THE ULTIMATE O‘AHU, HAWAI‘I TRAVEL GUIDE

Free Preview -- Sample Chapters from the 2026 Edition

A free look inside our complete O‘ahu guide: current conditions, the island at a glance, our orientation map, an honest comparison of all eight regions and where to stay, the complete Pearl Harbor chapter, and our reservation timeline -- exactly as they appear in the full 78-page guide.

WAIKĪKĪ * NORTH SHORE * PEARL HARBOR * BEACHES * HIKES * FAMILY TRAVEL

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About this free preview

You are reading seven sections from The Ultimate Oʻahu Travel Guide 2026, reproduced exactly as they appear in the full guide. Some sections refer to chapters that are only in the full guide. Planning details were checked as of November 23, 2026; closures, reservation systems and prices change, so use the official links in each section before you book. Some links are affiliate links; if you book through them, we may earn a commission at no additional cost to you.

Welcome to Oʻahu

How to use this guide

Oʻahu is the most visited Hawaiian island and the easiest one to plan badly. It is home to about two-thirds of Hawaiʻi's residents, a real city with real traffic, and some of the best beaches, hikes and history in the Pacific. The island is small on a map -- you can drive around most of it in a day -- but rush hour on the H-1, a sold-out Hanauma Bay, a full Lanikai parking street or a winter swell on the North Shore can quietly wreck a day you planned around them.

This guide is built to be your actual trip plan. It tells you which part of the island to stay in, what is worth your limited days and what is not, which reservations open when, where to park (and where not to), which popular hikes are legal and which are not, how the seasons change the beaches, and exactly how to string it all together into 3- to 10-day itineraries.

We wrote it from a family perspective -- Heather, Jesse and our son Lukas, who is nine -- because that is how we plan. But this is not a kids-only guide. Couples, first-timers, return visitors, hikers, snorkelers, photographers and anyone who hates sitting in traffic will find the same practical detail. Where an activity is great for kids, too much for kids, or better without them, we say so.

LAST VERIFIED: November 23, 2026

Reservation rules, fees, hours and trail status in this guide were checked against official Hawaiʻi State Parks (DLNR), City and County of Honolulu, National Park Service, Recreation.gov and attraction websites on this date. Items marked **[CHANGES OFTEN]** are the ones most likely to move: reservation windows, prices, hours, storm closures and business details. Check the official link before you build a day around them.

How this guide is organized

Chapters 1 and 2 give you the island and its regions. Chapters 3 to 19 cover what to do: attractions, beaches, snorkeling, hikes, waterfalls, the North Shore, Waikīkī, Pearl Harbor, culture, lūʻau, Kualoa Ranch, food, sunrise and sunset, photography, wildlife, scenic drives and the circle-island day. Chapters 20 and 21 are the itineraries. Chapters 22 to 38 are the logistics -- where to stay, getting around, parking, reservations, kids, seasons, weather, packing, budget, free things, splurges, skips, mistakes, safety, etiquette, rainy days and an FAQ. The back of the guide has quick-reference tables and map data for every major stop.

Labels we use

Attraction cards are color-coded: **MUST DO** (plan your trip around these), **WORTH IT** (strong picks for most visitors), **OPTIONAL** (good if it fits your interests), **SEASONAL** (great only at certain times of year), **SKIP** (we would spend the time elsewhere) and **DO NOT GO** (closed, illegal, trespassing or genuinely dangerous). Costs are listed as verified on the date above; [CHANGES OFTEN] flags the soft ones.

A note on names

This guide uses Hawaiian spelling, including the ʻokina (the glottal-stop mark in Oʻahu) and the kahakō (the macron over long vowels, as in Waikīkī), wherever the spelling is confirmed by State of Hawaiʻi, City and County of Honolulu or cultural sources. Business and brand names keep the spelling the business itself uses (Ko Olina resort, Roberts Hawaii, Wet'n'Wild Hawaii), and web addresses are unchanged. Map apps find these places with or without the marks; the Map Data section lists a plain-text search name for every stop. Chapter 11 includes a short pronunciation guide.

Find it fast

The questions buyers ask most, and where the answer lives.

