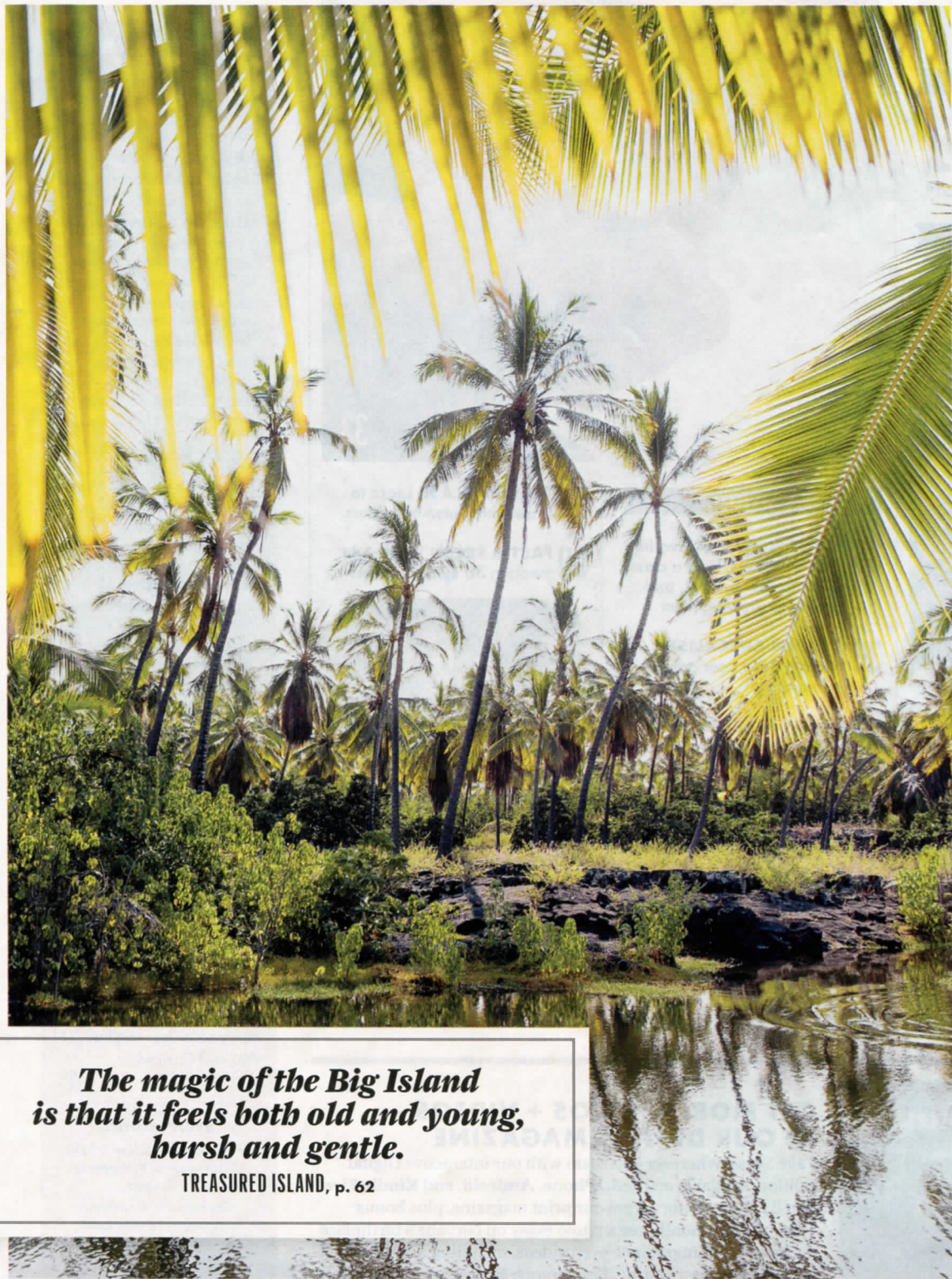


# January



***The magic of the Big Island  
is that it feels both old and young,  
harsh and gentle.***

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Photograph by THOMAS J. STORY

