menacing eels (no sharks this time, though). There's always plenty to see on the 50-minute, 100-foot-deep dive: The submarines wisely supply food and hundreds of fish take full advantage of the free snacks. On the Big Island, we went snorkeling off the black lava beaches of Kona and toured the dramatic craters of Volcanoes National Park in Hilo.

Our favorite excursion was the Waimea Canyon helicopter ride on Kauai. My husband and I took turns (the kids were too young to appreciate this one) doing the 45-minute tour of the unspoiled canyons, waterfalls and sea cliffs of the lush "Garden Isle," including Waialeale Crater—the wettest spot on Earth. No doubt it's pricey (\$127 per ticket) but it was an absolutely unforgettable experience. Don't miss it! Helicopter tours are offered on every island, including shorter rides like the West Maui Special (\$59).

On board, nightly entertainment included traditional hula dancers and Hawaiian music, a great magician, a musical revue and—my kids' pick—a "soap bubble sculptor/comedian" (you had to be there). Acts vary with each cruise. What we saw was very professional—except when the *keikis* performed a "unique" hula dance in costumes they made themselves (accompanied to the tune of paparazzi parents!).

Contrary to what you might think, eating on a cruise with our two kids was not stressful. Although you have the option at all three meals to sit down in the dining room (cloth napkins, quiet atmosphere and all), we

chose to feed our often unruly brood at the on-deck breakfast and lunch buffets—with a magnificent view of the islands. Dinner was a more serious matter—be sure to request the more family-friendly first seating—but since you're assigned to the same table and servers, they soon got to know us. ("Your usual hot dog tonight, Kyle? Steak for you I assume, Tyler?" our waitress would ask.) With everything included, you can go wild with six-course meals ... or more. The menu features continental favorites and cuisine with a regional flair like Maui mango pasta with sweet and sour shrimp. The only drawback was after we got home, my kids wanted me to continue the gourmet feasts. (Ha!)

There were a few claustrophobic moments, like when I had to give Kyle a time-out-in the shower. (Where else, when a family of four resides in a 12-by-14 room?) Actually, the American Hawaii cruise ships—older vessels originally designed for trans-Atlantic voyages—have larger rooms than most. Tip: Stay in a Waikiki hotel for a couple of days first to help everyone adjust to the time change before your serious tourist mode sets in. We stayed at the Hawaiian Regent, a beachside high rise with panoramic views (the cruise line offers packages with a variety of hotels). Family prices (single-parent rates available) for the seven-day cruise including meals, entertainment and kids program start at \$1,359 per adult, kids 16 and under stay free. Three- and four-day cruises also offered. For more information and a brochure, call (800) 766-8338.

— Vivien Santana Hughes



Keikis do a pool-side hula under the instruction of an American Hawaii Cruises recreation coordinator.