Question	Go to
Where should we stay? Do we need a car?	Ch. 2 Parts of Oʻahu; Ch. 22 Where to Stay; Ch. 23 Getting Around
What needs a reservation, and what sells out first?	Ch. 25 Reservations (timeline and sell-out order)
What should we do each day?	Ch. 20 itineraries (7-day flagship); Ch. 21 special-interest plans
Which beaches suit our ability and the season?	Ch. 4 Beaches (summer vs winter table); Ch. 35 Safety
Where is snorkeling safe, and when does it become unsafe?	Ch. 5 Snorkeling; Ch. 8 North Shore
Where do we park, and how early should we arrive?	Ch. 24 Parking Guide
Which hikes are legal? Which viral spots should we avoid?	Ch. 6 Hikes (Do NOT Attempt table); Ch. 33
What do we do with kids, or when it rains?	Ch. 26 Oʻahu with Kids; Ch. 37 Rainy Day Oʻahu
What is worth paying for, and what can we skip?	Ch. 32 Splurges; Ch. 33 Things We Would Skip
How early do we leave for the airport?	Ch. 23 Getting Around (departure day)

Partner disclosure

Some links in this guide are affiliate links, including Expedia, Booking.com, our Viator shop and Shaka Guide. If you book through them, Adventure Family Vlog may earn a commission at no extra cost to you. That never changes what we recommend. Official reservations -- Hanauma Bay, Diamond Head, the USS Arizona Memorial program and any state, city or federal permit -- are always linked directly to the official booking site. We never send you to a third party for something you can book officially.

Current O‘ahu Conditions

What changed in 2026 -- read before you book

A lot moved on O‘ahu in 2026. Two Kona low storms in March 2026 flooded parts of the island and closed state parks for weeks, a beloved lū‘au closed for good, transit fares changed, and a lookout added a parking fee. Here is what matters for a trip in late 2026 and early 2027.

CURRENT CONDITIONS -- as of November 23, 2026

Ka‘ena Point State Park: Vehicle access has reopened, but the Keawa‘ula Trail (the Wai‘anae-side route to the point) remains CLOSED, and vehicle access is restricted past the restroom parking lot because of storm damage. The comfort station has reopened. Vehicle access has also closed temporarily after heavy rain this fall. To hike to the point, use the Mokulē‘ia (North Shore) side. [CHANGES OFTEN]

Keaīwa Heiau State Recreation Area (‘Aiea Loop Trail): All restrooms closed for construction through November 25, 2026. [CHANGES OFTEN]

Pu‘u o Mahuka Heiau: Closed for storm cleanup in spring 2026; it no longer appears in the State Parks closure notices as of November 12, 2026. [CHANGES OFTEN]

Paradise Cove Luau: Permanently closed after its final show on December 31, 2025. Ignore any older article or booking site that still lists it. See Chapter 12 for current lū‘au options.

Pu‘u ‘Ualaka‘a State Wayside (Tantalus lookout): Since March 1, 2026, non-residents pay a $7 per-vehicle parking fee.

Pearl Harbor on December 7: The anniversary morning is reserved for the commemoration ceremony; plan your USS Arizona visit for another day (Chapter 10).

TheBus and Skyline: New fares took effect July 1, 2026 (Chapter 23). Skyline rail runs from East Kapolei to Middle Street, including the airport; it does not reach Waikīkī or Ala Moana.

Island-hopping? State Parks' November 2026 hurricane-recovery notices (Hurricanes Nolo and Lowell) mainly affect Kauai. Check them before adding another island.

Where to check the night before

Weather and surf decide more O‘ahu days than anything else. Check these before you commit to a beach, hike or drive. State Parks posts closures in a running notice list; the City posts Hanauma Bay changes on its official page; the National Weather Service in Honolulu issues flash-flood watches and high-surf advisories.

State Parks notices | Hanauma Bay (City) | NWS Honolulu | Hawaii Beach Safety | Pearl Harbor (NPS)

O‘ahu at a Glance

Chapter 1 -- the island in one page

O‘ahu is roughly 44 miles long and 30 miles wide. Two mountain ranges run along it -- the Wai‘anae Range on the west and the Koolau Range on the east -- with a central plateau between them. That geography explains almost everything about planning here: the windward side gets more rain, the leeward side is drier and sunnier, the North Shore swings between calm summers and giant winter surf, and the roads funnel through a few busy corridors.

