Playgrounds in Paradise

Thrills for all ages in Hawai‘i

By Matt Villano
With ocean waves rolling against the cliffs nearby and Hawai‘i Island’s Pololū Valley spread out like a fan before us, my elder daughter opened pre-hike negotiations at a steep price. “I’m going to need one M&M for every single switchback,” she declared. “The trail is steep! I need energy.”

My wife and I looked at each other and smiled; tactics like these were commonplace for our Big Girl, a precocious 3 at the time. She had hiked down the 1.5 miles of muddy switchbacks without incident, regaling us (and other hikers) with stories about make-believe cat princesses and singing old Taylor Swift songs. The descent was like entering a real-life terrarium complete with chirping birds, buzzing insects and palm-frond green as far as the eye could see. At the bottom of the trail, however, after a PB&J sandwich and an hour tossing rocks into a creek, the daunting prospect of a return climb required incentives. Tiny chocolate ones.

Of course we obliged. More than an hour later, it was high fives all around at the top of the trail.

This epic afternoon was just another day in paradise for our adventuresome family. My wife and I got married on Maui in 2004, and since our oldest daughter was born in May 2009, we’ve visited the Islands many times. Her sister, who turns 3 this September, has been to the Islands five times herself; she’s seen most of the Aloha State from the comfort of an external frame, child-carrying backpack that I am proud to carry.

Our adventures have led us to all four major islands: Maui, O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, and Kaua‘i. We’ve toured almost every inch of these famous destinations together. They are among the most family-friendly places on Earth. The sheer beauty of the islands and the deep appeal of their culture combine to create an arena for memorable experiences that we believe our daughters will cherish the rest of their lives.

It’s not just the beaches—any family can have fun anywhere with some sand pails and shovels. Rather, we love Hawai‘i for the diversity of activi-
ties, activities that truly appeal to kids of all ages. Often, we try to build our trips around a double-faceted agenda of hotel-driven activities and excursions we can engineer on our own. We also love to experience local culture—most often through music and art. The result: An understanding of Hawai‘i that creates an appreciation of how the place nurtures our collective souls. Put simply, it’s our family’s favorite place.

FLOWER POWER ON MAUI

Because my wife and I got married in Kapalua (and because my father-in-law owned a condo on Kā‘anapali Beach for a while), Maui is the part of Hawai‘i to which we return most frequently. Our first few trips back as parents comprised dragging our first daughter (and eventually her sister) to all the places we enjoyed during our wedding weekend. Using my father-in-law’s flat as a base, we explored Kā‘anapali and Lahaina, resting beneath the shade of its famous immense banyan fig. We even hiked the trail to the 1,200-foot ‘Iao Needle, the site of a great battle in 1790 to unite the islands.

Then, sometime around 2011, it dawned on us: Why not go somewhere new? This is what led us to Hāna, a legendary no-stoplight village on the eastern side of Maui.

The nightly lū‘au at O‘ahu’s Polynesian Cultural Center begins with the arrival of the chief’s family—the ali‘i.
5 Tips for Hawai‘i Family Vacations

Let’s face it: Even in paradise, a week together for the modern family can present challenges. Here, in no particular order, are five suggestions to maximize your enjoyment on your next Hawaiian getaway.

1. Remember the lānai. Almost all Hawai‘i accommodations boast an open-air lānai, or patio. Opening the glass doors and heading outside is an easy route to a breath of fresh island air.

2. Use the kids’ club. Many of the largest resorts have kids’ club programs for children every day. At Hilton Hawaiian Village, the huge resort at the west end of Waikīkī, the kids’ club is called Camp Penguin. It focuses on Hawaiian culture, and often includes off-property excursions such as trips to the Honolulu Zoo.

3. Get off-property. Resort hotels in Hawai‘i are designed to keep visitors busy throughout their stays, but an equally worthy way to experience the local culture is to get out and explore. Invest in a good guidebook for suggestions for day trips, or consult the hotel concierge for ideas.

4. Call in reinforcements. Many properties contract with local babysitting services to pre-screen nannies/sitters they can recommend. If you’re comfortable with the idea, hire one of these child minders to watch the kids and free you and your spouse for a date night.

5. Rent a villa. One easy way to spread out is to reserve a multibedroom vacation rental. These accommodations offer a vacation experience similar to apartment living; families purchase groceries and cook their own food. In Hawai‘i, many villas are part of condo associations, which means guests enjoy access to on-site pools, barbecues and other amenities. —M.V.