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*Cake cover: Photograph by Thomas J. Story; food styling by Karen Sbinto. Hawaii cover: Photograph by Thomas J. Story.*

# TREASURED ISLAND

*Way back when, they met cute in Hawaii. Now, they're trying to reconnect with this land of lava, white-knuckle drives, dolphins gone AWOL—and each other. Can they find the magic again while chaperoned by a ukulele-mad 10-year-old?*

BY PEGGY ORENSTEIN

**THE BIG ISLAND** brought my husband and me together. It was 1991. I was still new to San Francisco, enjoying myself in that aimless, vaguely miserable way endemic to one's 20s—unsure of what my life added up to, where it was heading. A friend who was writing about the rise of the Native Hawaiian rights movement invited me to tag along on a reporting trip to the Big Island. A free hotel room? Sign me up! Steven, as it happened, was there making a documentary film on the same subject. We had friends in common back home, and I'd always thought he was kind of cute. So, on the pretext of our mutual interest in hula heiaus and petroglyphs, I wangled an introduction.

About a year later, we returned to the Big Island as a twosome, to screen his film and, not incidentally, to

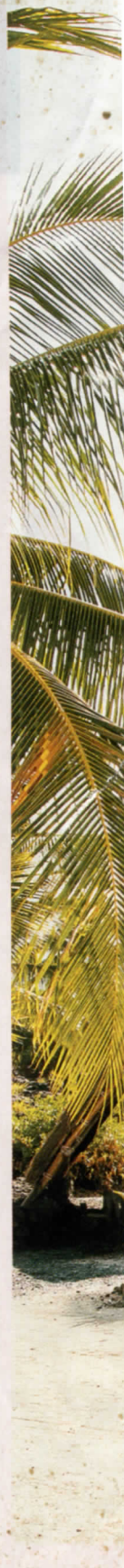
marry. In a photo from that trip, I'm standing on the rim of the Kilauea Volcano caldera, gazing at the steam that rises from its floor. Life was beginning down there, molten and unpredictable. I wonder if I realized that my own life was being forged as well.

