

## KONA KOHALA COAST: Hot Lava, Cool Dolphins

by  
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The Big Island of Hawaii was not what I expected. Somehow, I assumed that “big” equaled “built up,” and the beaches would likely all be rocky, right?

Wrong on both counts. While the island is by far the largest in the state, the vast, unpopulated expanses are reminiscent of Montana, not Manhattan. And all along the western Kona Kohala coast that my son Kyle, 8, and I visited, sandy beaches coexist with lava rock.

We were struck by The Big Island’s unique beauty. After landing at the Kona International Airport (United offers direct flights), we drove our rental car along a lone highway, past a landscape of charcoal-hued lava rock dotted with impossible bursts of tropical green foliage topped with deep fuchsia blooms.

A 20-minute trip got us to the Hilton Waikoloa Village, a spectacular 62-acre resort so vast that an air-conditioned monorail system transports guests to three towers that house the 1,241 guest rooms.

The resort offers several pools with water slides, a huge lagoon, a beach stocked with fish and sea turtles (you can rent snorkeling gear, water bicycles and more), eight tennis courts, two golf courses and the Kohala Spa, a 25,000-square-foot facility.

But by far our favorite place was the Dolphin Quest pool. Here Kyle actually swam in salt water with several “real live Flippers.” Advance reservations are permitted for children and teens only (Dolphin Discovery for ages 5 to 12; Teen Encounter for ages 13 to 19); adults are chosen from a daily lottery. (\$95 adults, \$75 ages 13 to 17, \$55 ages 5 to 12; 808/886-2875.)



The author’s son, Kyle, makes a marine friend.

If you want to pamper yourself with a massage at the spa (try the Hawaiianstyle *Lomi Lomi*), let the kids spend some time at the Hilton’s children’s program, Camp Menehune, for 5 to 12 year olds. Kyle actually asked to go back a second time—quite an endorsement from this picky connoisseur of kids’ clubs. Operating every day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the program offers activities from cooking to scavenger hunts to sandcastle building (\$45 per day with lunch; Friday and Saturday from 6 to 10 p.m. for \$30).

When we forced ourselves away from the Hilton, we found quite a variety of things to do around the island all within 20 minutes of the resort. We rode horseback through the sheep- and cattle- dotted hills of the verdant Kohala Ranch (ages 8 and older; \$55 per person for a 1 1/2-hour ride; 808/889-0022). Another day we cruised along the Kohala Sugar Plantation irrigation canals in stable, inflatable kayaks (ages 5 and older; \$75 adults, \$55 ages 5 to 18; 808/889-6922). But our most memorable activity was a helicopter tour over the very active. Kilauea Volcano, which has been

erupting for a decade. From our vantage point, we saw the fiery molten lava oozing from the crater and later, by the coast, sending up a thick plume of steam as the lava hit the sea. A note of caution: The trip is long (more than two hours), so be sure your child really wants to go, and circling around the breathtaking scenery may cause nausea. (\$295 per person; 800/400-4354.)

We’ll definitely return to the Kona Kohala coast. And there are many accommodation options—from elegant retreats like the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai to casual, all-inclusive resorts like Kona Village. Those listed below offer family-friendly packages. Check them out on the Internet, but remember—your virtual tour won’t offer the scent of Hawaii’s legendary naupaka flower.