Tips for Hawai‘i Family Vacations

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Like most visitors to this part of Maui, we headed out along the 68-mile Hāna Highway, a curvaceous ribbon of road that hugs the northeast flank of Mount Haleakalā. We stopped about halfway along the drive for a picnic lunch at the Garden of Eden arboretum and botanical garden, a privately owned facility with vibrant flowers, thousands of trees and a handful of quiet walking paths to take it all in. The garden features more than 500 different plants and trees, including many native to the Islands—and a very popular flock of non-native resident peacocks, which seemed inclined to follow us around for the duration of our visit.

Our destination in Hāna was Travaasa Hāna, a luxurious-but-understated resort with an extensive selection of immersive experiences for guests of all ages. Our goal: Give the girls the opportunity to make their own lei.

It turned out that our youngest daughter was too little to sit still and participate in the lei kui pololei (strung with needle) lei-making class we attended. Her older sister, on the other hand, embraced the challenge with panache. Like a surgeon, she poked the 3-inch needle through the
center of plumeria flower after plumeria flower, alternating between pink and white to create a lovely effect.

At one point, she was so thoroughly focused on the task at hand, she rejected a snack. Unprecedented.

Finally, when she finished her lei, the “auntie” (this is island parlance for a female elder) leading the class explained the cultural significance of these beautiful flower necklaces, noting that throughout history, Polynesian people have considered them a sign of enduring affection.

Throughout history, Polynesian people have considered these colorful flower garlands—lei—signs of enduring affection.

I wasn’t sure my daughter was completely following the story; at times, I caught her smelling some stray plumeria flowers or watching some colorful birds in the trees. But when we got back to the hotel room and she put the lei around her mother’s neck, I knew she had taken the story to heart.

‘Snorkeling’ on Kaua’i

Hawaiians call Kaua’i the Garden Isle for its lush valleys and forest-draped mountains. If they wanted to, they also could call it the “Playground Isle,” as it has so many natural diversions for young families and kids.

On the South Shore, near Po’ipu, our girls have marveled at Spouting Horn, a natural lava tube that fills with surf during large swells and “spouts” like a whale’s blowhole. In Lihu’e, less than 15 minutes from the island’s main airport, we’ve pretended to be engineers aboard the narrow-gauge railroad at Kilohana Estate, an old Tudor-style mansion representing what’s left of what was one of the island’s largest sugar cane operations.
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All accommodations include free daily maid service, free WiFi access, onsite oceanfront restaurant, general store/esi, gas BBQ grill, free parking, no resort fee and much more.
Still, our favorite spot on the entire island is Hā'ena State Park, the public space at the end of the road that winds through Hanalei, on the island's North Shore. This is the site of the trailhead for the 11-mile Kalalau Trail, the famous footpath that traverses the Nā Pali Coast to Kalalau Valley. It's also the backdrop for Kē'ē Beach, a reef-protected cove with white sand, placid turquoise water and—at low tide—innumerable shallow tide pools to explore.

We took the girls to this beach on our last visit to Kaua'i, in 2012. The older girl had been nagging us about going snorkeling for the first part of the trip, and my wife and I were struggling to explain to her that she couldn't engage in actual snorkeling until she knew how to actually swim. At Kē'ē, however, my wife had a brilliant idea, convincing her that standing in the tide pools and peering down on all the tiny fish and critters was just as good.

Right away, our daughter planted her feet in the tidal zone, staring downward with a huge grin.

Over the course of the two hours that followed, the child announced every single form of marine life she could find: Hermit crabs! Sea stars! Angelfish! Coral! The list went on and on. She was so obsessed with “snorkeling” that she ignored our pleas to come in from the water, forcing us to reapply sunscreen multiple times while she was standing there looking down. Even her younger sister got into the game (though we repatriated her to shore when she tried to say our girls love music would be like saying Hawai'i is surrounded by water—they adore everything from hula to falsetto to slack-key and more.

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to eat one of the crabs).

Later that night, at our vacation rental back in Po’ipū, we found our elder “snorkeler” cuddled up on the couch with a book from the condo library. At first we thought it was one of the Olivia the Pig books she’d discovered the night before. Then we took a closer look: It was a field guide to the fish of Kaua‘i. Our daughter was preparing for her next “snorkeling” experience. Or a future as the next Jacques Cousteau.