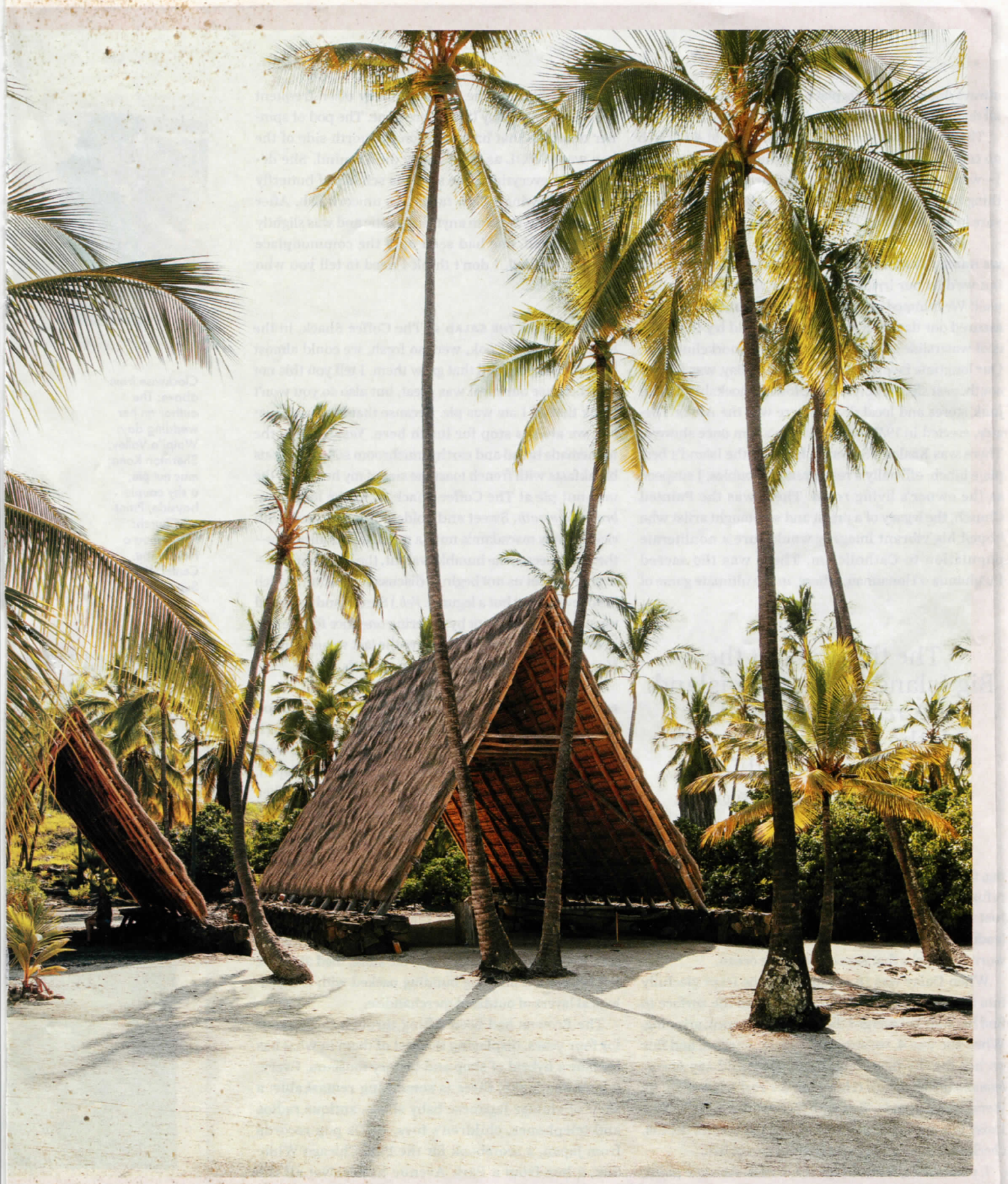
So much has happened since then: years of infertility followed by the birth of our daughter, Daisy; professional triumphs and disappointments; illnesses and the deaths of parents; shared jokes; inevitable resentments. Our marriage turned 21 last year, old enough to drink (and some days it probably would—*heavily*). That seemed the perfect moment to return to the Big Island, the place it all began. As with love itself, I hoped to rediscover what had

The Kona Coast: palm trees, soft white sand, thatched roofs, gentle tradewinds.

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*Peggy Orenstein is the author of *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, a New York Times best seller. She is also a contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine. Hear her read this story on [voqel.com/sunset](http://voqel.com/sunset).*





*Photographs by* **THOMAS J. STORY**

always drawn me to this place—and, perhaps, even after all these years, to find a few surprises.

The day did not start off well. We woke at 4 to catch an early flight and all of us—Daisy, now 10, Steven, and I—were grouchy. Steven and I quarreled over something tiny. I can't recall what, exactly, though I am quite sure he started it and I was in the right.

**WE HADN'T EXACTLY RECONCILED** by the time we landed, but we'd let our irritation go. After all, we were in Hawaii! We dumped our things at our Keauhou Bay hotel, assured our daughter that, yes, she could try the really cool waterslide *later*, and grabbed our snorkeling gear. Our longtime favorite spot, Honaunau Bay, was farther south, past sleepy, polysyllabic towns chockablock with junk stores and local dives. There was the Aloha Theatre, erected in 1932, where Steven's film once showed. There was Kāaloa's Super Js, home of the island's best plate lunch; officially a restaurant, it doubles, I suspect, as the owner's living room. There was the Painted Church, the legacy of a priest and self-taught artist who hoped his vibrant imagery would lure a nonliterate population to Catholicism. There was the sacred Pu'uhonua o Honaunau, where, in the ultimate game of

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Big Island is, it's a big island.  
A *really* big island.  
All the other islands put  
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tag, ancient Hawaiians condemned to death could find refuge—provided they got there before being caught. Just before the parking lot, we turned down the road leading to Two-Step, a snorkeling spot named for the worn lava rocks that ease entry to the ocean.