Main airport	Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL), about 9 to 10 miles from Waikīkī. Plan 25 to 45 minutes by car, much longer at rush hour. Going home: reach the rental-car return about 2.5 hours before a mainland flight, plus your drive time (Chapter 23).
Where most visitors stay	Waikīkī (walkable, no car needed for the first days), then Ko Olina (resort lagoons), the North Shore (Turtle Bay) and, for longer stays, legal rentals in resort zones.
Do you need a car?	Not for Waikīkī, Honolulu and Pearl Harbor. Yes, for at least 2 to 4 days if you want the North Shore, windward beaches and east-side hikes on your own schedule. Rent only for the days you need.
Biggest reservations	Hanauma Bay (2 days ahead, 7:00 a.m. HST), Diamond Head (up to 30 days ahead), the USS Arizona Memorial program (8 weeks ahead and the day before), Kualoa Ranch, lū‘au, ‘Iolani Palace.
Driving around the island	A full circle-island loop is roughly 110 to 120 miles. Doable in a day, better split over two.
Rush hour	Weekday mornings toward Honolulu (roughly 5:30 to 8:30 a.m.) and afternoons away from it (roughly 3:00 to 6:30 p.m.). The H-1 between Kapolei and downtown is the worst stretch.
Weather	Warm all year: highs mostly in the low 80s F in winter and upper 80s F in summer. Windward and mountain areas get passing showers; the leeward side is driest.
Ocean seasons	Winter (roughly October/November to April): big surf on north- and west-facing shores. Summer: calmer north shore, occasional south swells in Waikīkī.
Whale season	November to May, peak January to March (State Parks).
Time zone	Hawaii-Aleutian Standard Time (HST). Hawai‘i does not observe daylight saving time.
Sunscreen	The law: Hawai‘i prohibits the sale and distribution of sunscreens containing oxybenzone or octinoxate. Our recommendation: bring a mineral (zinc oxide or titanium dioxide) sunscreen and a rash guard.
Emergency	Call 911. Lifeguards staff many but not all beaches; swim at a guarded beach whenever you can.

