

A Hawaiian Escapade

Navigating Enchantment on the Big Island



Mike Lauro is a man to envy – and emulate. Mike not only lives in the paradise that is the Big Island of Hawaii, he also flies it. For a living. Tough life! Yet Mike Lauro's Tropic Bird Flight Service, the Kona-based outfit that offers island-flying training and sightseeing tours, is as inside-Hawaii as the real Hawaii gets. It – and Mike – know every volcano (there are four), each tricky weather pattern (windward and leeward patterns dominated by tradewinds, clouds and rain), traffic (heavy), the local Unicom language (can you pronounce Pu'u Honua O'Honaunau?) and more. That's why Flying Adventures has asked Mike to guide us on the most spectacular of all possible Big Island flights, an adventure that takes in every sight, touches on island history, concerns itself with every technical challenge and, not least, is one hoopla of a lot of fun.

We've arrived at Kona Int'l Airport (HKO) via one of the many nonstop flights the major airlines offer from the mainland, an airport dramatically sited

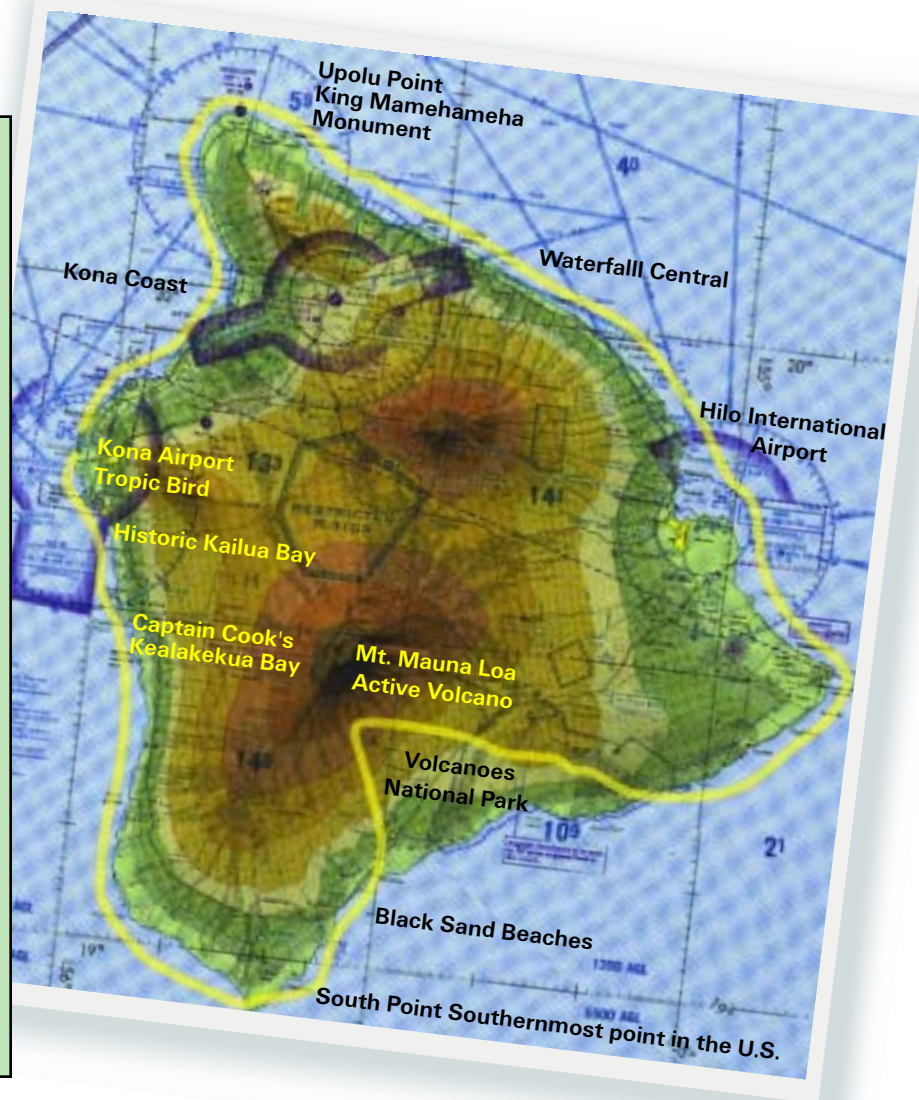
atop a moonscape of lava flow from the 1801 eruption of 8,000-ft Mt. Hualalai. We've been briefed that typical wet weather is to be expected on all north- and east-facing (windward) volcano slopes, and hot, dry weather on those (south- and west-facing (leeward); we understand the best flight plan of all, for scenery especially, is to follow the shoreline counterclockwise as it meanders 300 magnificent miles in circumference. Mike meets us here with his Cessna 182 in which we'll take left seat for the flight; as a super-skilled CFI whose very expertise are the unique challenges of flying Hawaii, he's along not only to keep us legal – booking a flight/tour with him is a great way to bypass the time-consuming requirement of getting checked-out in a plane ourselves – but also guarantees we get in every possible thrill that flying the Big Island offers. We are revved to depart south from HKO for a fantastic Mike-designed Flying Adventure. And so now it's time to turn the tour over to our Hawaii-flying expert. Take it away, Mike!