When Daisy was 18 months old, she leapt gleefully into a swimming pool; I ducked beneath the surface to find her fully submerged there, eyes wide open, grinning. When she was 4, we strapped a mask, snorkel, and fins on her for the first time; by 6, she could say *humunukunukuapua'a* (Hawaiian for reef triggerfish, its literal translation is "fish with a snout like a pig"). Now Daisy is a mermaid, free-diving into the ocean's depths, checking beneath ledges for bashful parrot fish.

I, meanwhile, scanned for sea turtles. At some point, Steven and I decided they were lucky, so *not* seeing one

somehow became the opposite. They often frequent Two-Step, but today there were none. The pod of spinner dolphins that hangs out on the north side of the bay was AWOL as well. Daisy didn't mind. She delighted in everything she saw: the schools of butterfly fish, the glowing yellow tangs, the unicorn fish. After an hour, I had not seen anything exotic and was slightly disappointed; she had seen only the commonplace yet was thrilled. I don't think I need to tell you who was better off.

**THE GREENS IN THE SALAD** at The Coffee Shack, in the town of Captain Cook, were so fresh, we could almost taste the sun and soil that grew them. I tell you this not only because our meal was great, but also so you won't think that all I ate was pie. Because that is the *real* reason we always stop for lunch here. Yes, there is the homemade bread and earthy mushroom soup, fabulous breakfasts with french toast the size of my head. But the mac nut pie at The Coffee Shack is, as the locals say, *broke da mouth*. Sweet and golden, it is suffused with rich, creamy macadamia nuts, a nut that puts all others—the lowly pecan, the humble walnut, the basic almond—to shame. (Let us not begin to discuss the peanut, which is not even a nut but a legume. *Feh.*) Steven and I showed uncustomary restraint by ordering one slice for the two of us, then dove for it as if it were the last weapon in *The Hunger Games*. It was gone within seconds.

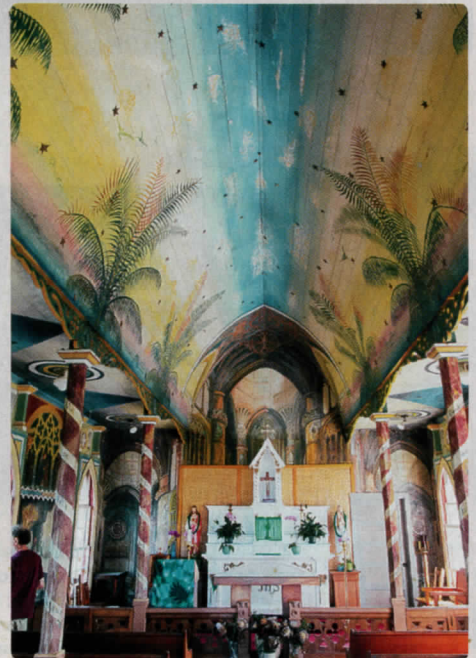
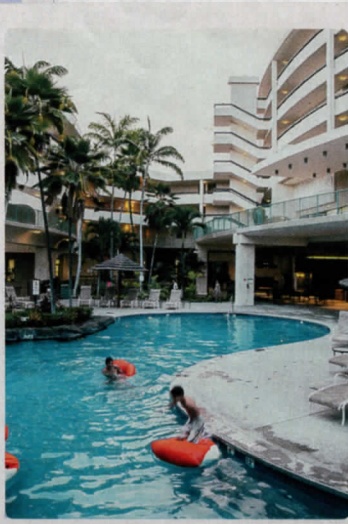
**REMEMBER THE PART** about surprises? The Keauhou Store, along a backroad recently tagged the Kona Heritage Corridor, turned out to be one of them. Hand-built in 1919 by Yoshisuke Sasaki, an immigrant from Japan, and lately refurbished by California transplants Thea and Kurt Brown, it was, in its heyday, akin to the Selfridges of the Big Island, selling a little bit of everything. There were the requisite groceries and dry goods, but it also peddled the first Schwinn bikes in Kona and stocked band instruments, furniture, even sleds for the snowy peaks of Mauna Kea. Business evaporated when the main highway came through; when Sasaki's middle son, Ricky, who had taken over the store, died at 84, he left behind a crumbling building packed with archaeological layers of outdated merchandise.