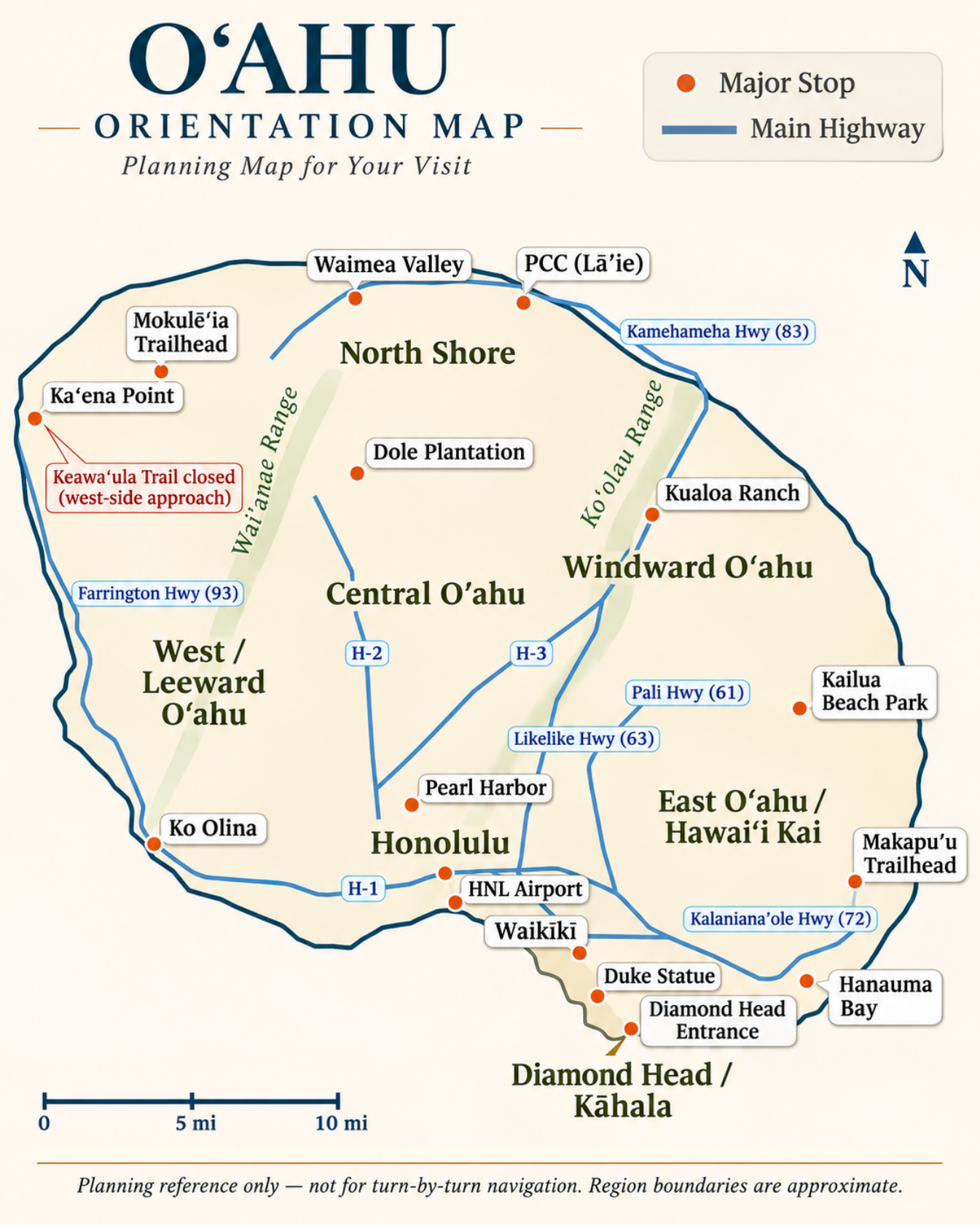
O‘ahu quick-reference

Use this table as your one-page cheat sheet. Drive times are typical light-traffic estimates from Waikīkī; add 30 to 60 minutes at rush hour or on weekend afternoons heading back into town.

Region	Best for	From Waikīkī	Top stops
Waikīkī	First-timers, no car, nightlife, easy beaches	--	Waikīkī Beach, Kūhiō, Kapahulu food, Kaimana
Honolulu	History, food, culture	10-20 min	‘Iolani Palace, Bishop Museum, Chinatown, Ala Moana
Diamond Head / Kāhala	Iconic hike, quiet beaches	10-15 min	Diamond Head, Kāhala, Kaimana
East / Hawai‘i Kai	Snorkeling, coastal views, short hikes	20-35 min	Hanauma Bay, Makapu‘u, Hālona, Sandy
Windward	Beaches, green cliffs, kayaking	25-50 min	Kailua, Lanikai, Byodo-In, Kualoa

Region	Best for	From Waikīkī	Top stops
North Shore	Surf (winter), snorkel (summer), small towns	50-70 min	Haleʻiwa, Waimea, Shark's Cove, Sunset
Central	Pineapples, Pearl Harbor, inland	20-45 min	Pearl Harbor, Dole Plantation, Wahiawā
West / Leeward	Resorts, sunsets, dry sunny beaches	35-60 min	Ko Olina, Mākaha, Pōkaʻī Bay, Kaʻena Point

Use this map to understand how O‘ahu's eight visitor regions fit together before planning your days. The regions are planning areas used throughout this guide, not official district boundaries.



The Parts of O‘ahu

Chapter 2 -- eight regions, honestly compared

Where you stay matters more on O‘ahu than on most islands, because traffic turns a 25-mile drive into an hour and a half. Read this chapter before you book a hotel. Each region gets the same treatment: what it is known for, the main attractions, beaches, hikes and food, pros and cons, traffic and parking, and who should or should not stay there.