**Celebrating music on O’ahu**

To say our girls love music would be like saying the Hawaiian archipelago is surrounded by water. We introduced both kids to Bach and Beethoven when they were infants, and since have expanded their repertoire to include artists ranging from Kelly Clarkson and Lucinda Williams to Hapa and (Disney Junior rockers) Choo-Choo Soul.

Naturally, because we have spent so much time in the Islands, the kids also have been exposed to copious amounts of Hawaiian music—everything from hula to falsetto, slack-key and more. This is why we were intent on seeking out live music on our most recent visit, to O‘ahu, last June.

Our quest began at the Polynesian Cultural
Center in Lāʻie, a quiet town in the northeast corner of the island, about an hour’s drive from downtown Honolulu. This expansive attraction is a key venue for visitors to experience Polynesian culture—it’s laid out like a mainland theme park with discrete areas representing seven different regions of Polynesia. It’s also reputed to have the best lūʻaus in all of Hawaiʻi.

We signed up for an Aliʻi Lūʻau, a three-hour experience that includes music, dancing and dinner. The dinner part was a buffet of everyday Hawaiian foods such as poi, lomi lomi, poke, and kalua pig cooked in an earthen oven. The entertainment was campy and fun—a musical revue of traditional numbers from around the Pacific. The girls preferred the hula numbers; at one point the Big Girl bolted out of her chair and ran toward the stage to shake hips with other kids from the crowd. Later on came my favorite, the Samoan fire-dancing, during which performers quite literally whirled around the stage spinning flaming torches and knives.

Our musical immersion continued later that weekend at Kapiolani Regional Park, a 300-acre swath of grass and ironwood trees on the east end of Waikīkī. With Diamond Head looming in the distance, we made our way to the bandstand, grabbed a spot on the lawn and listened to a concert by the Royal Hawaiian Band.
This performance was significant for a number of reasons. First, we were in the company of greatness: The Royal Hawaiian Band is the only full-time municipal band in the nation. Second, we were witnessing history unfold before our very eyes: The same band (with different players, of course) has been playing in the same spot since the days of King David Kalākaua, the “Merrie Monarch” who ruled Hawai‘i from 1874 to 1891. Finally, my wife and I were able to enjoy the music in almost total silence—both our girls were so excited to be outside that they spent most of the concert lying on their backs watching palm trees sway in the wind.

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Toward the end of our visit, we uncovered yet another musical gem: the Kani Ka Pila Grille, a super-casual poolside restaurant in Waikīkī.

A friend who’s a fan of slack-key guitar had recommended the place; he told me locals hail the unassuming restaurant as one of the best spots in town to hear traditional Hawaiian music. On the night we went, we got to see Cyril Pahinui, a slack-key master in his own right and the son of musical legend Gabby Pahinui.

Initially, we were nervous to bring the girls; we had had a long day on Waikīkī Beach and weren’t sure how tired toddlers would do in an intimate setting near a pool. Ultimately, however, the kids were even more transfixed by Pahinui’s mellifluous melodies than we were. At one point in the night, both girls wandered right up to the stage and just stood there watching the musician’s

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On Maui, Piiholo Ranch Zipline (www.piiholozipline.com) is a private course with a variety of zips, including one that measures more than a half-mile long. The outfitter has invested in block brakes on the lines themselves, enabling guests to free their hands for picture taking, shaka shaking, and fist-pumps in midflight. There’s also a giant rope bridge at the start of the course.

If your big kids seek an even more adrenaline-inducing adventure, hike the 5-mile Sliding Sands trail in Haleakalā National Park (www.nps.gov/hale); the trail starts near 10,000 feet and traverses the enormous Haleakalā Crater.

Another option (between January and April): Whale-watching trips out of Lahaina Harbor to see humpback whales. Ultimate Whale Watch (www.ultimatewhalewatch.com) runs some of the fastest boats in the fleet. The company also works closely with local
researchers, many of whom have contributed significant data on whale mating, vocalizations and calf rearing.

On Kaua‘i, older kids will love tubing with Kaua‘i Backcountry Adventures (www.kauaibackcountry.com). The three-hour tour follows a circa-1870s ditch and tunnel system that once irrigated vast sugar cane fields on a plantation in Lī‘hu‘e; the system runs through some of the most beautiful and remote land on the island and includes incredible views of the ocean, coast, mountains and valleys. The tubing route even includes several hand-dug tunnels.

The North Shore of O‘ahu has its own share of activities for bigger kids. During calm days—or in summer—visit Sunset Beach outside Hale‘iwa to look for Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles hauled up on the sand. Admire them from a distance, please; both animals are protected by federal law.