The Browns had been sifting through those relics for four years, displaying the best of them in what has become a hybrid of shop and history museum. Everywhere one looks, there is something remarkable: a shelf of vintage Japanese baby shoes, antique radios and telephones, children's toys, 1950s pop records from Japan, a scorebook for the 1956 Chicago White Sox, a box from a Park Avenue hatter. Not all the antiques are for sale, but the store does feature



Clockwise from above: The author on her wedding day; Waipi'o Valley; Sheraton Kona; mac nut pie; a shy couple bayside; Painted Church; Pu'uhonua o Honaunau. Center: Kaaloa's Super Js.





I floated alone. Until I was not.  
I saw a dark shape, and  
suddenly a manta ray appeared  
just beneath me.



HOLUALOA UKULELE  
GALLERY



Clockwise from top: The coast just off Mamalahoa Hwy.; four-string bliss in Holualoa; the Volcano Rainforest Retreat; breadfruit; line-caught tuna at the Suisan Fish Market. Center: A young customer at the Keauhou Store.

vintage-look T-shirts as well as replicas of old maps and theater posters. The Browns also sell produce and coffee grown on their own land as well as home-baked cookies (try the snickerdoodle).

We pulled over again farther down the road at the Holualoa Ukulele Gallery, housed in the town's original late-1920s post office. Inside, instruments are displayed like artworks, as well they should be. These are no tourist-trap tchotchkes: Handcrafted by members of the Big Island Ukulele Guild, they are made of koa, mango, myrtle, African mahogany. A few are even built from old cigar boxes, a time-honored technique. They run from about \$500 to \$1,650. Owner and former goldsmith Sam Rosen offered Daisy his business card, printed with four easy chords on the back, and within minutes, she was plunking away, the waterslide, at least for now, forgotten.

**THE THING ABOUT** the Big Island is, it's a big island. A *really* big island. All the other islands put together would fit onto it nearly twice over. To truly experience it, you have to move—a lot. After another day of snorkeling, mac nut pie, and, yes, waterslides, we pointed our rental car southeast. Lush coffee farms gave way to clusters of tiny houses with rusted corrugated-tin roofs, then to scrubby 'ohi'a trees. The blue skies darkened with ominous clouds. A shaft of god-light broke through just as a song by Darden Smith, an Austin singer-songwriter, came on the car stereo: "Skin, love is the one true skin, we all wanna walk around in..."

I'd listened to that tune incessantly on our wedding trip, when Steven's skin still felt new against mine. Back then, we canoodled in a rain forest B&B whose name we subsequently forgot; because we could never find it again, it attained Holy Grail status in our joint imagination. After three nights at the Volcano Rainforest Retreat, however, we have called off the quest. The *Swiss Family Robinson*-meets-Zen aesthetic of its four cabins

is the closest we'll get to life in an enchanted forest. Ours had a loft bed under a peaked roof and a cozy, propane-fueled stove for (needed) nighttime warmth. Through our windows, we could see the rain forest surrounding us in a veritable rainbow of green: a canopy of tree ferns, moss, bamboo. Maybe someday, years from now, a moment like that will once again lead to romance. But now, during these precious years of traveling as a family, our daughter flung herself in between us, and the three of us popped in a DVD of *The Simpsons*.

In the morning, we struck out on the Kilauea Iki Trail, which descends 400 feet through the rain forest, then across the still-steaming crater floor. The first time I hiked it, a mere quarter-century after the eruption that formed it, I was unimpressed: It felt like little more than a jaunt across a badly paved parking lot. You have to get into the science, the spirituality, the *flow* of the volcano to appreciate it; it is a window into the beginning of time, simultaneously ancient and new.

That is the paradox, the magic of the Big Island: It feels both old and young, harsh and gentle. This is a land where, because there were no predators, mint plants evolved without their minty flavor, nettles lost their sting, flies their

flight. It is a land where spiders have markings on their bellies that resemble a smiling human face. And it is a place, where, beneath decades of cooled rock, there is still plenty of blazing heat.