WAIKĪKĪ	
Known for	O‘ahu's resort district: two miles of beach, high-rise hotels, shopping, restaurants and surf lessons, all walkable, with Diamond Head as the backdrop.
Attractions	Waikīkī Beach and the Duke Kahanamoku statue, Kūhiō Beach, Kapahulu Groin, Honolulu Zoo and Waikīkī Aquarium, Kapi‘olani Park, Fort DeRussy, the International Market Place, sunset catamarans.
Beaches	Kūhiō (calm, wall-protected pools), Queen's, Kaimana/Sans Souci (local favorite, calmer), Fort DeRussy (wider sand), Duke Kahanamoku Lagoon at the Hilton (no surf).
Hikes nearby	Diamond Head (10-15 minutes away; reservation required).
Food	Everything from food halls and musubi shops to fine dining. Kapahulu Avenue (Leonard's, Rainbow Drive-In, Ono Seafood) is the local-food corridor on Waikīkī's edge.
Pros	No car needed. Walk to beaches, food and tours. Most tours pick up here. Best for first-timers and short trips.
Cons	Crowded, urban and expensive. Hotel parking is costly. Not the 'quiet tropical Hawai‘i' some people picture.
Traffic / parking	Congested streets; hotel parking is often expensive per night [CHANGES OFTEN]. Street and Kapi‘olani Park parking fill early. Plan to rent a car only for the days you leave Waikīkī.
Who should stay	First-timers, 3- to 5-day trips, families who want easy beaches and food, people who do not want to drive, Pearl Harbor and Diamond Head planners.
Who should not	Travelers wanting seclusion, a big private lanai and a sleepy beach town.
Drive times	Airport 25-45 min; Pearl Harbor 25-40; Hanauma Bay 20-30; Kailua 25-40; Hale‘iwa 50-70; Ko Olina 35-60.

HONOLULU (BEYOND WAIKĪKĪ)	
Known for	Hawai‘i's capital: ‘Iolani Palace (home of Hawai‘i's last monarchs), museums, Chinatown, Ala Moana and Kaka‘ako's murals and breweries.
Attractions	‘Iolani Palace, Bishop Museum, Hawai‘i State Capitol and King Kamehameha statue, Chinatown, Ala Moana Center, Kaka‘ako murals, Punchbowl (National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific), Tantalus and Pu‘u ‘Ualaka‘a.
Beaches	Ala Moana Regional Park and Magic Island lagoon (calm, family-friendly).
Hikes	Mānoa Falls, Makiki Valley trails, the short Ualakaa trail, Pu‘u Pia.
Food	The island's best range: Chinatown dim sum and noodles, Liliha Bakery, plate lunches, Kaka‘ako food halls, Kaimukī restaurants.
Pros	Culture and food; rainy-day options; close to the airport.
Cons	Few hotels outside Waikīkī and Ala Moana; downtown is quiet at night; some areas are not great to wander after dark.
Traffic / parking	Paid street meters and garages; museums have their own lots. Rush hour is heavy.
Who should stay	Business travelers, return visitors, food lovers who prefer Ala Moana or Kaka‘ako condos-hotels.
Who should not	Beach-first vacations.
Drive times	Waikīkī 10-20 min; airport 15-25; Pearl Harbor 20-30.

DIAMOND HEAD AND KĀHALA	
Known for	The volcanic crater hike, upscale Kāhala homes and quiet beaches.
Attractions	Diamond Head State Monument, Diamond Head Lookout on the coastal road, Kaimana Beach, Kāhala Beach, the KCC Farmers Market (Saturday mornings) [CHANGES OFTEN].
Beaches	Kaimana, Diamond Head Beach Park (rough, surfers), Kāhala (shallow and reefy, more for strolling).
Pros	Calmer than Waikīkī but close to it. Very few hotels (one landmark resort in Kāhala).
Cons	Limited lodging; few places to eat right on the beach.
Traffic / parking	Diamond Head parking is by reservation only for non-residents. Kāhala beach access lanes have limited street parking.
Who should stay	Couples and families who want a quieter base near Waikīkī.
Drive times	Waikīkī 10-15 min; Hanauma Bay 15-20.