Kona's Kealakekua Bay, known to Hawaiians (and visitors awed by its beauty) as the "pathway of the gods" (left); the mighty Mauna Loa, between 600,000 and 1 million years old, and the world's largest, most active volcano (above)



Calling All Tropic Birds

Whether it's navigating wind shear around the island, becoming safely acquainted with the wonderful world above spewing, steaming, fiery "Dante's Inferno," or having a co-pilot who speaks Hawaiian working the radio, Mike Lauro, former US Air Force Captain with 14 years' experience flying Hawaii, welcomes all tropic-bound birds eager for an exciting Hawaii-Flying Adventure. For details on a Pilot in Command sightseeing escapade that includes lots of you-fly-it adventure, call Mike at 808-325-0068 or visit the Tropic Bird website at www.tropicbirdflightservice.com



Full throttle, nose up and we're airborne! Wow, what colors: coral reefs glowing in the sunlight below, the water brilliant blue and the deepest sparkling aquamarine, and to your left the massive Mt. Hualalai volcano; upslope in the puffy clouds are a vast array of coffee and macadamia farms. Historic Kailua Bay drifts by below, the heart of Kona town, where King Hamehameha settled in after conquering the islands in the early 1800s. Watch for those parasail guys; sometimes they get towed as high as 800 feet! Cruising the Kona Coast southbound (note all the condos and construction), we come to the "pathway to heaven," or Kealakekua Bay. In age-old Hawaiian culture, this was a sacred site for religious festivals, the Makahiki; also known as Captain Cook, the very tall seacliffs and beautiful deep harbor

here mark the spot where the former "high chief" met his doom in a skirmish.

A few miles down coast is Pu'u'honua o Honaunau, the sacred "place of refuge," or forgiveness, an old Hawaiian village and temple ringed with a brush of tall coconut trees; the coral reef here is one of the absolute best places to snorkel or scuba dive in the entire state! Continuing down the Kona Coast to South Point you can't miss the charcoal black lava fields that cut a wide swath through the cloud forests on the 13,680-ft Mauna Loa volcano. Off the coast where the flow spills into the ocean is simply great sportfishing for Marlin, Ono, Ahi and MahiMahi; look closely and you'll see pods of spinner dolphins, and that ominous black triangle? That's the stealth fighter-shaped manta ray.

Remote and awesome South Point,

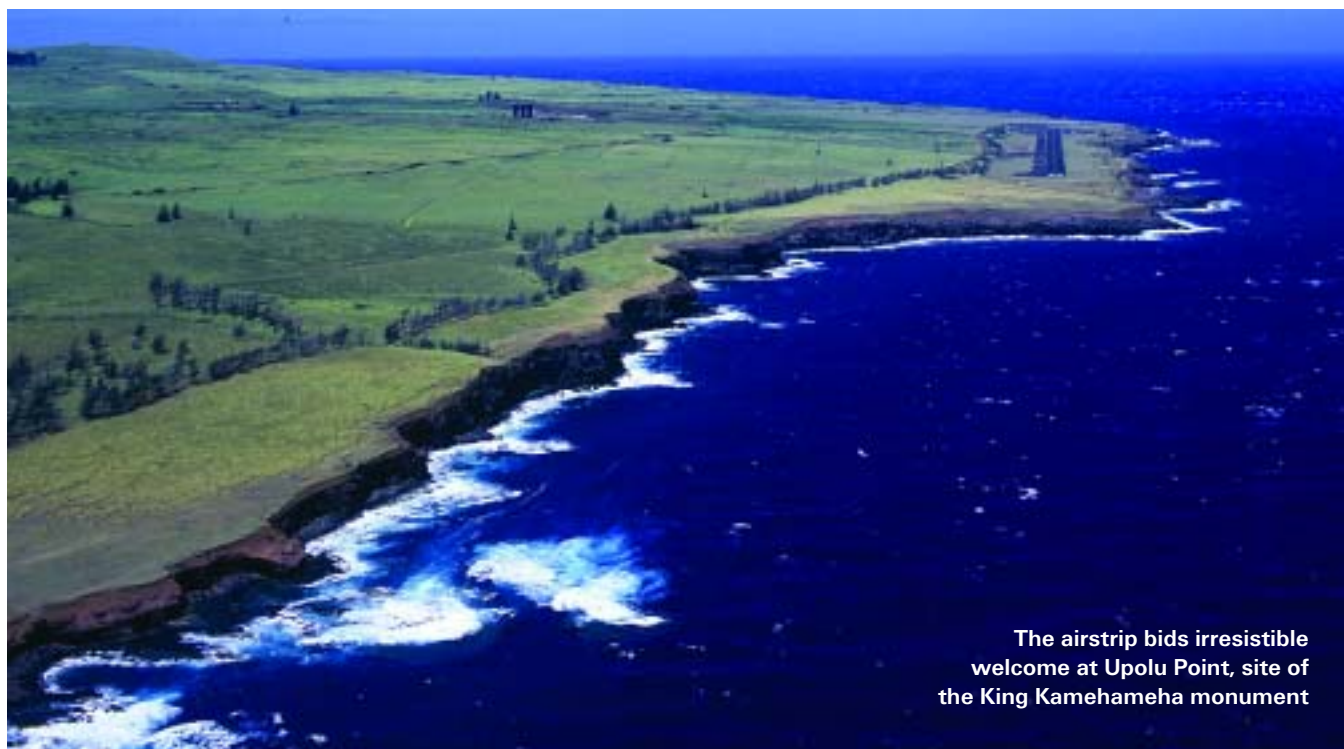
ahead, is the southernmost point of the U.S., the spot where the first Hawaiians arrived in sailing canoes from Tahiti 1500 years ago. Check-out the old Hawaiian rock wall settlements just along the shoreline. We have been flying the wind shadow of Mauna Loa, protected from the tradewinds, but up ahead, amazing! The ocean is alive with frothy white caps. We must slow to cross this "speed bump," or shear line of wind. Whew! Once through the turbulence and onto the windward coast, we fly in glassy smooth laminar air that has been sweeping across the flat ocean. The foamy white surf crashing against the pitch black jagged lava rock...incredible! And pure Hawaii.