**ON EVERY HAWAIIAN ISLAND**, I have a favorite treat. On Maui, it's dry noodles at Sam Sato's in Wailuku. Shave-ice? Only at Matsumoto on Oahu's North Shore—anything else is just a snow cone. Here on the Big Island, I dream of *poke* from Hilo's Suisan Fish Market: cubed raw seafood alchemized into *onoliciousness* through some combination of onions, seaweed, sesame seeds, and spices, then dressed (or not) with soy sauce or sesame oil. We loaded up on marlin, on ahi poke with spicy, *tobiko*-studded mayo, on kimchi octopus and the obligatory two scoops of rice and macaroni salad, then picnicked beneath a banyan tree in Lili'uokalani Park. Our meal tasted like the ocean, and I pondered which I love more: snorkeling with fish or eating them. The omnivore's dilemma indeed.

Hilo, on the rainier east coast of the Big Island, is famous for its two tsunamis, which struck in 1946 and 1960. Entire neighborhoods were swept away; 220 people died in the two catastrophes. The stories of the disasters as collected by the Pacific Tsunami Museum are by turns devastating and miraculous. I'm partial to the tale of Marsue McGinnis, a young teacher who relocated from Cincinnati just before the 1946 tsunami hit. The wall of water tore her cottage to bits, killing her three housemates. McGinnis somehow survived, bobbing among the debris half-clothed, clinging to a plank of wood. Hours later, a small boat spotted her. On it was the man she had been dating and would later marry.

When we checked into Shipman House, our host, Barbara Andersen, said she remembered the shock she had experiencing the 1960 tsunami. She grew up on Oahu but spent every summer in Hilo at this sprawling 19th-century mansion owned for generations by her extended family. Barbara and her husband, Gary, bought the place in 1994 and converted it to a bed-and-breakfast. She pointed out the Steinway grand piano that Queen Lili'uokalani once liked to play, and she read from a 1907 letter introducing Jack London to the family. "Both he and his wife are plain, commonsense people," its author said. Barbara waited a beat, then deadpanned, "That was a lie."

**MAUNA KEA IS** not only the highest peak on the Big Island, it is also the tallest mountain on the planet—unlike Everest, much of it is underwater. Its 13,796-foot elevation, clean air, and minimal light pollution make it ideal for astronomy. Eleven countries have telescopes on its summit, peering past our stars and planets into



galaxies far, far away. It's possible to hike to its peak, but you can also join the free stargazing program at the visitor center, a mere 9,200 feet above sea level.

First, however, you have to get there, which for us involved a white-knuckle drive in the dark, through dense clouds and driving rain. When we broke through, though, the night sky was crystalline. The area around the visitor center's telescopes was unusually packed, the draw a bright speck that was hurtling across the sky: the International Space Shuttle. We craned our necks to see as it passed through Leo's mane, Scorpio's fishhook, the bow of Sagittarius, and then it was gone.

I peered into the viewfinder of a giant telescope and saw a perfect, tiny black-and-white Saturn. It looked fake, though of course it wasn't: I was looking at an actual planet! Impressive. But the temperature had dropped into the 40s. We grabbed cups of cocoa and hustled back to the car. In travel, as in love, not every adventure proves worth it.