EAST O‘AHU AND HAWAI‘I KAI	
Known for	The dramatic southeast coast: Hanauma Bay, Koko Head, the Hālona Blowhole, Sandy Beach, Makapu‘u.
Attractions	Hanauma Bay, Koko Crater Tramway (the stairs), Koko Crater Botanical Garden, Hālona Blowhole lookout, Hālona Beach Cove, Sandy Beach (watch only), Makapu‘u Point Lighthouse Trail, Makapu‘u Lookout.
Beaches	Hanauma Bay (protected snorkel preserve), Makapu‘u (bodyboarding, often rough), Sandy Beach (dangerous shorebreak -- watch, do not swim).
Hikes	Makapu‘u Lighthouse (easy paved), Koko Crater stairs (brutal), Kuli‘ou‘ou Ridge (moderate-hard).
Food	Hawai‘i Kai has shopping-center restaurants, a Costco and shave ice; little right on the coast.
Pros	Spectacular scenery 20-35 minutes from Waikīkī; sunrise country.
Cons	Very few visitor rentals; small lookout parking lots; car break-ins happen at scenic pullouts.
Traffic / parking	Kalaniana‘ole Highway backs up on weekends. Lookout lots are small -- go early.
Who should stay	Usually best as a day trip from Waikīkī.
Drive times	Waikīkī to Hanauma 20-30 min; to Makapu‘u 30-40.

WINDWARD O‘AHU (KAILUA, KĀNE‘OHE, WAIMĀNALO, KUALOA)	
Known for	Turquoise water, the soaring green Koolau cliffs, Kailua and Lanikai beaches, and quieter towns.
Attractions	Kailua Beach, Lanikai Beach and the Lanikai Pillbox, Waimānalo Beach, Pali Lookout, Ho‘omaluhia Botanical Garden, Byodo-In Temple, Kualoa Regional Park, Kualoa Ranch, Kāne‘ohe Bay sandbar tours, Mokulua Islands kayak tours.
Beaches	Kailua, Lanikai, Waimānalo, Bellows (weekends and holidays), Kualoa Regional Park.
Hikes	Lanikai Pillbox (Ka‘iwa Ridge), the long Maunawili Trail, Ho‘omaluhia's walking paths.
Food	Kailua town: cafes, poke, plate lunch, Kalapawai Market, shave ice; Waiāhole and Kahalu‘u roadside stops.
Pros	Some of the prettiest beaches in Hawai‘i; small-town feel; easy kayak and paddle trips.
Cons	Rainier than Waikīkī. Legal short-term rentals are scarce here (most homes need 90-day minimum stays -- see Chapter 22). Lanikai has no beach parking lot.
Traffic / parking	Kailua Beach Park lots fill by mid-morning on weekends; Lanikai has holiday-weekend parking restrictions. The Pali and Likelike highways jam at rush hour.
Who should stay	Return visitors and longer stays in a legal rental or B&B; otherwise do it as day trips.
Who should not	Anyone who needs a resort pool and nightly restaurant variety.
Drive times	Waikīkī to Kailua 25-40 min; to Kualoa 40-55; to Waimānalo 35-45 (via the coast).

NORTH SHORE (HALEʻIWA TO KAHUKU AND LĀʻIE)	
Known for	World-famous winter surf (Pipeline, Sunset, Waimea), summer snorkeling, Haleʻiwa town, shrimp trucks and turtles.
Attractions	Haleʻiwa town and Matsumoto Shave Ice, Laniākea (turtles), Waimea Bay, Waimea Valley, Shark's Cove and Three Tables (summer), Pipeline/ʻEhukai, Sunset Beach, Kahuku shrimp trucks, Turtle Bay, Polynesian Cultural Center and Lāʻie Point.
Beaches	Waimea Bay, Sunset, ʻEhukai, Haleʻiwa Aliʻi, Chun's Reef, Kawela Bay, Lāʻie beaches.
Hikes	Kaʻena Point from Mokulēʻia, Waimea Valley paved walk, Hauʻula Loop.
Food	Food trucks, shrimp trucks, Haleʻiwa cafes, Ted's Bakery pies.
Pros	The 'country' feel, sunsets, surf watching in winter, calm snorkeling in summer.
Cons	Far from everything else; one two-lane highway (Kamehameha Hwy) that jams on winter weekends and big-surf days; limited lodging; winter swells close many beaches to swimming.
Traffic / parking	Shark's Cove, Laniākea and Waimea Bay parking are chronic problems. Never park on the highway shoulder where signs prohibit it.
Who should stay	Surf fans in winter, families who want a slower 2-3 night stay, PCC visitors (Lāʻie).
Who should not	Short trips focused on Pearl Harbor, Diamond Head and Waikīkī.
Drive times	Waikīkī to Haleʻiwa 50-70 min; Haleʻiwa to Turtle Bay 25-35; Lāʻie to Waikīkī 60-80 (windward route).