Thirty minutes northeast, we arrive at Volcanoes National Park, the wettest place on the island as well as the hottest...i.e.,



Coral reefs off sacred Pu'u'honua o Honaunau, or "place of refuge," offer Hawaii's ultimate diving and snorkeling adventure; (inset): A yearly rainfall of up to 200 inches is the tropical lushness seen from above

Flying Adventures



The airstrip bids irresistible welcome at Upolu Point, site of the King Kamehameha monument

lava! We're probably in tradewind showers now, but check out the awesome Kilauea Crater's cauldron and the "chain of craters" road snaking around the moonscape of lava flows and cinder cones. We are now flying at 3,000 feet to the active volcano site, basically a smoking cindercone. Grab the camera and, for sure, politely skirt the swarm of tour aircraft. To find lava flows that play cat-and-mouse with the crusty surface, we head to the jet black sandy beach where 2,000-degree molten rock is exploding and steaming into the crashing surf – what an awesome otherworldly sight! Just upslope an entire subdivision of exclusive homes in the early 1990s was burned-up by a giant claw of lava; some of the lucky survivors still stand. Turning upslope, let's climb the Pali (Hawaiian for "cliffs") to view the smoking and spewing Pu'u-O'O Vent, the vent named for Hawaii's rarest endangered bird; weather permitting, we can circle on the upwind side, avoiding at all costs the poisonous sulfur gas plume. This is where your turn-around point practice comes in handy: Below, it's a scene right out of Dante's Inferno!

Hopefully, you got some incredible photos. Time to head north to Hilo, call

approach and get a transition through Class D airspace. Hilo is Hawaii's second largest city (pop. 50,000) and the wettest in the U.S. – yearly rainfall can be 200 inches!; its tropical look is due to its growth from sugar cane farming and blend of Asian and Hawaiian cultures. As we fly abeam Hilo Bay, notice the huge break wall erected to protect the city from the tsunamis that can hit here, like the one in 1946 whose 50-ft waves (caused by a 7.3 earthquake off Alaska) devastated the entire Big Island.

Cruising past Hilo, we're now above the Hamakua Coast – miles of glowing green farmland. This is waterfall central! No beaches, just miles of 100-ft seacliffs and small Hawaiian farms with remnants of sugar cane mills: Laupahoehoe; Paulo; Honokaa. Approaching the island's north end, here's 13,796-ft Mauna Kea, or "white mountain" for its frequent snow. Head's up! Rain shower cells ahead. For 10 miles now we've got the island's most rugged and tropical scenery. The Kohala Volcano's seven deep and very dramatic valleys are a fishing-farming haven with falls galore, falls that can drop 2,800 feet to the valley floor. If you look really closely, you might see a long-necked brontosaurus feeding on

jungle treetops: it is that Jurassic looking!

As we round Upolu Point, there's a quiet airstrip on the cliff: perfect for shooting touch-and-go's or stopping for a picnic by the 1,500-year-old Stonehenge-looking temple, Mookini Hei'eau. King Kamehameha was born nearby; his monument is worth a walk.

There's that giant wall of white-caps again! Climb to 3,000 feet, slow down, hang on and cross the northern wind-shear line.

All right? Swinging down the Kona Coast now, it's all bright blue sunshine, white sandy beaches and, December through April, hundreds of migrating humpbacks. There are also all the major resorts and golf courses like Mauna Kea and Hapuna Prince, all built upon a lava desert from an 1859 Mauna Loa eruption.

Around now it's time to check ATIS information for Kona Airport and check in with Kona tower. Get ready to use that opposite rudder for the airport is graced with a constant crosswind mixed with lots of turbulence generated from the sun-cooked lava rock upon which the airport is built. A sweet touchdown on the center line and now...a nice refreshing lunch of fish sandwiches and ice tea. Mahalo! ✕