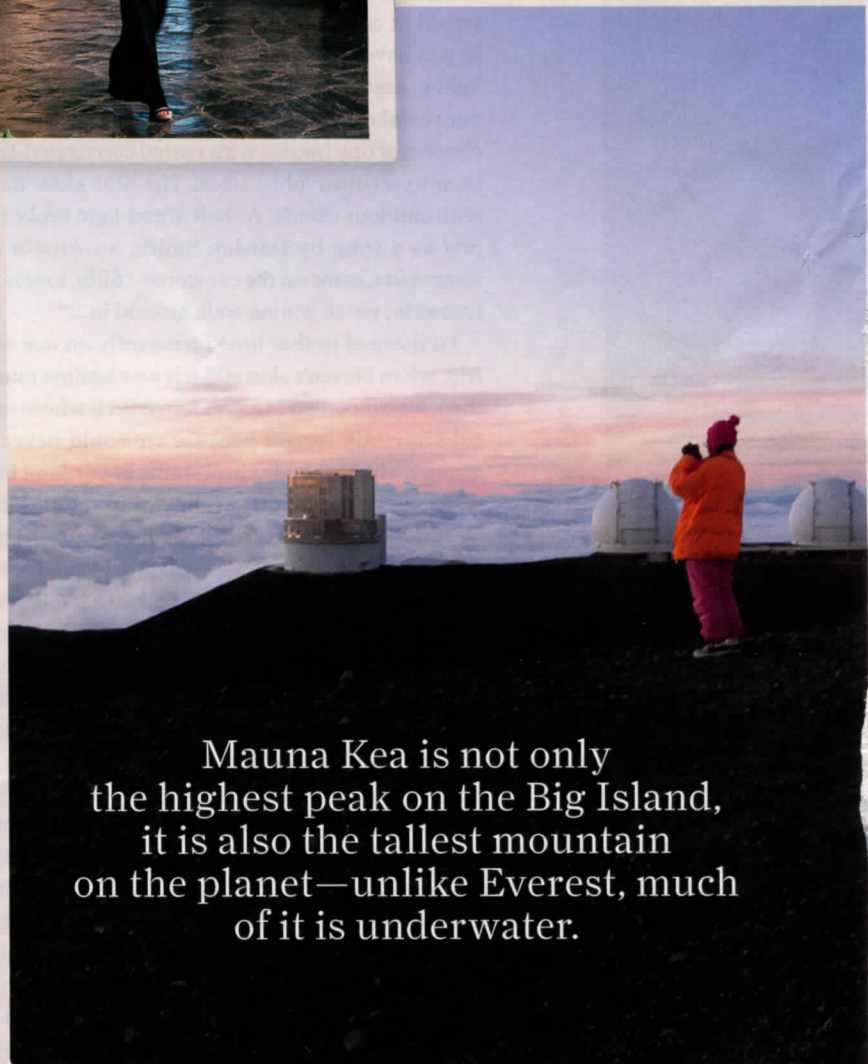
To distract ourselves for a bit from the treacherousness of the road, Steven and I reminisced quietly about other trips, to this island, to others, to places farther flung. "It's been a fun ride," he said as we turned into the Shipman House driveway.

"Up the mountain?" I asked, incredulous.

"No," he said. "The last 21 years. All of it. Together."

**WE SAVED THE KOHALA COAST**, with its high-end resorts, for last. I knew that once we reclined into lounges on the white sand of the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, we were done for. Not for nothing had this been voted—twice!—the world's best beach. The Mauna Kea was the first resort on the Big Island, built in 1965 by Laurance Rockefeller. It has a luxe *Mad Men* vibe to it, a midcentury elegance. But the real appeal is that idyllic crescent of sand, its irresistible turquoise water. I swam out until the umbrellas on shore were mere pin dots, then floated in the warm water alone. Until, that is, I was not: Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark shape, and suddenly a manta ray appeared just beneath me, its wings stretching slowly and gracefully. I remained motionless as it circled me once, then disappeared out to sea.

A few minutes later, I saw a "lucky" sea turtle; in fact, I saw two. But by then, I had realized I no longer needed them. I already had as much good fortune as I could want. So I turned in the limpid water and started swimming for shore, back to my daughter and my husband.



Mauna Kea is not only the highest peak on the Big Island, it is also the tallest mountain on the planet—unlike Everest, much of it is underwater.





Clockwise from far left: The Mauna Kea Beach Hotel; Hilo's Shipman House; the breakfast buffet at Shipman House; stellar sightseeing from Mauna Kea. Center: The pool at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel.

## ISLAND TIME

Hawaii is called the Big Island for a reason. It's 93 miles north to south, 76 miles east to west, more than 4,000 square miles all told, and, with continual volcanic activity, growing every year. When you visit, give yourself time; there's lots to explore.

### DAY 1

**START** your tropic idyll in **Kona**, famed for coffee but a region that has a lot more percolating than just java. First thing, check into the **Sheraton Kona Resort & Spa**. From \$199; [sheratonkona.com](http://sheratonkona.com).