CENTRAL OʻAHU (PEARL HARBOR, WAHIAWĀ, MILILANI)	
Known for	Pearl Harbor, the central plateau and pineapple fields, military bases and suburbs.
Attractions	Pearl Harbor National Memorial and the three Historic Sites, Dole Plantation, Wahiawā Botanical Garden, ʻAiea Loop Trail (Keaīwa Heiau).
Pros	On the way to the North Shore; Pearl Harbor is right off the H-1.
Cons	Few visitor hotels; mostly suburban.
Traffic / parking	The H-1/H-2 merge and the Pearl Harbor area are among the worst traffic points on the island. Pearl Harbor parking is a paid lot (Chapter 10).
Who should stay	Rarely visitors; it is a pass-through region.
Drive times	Waikīkī to Pearl Harbor 25-40 min; to Dole 35-50.

WEST / LEEWARD OʻAHU (KAPOLEI, KO OLINA, WAIʻANAE COAST)	
Known for	The sunniest, driest coast; the Ko Olina resort lagoons; long sunsets; the remote Waiʻanae coast and Kaʻena Point.
Attractions	Ko Olina lagoons, lūʻau in Kapolei/Ko Olina, Wet'n'Wild Hawaii, Pōkaʻī Bay, Mākaha Beach, Electric Beach (experienced snorkelers only), Kaʻena Point State Park.
Beaches	Ko Olina lagoons (very calm), Pōkaʻī Bay (protected), Mākaha (big surf in winter), Yokohama (remote).
Pros	Calm swimming lagoons for kids; reliable sun; Disney's Aulani and other big resorts; legal resort-zone condos.
Cons	45-60+ minutes from Honolulu, much worse at rush hour; far from the windward side and North Shore; limited dining outside the resorts.
Traffic / parking	Farrington Highway is the only road along the Waiʻanae coast. Ko Olina has a limited number of free public stalls at the lagoons that fill early.
Who should stay	Families who want a pool-and-lagoon resort trip, multigenerational groups, Disney fans.
Who should not	Anyone wanting to explore the whole island daily -- you will spend hours in the car.
Drive times	Ko Olina to Waikīkī 35-60 min (90+ at rush hour); to Pearl Harbor 25-40; to Haleʻiwa 40-55.

Our take on where to base

For a first trip of five to seven days, we would split the stay: 3-4 nights in Waikīkī (no car) and 2-3 nights on the North Shore or at Ko Olina (with a car). For three or four days, stay in Waikīkī and rent a car for one or two days only. Chapter 22 goes deeper.

Pearl Harbor

Chapter 10 -- the complete guide

Pearl Harbor is the most visited site on O‘ahu and one of the most moving places in the country. It is also confusing: one free National Park Service memorial plus three separate, paid nonprofit museums, all starting from the same visitor center, with a strict bag policy and a reservation system that sells out. Here is how it works.