During high-surf days—especially in winter—grab the binoculars and head to ‘Ehukai Beach Park in Pūpōkea for watching of a different kind: surfer watching. This is the closest beach to the surf reef break known as the Banzai Pipeline, a natural ocean-floor feature that creates some of the biggest and most epic waves in the world.

On Hawai‘i Island, teenager-friendly activities are all about natural spectacles. No. 1 on just about every family’s list is Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park (www.nps.gov/havo), the only place in the United States to witness a
volcanic eruption in real time. In recent years the best viewing has been from Crater Rim Drive, which overlooks the active Halema'uma'u crater. The coastal area of the park also is worth seeing; Chain of Craters Road dead-ends where a 2003 lava flow crossed the pavement on its march to the sea.

Across the island, just outside Hilo, check out ‘Akaka Falls State Park (above), which boasts a short hike and a 440-foot waterfall that pours over the edge of a rocky cliff.

On Lāna‘i, rent a Jeep and tool around the windswept Garden of the Gods rock garden at the end of Polihua Road. The rock towers, spires and formations formed by centuries of wind erosion are best to see around dusk, when the setting sun turns everything Martian-red.

For more information about family-friendly accommodations or attractions that welcome families, please visit the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority’s website, www.gohawaii.com. —M.V.
...fingers as they fluttered over the frets. Later in the evening, the two of them got up once again—this time to dance.

When they finished, even Pahinui himself laughed and applauded.

**Archaeology on Hawai‘i Island**

When you’re married to a professional archaeologist, one out of every three or four vacations includes at least a handful of visits to archaeological sites. Naturally, then, because my wife is the female version of Indiana Jones (minus the hat … and the whip), we’ve visited our fair share of heiau—the Hawaiian term for temples, or sacred spots. These historic sites are found on all the Islands, and three of the most family-friendly ones are on Hawai‘i Island.

The first, Lapakahi State Historical Park, comprises partially restored remains of an ancient fishing settlement, as well as a visitor kiosk with interpretive displays including artifacts retrieved from the site. As we wandered the trail through Lapakahi Village, my wife explained to the girls how ancient Hawaiians lived and worked together, how they stored their fish and how they cooked it in earthen pits. The archaeologist in our family knew this stuff by heart; for everyone else, a pamphlet-based self-guided tour is available.

Also nearby, Pu‘ukoholā Heiau National Historic Site features a host of restored structures, the remnants of what is believed to have been a temple and village used only by priests and the chiefly classes. The two girls especially loved this latter site. After marveling at artifacts in a small—but-modern on-site visitor center, they followed their mother on a trail through the site itself, listening intently as she shared a G-rated edition of the history. Her version: A great king—Kamehameha—built the temple at the suggestion of a friend. The more complete historical version: Following years of inter-island war, a kahuna, or wise man, prophesied that peace would come if Kamehameha built a temple and dedicated it to the war god, Ku. So the king built the temple. It worked.
Before leaving Pu'ukoholā, the four of us wandered down to the remains of an ancient village—a spot that overlooks a pocket beach. Here, from the shade of some palm trees, we watched tiny crabs run sideways up the beach to escape the gently creeping surf. The girls were intent on catching some of these crustaceans, and repeatedly followed the waves back out to sea. Every time the kids got close to some crabs, the crustaceans darted to safety down holes in the wet sand.

Another animal encounter was the highlight of our visit to Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau National Historical Park, the third of our favorite sites on Hawai'i Island and arguably the most sacred site in the whole state.

Sure, all of us enjoyed the ranger-led tour during which we learned about the site's role as a place of refuge for Hawaiians who had violated the kapu, or sacred laws. And, yes, the kids were in awe of the holua slides—chutes that were part of a dangerous-but-adrenaline-pumping historic sport that sounds like the Hawaiian take on bobsledding.

But what my children remember best about Pu'uhonua was the green sea turtle we spotted lollygagging in the water just offshore as we walked along the edge of Keone'ele Cove.

Once they recognized the turtle's tiny head bobbing in the water, the girls ran back and forth along the shoreline, laughing and pointing and shrieking. The turtle lingered for nearly 45 minutes—so long that our older daughter was convinced she had made a new lifelong friend.

“I think he likes us, Dad,” she said earnestly. “I think he wants us to stay.”

Matt Villano is a freelance writer and editor based in Northern California.