**HIT** the ocean next. You're on the dry side of the island, but you don't have to forgo the water. The snorkeling is excellent at both **Keauhou Bay** and, farther south, **Honaunau Bay**. **SPEND** part of your day shopping—or simply gawking—at the **Holualoa Ukulele Gallery** and the **Keauhou Store**. *Gallery:* 76-5942 Mamalahoa Hwy., Holualoa; [konaweb.com/ukegallery](http://konaweb.com/ukegallery). *Store:* 78-7010 Mamalahoa Hwy., Holualoa; [keauhoustore.com](http://keauhoustore.com).

### DAY 2

**DRIVE** to **Pu'uhonua o Honaunau National Historic Park** to see the restored Royal Grounds, complete with a fish pond, thatched-roof canoe houses and burial sites. \$5/vehicle; *State 160, Honaunau*; [nps.gov/puho](http://nps.gov/puho).

**STOP** to visit the **Painted Church**, whose more formal handle is St. Benedict Roman Catholic Church. More than 110 years ago, a Belgian priest decorated the walls with bright 3-D paintings that tell biblical stories.

84-5140 Painted Church Rd., Captain Cook; [thepaintedchurch.org](http://thepaintedchurch.org).

**GET** the perfect plate lunch at **Kaaloa's Super Js**. \$; 83-5409 Mamalahoa Hwy., Captain Cook; (808) 328-9566.

**POLISH** it off with a slice—or two—of macadamia nut pie at **The Coffee Shack**. \$; 83-5799 Mamalahoa Hwy., Captain Cook; [coffeeshack.com](http://coffeeshack.com).

**SEE** what's playing at the **Aloha Theatre**, which hosts community theater and live music. 79-7384 Mamalahoa Hwy., Kainaliu; [apachawaii.org](http://apachawaii.org).

### DAYS 3 & 4

**STEER** yourself to the southern tip of the island and then swing through the **Ka'u District**, a region that's making a name for itself with prize-winning coffee beans. At **Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park**, find Crater Rim Drive and then park at the Kilauea Iki Overlook.

**STRAP** on your hiking shoes, grab some water, and head out on the 4-mile **Kilauea Iki Trail**. It will take you right through the middle of the **Kilauea Iki Crater**, which includes an erstwhile lava lake. \$10/vehicle; [nps.gov/havo/planyourvisit/hike\\_day\\_kilaueaiki.htm](http://nps.gov/havo/planyourvisit/hike_day_kilaueaiki.htm). **REST** your weary legs at the **Volcano Rainforest Retreat**. 4 cottages from \$180; 2-night min.; [volcano retreat.com](http://volcano retreat.com).

### DAY 5

**WANDER** north to **Hilo**, the island's most populous town and the home of the **Merrie Monarch Festival**, which holds the world's top hula competition every April. \$5; [merriemonarch.com](http://merriemonarch.com).

**LINE UP** at **Suisan Fish Market** for a plate full of poke. \$; 93 Lihikai St.; (808) 935-9349.

**WALK** the grounds at **Lili'uokalani Park & Gardens**, a 30-acre Japanese garden. \$8; Banyan Dr. at Lihikai St.; (808) 961-8311.

**VISIT** the **Pacific Tsunami Museum** to understand the ocean's destructive potential. \$8; 130 Kamehameha Ave.; [tsunami.org](http://tsunami.org).

**CHECK IN** at the 19th-century **Shipman House Bed & Breakfast**. 5 rooms from \$219; [hilo-hawaii.com](http://hilo-hawaii.com).

**DRIVE** toward the middle of the island to the **Mauna Kea Observatories** and get in line to look into deep space. 9 a.m.–10 p.m., stargazing program 6–10; *Onizuka Center for International Astronomy, Mauna Kea Access Rd., 6 miles off Daniel K. Inouye Hwy.*; [afi.hawaii.edu](http://afi.hawaii.edu); (808) 935-6268 for weather and road conditions.

### DAY 6

**HEAD** northwest to the **Waipi'o Valley Lookout** and over to the **Mauna Kea Beach Hotel**. End your trip as you began it, at the ocean. From \$550; [princesorts.hawaii.com](http://princesorts.hawaii.com). ☺

**S DIGITAL BONUS** Our guide to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park: [sunset.com/hawaiiinp](http://sunset.com/hawaiiinp).