Site	Run by	Cost (2026)	Time	Notes
Pearl Harbor Visitor Center, museums and grounds	NPS	Free	1-2 hr	7 a.m.-5 p.m.; no ticket needed
USS Arizona Memorial program	NPS	Free + $1 Recreation.gov fee	About 75 min	Film + boat; programs about every 15 min, 8 a.m.-3:30 p.m., lunch break noon-1
Ford Island Bus Tour (USS Utah and Oklahoma Memorials)	NPS	Reservation required (Recreation.gov)	Varies	Limited dates and seats; book on Recreation.gov
Battleship Missouri Memorial	Nonprofit	$39.99 adult / $19.99 child (4-12)	2-3 hr	35-min guided tour included; on Ford Island
Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum	Nonprofit	$29.99 / $17.99	1.5-2.5 hr	9 a.m.-5 p.m.; on Ford Island
USS Bowfin Submarine Museum and Park	Nonprofit	$25.99 / $14.99	1-1.5 hr	7 a.m.-5 p.m.; by visitor center

Historic Site prices are as published in 2026 and can change. Third-party 'passes' are not valid for NPS programs, and the USS Arizona program itself is free -- you should never pay a reseller for it.

USS Arizona Memorial tickets -- official

Reserve on Recreation.gov: released 8 weeks (56 days) ahead and again one day ahead, both at 3:00 p.m. HST on a rolling daily window; the NPS allows up to 10 tickets per day. Tickets can be gone in minutes, so log in early. Every visitor, including infants, needs a ticket. The $1 fee is non-refundable and reservations are final. **Standby:** sign up at the audio tour booth in the visitor center; waits often run 1-3 hours and only a small share of visitors get on that way. [CHANGES OFTEN]

Recreation.gov -- Pearl Harbor National Memorial

The bag policy (people miss this every day)

Bags that hide their contents and are larger than 1.25 x 2.25 x 5.5 inches are not allowed -- that rules out purses, backpacks, diaper bags, camera bags and fanny packs. Clear bags with visible contents (stadium-style) are allowed. Paid bag storage is to the right of the entrance (about $7 per bag, $10 oversized; open roughly 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) and covers all the Historic Sites. Leave bags at the hotel, or lock them out of sight in the trunk before you arrive -- not in the parking lot. [CHANGES OFTEN]

Your reservation is not a guarantee of the boat

The USS Arizona boat program can be cancelled or modified for boat mechanical issues, high winds and other safety concerns, or at the Navy's discretion. When that happens, visitors usually see the film and museums only. Build Pearl Harbor into a day with some slack, and keep the free museums in your plan either way. The memorial is not open by reservation on the morning of December 7, when the anniversary ceremony takes place.

Getting there and parking

Use 'Pearl Harbor National Memorial, 1 Arizona Memorial Place' in your GPS. Parking is $7 per day, paid by app or kiosk; lots are open 6:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day [CHANGES OFTEN]. Arrive 45-60 minutes before your Arizona program -- traffic and construction near the site are common. From Waikīkī, allow 25-40 minutes by car, or use TheBus or a shuttle.

How a Pearl Harbor visit actually works

1) Park or arrive by bus/shuttle, store any bag. 2) Enter the free visitor center; your Arizona ticket shows a program time. 3) Check in at the theater about 15 minutes early (arrive at the site much earlier). 4) Watch the documentary film, then board the Navy-operated boat to the memorial. 5) Spend about 15 minutes on the memorial -- it is a place of quiet respect. 6) Return by boat. 7) For Missouri or the Aviation Museum, buy tickets at the visitor center ticket booth or in advance and take the shuttle to Ford Island; Bowfin is next to the visitor center. The memorial boat program can be suspended for weather, high winds or operational needs.

Getting there without a car

TheBus serves the Pearl Harbor area from Waikīkī; check routes on thebus.org or the DaBus2 app (allow about an hour). Many commercial shuttles and tours also pick up in Waikīkī -- but remember your USS Arizona ticket still comes from Recreation.gov, and a tour package cannot guarantee the NPS program unless it says how it secured tickets.

PEARL HARBOR IN 3 HOURS	
Arrive	45-60 minutes before your Arizona program. Walk the outdoor exhibits and waterfront.
Core	USS Arizona Memorial program (film plus boat, about 75 minutes).
After	One museum gallery in the visitor center, then leave.
Best for	Families with younger kids, people combining Pearl Harbor with another activity.

PEARL HARBOR HALF DAY	
Morning	Early Arizona program (8:00-9:00 a.m.).
Then	Shuttle to Ford Island for the Battleship Missouri (2-2.5 hours).
Lunch	Snack bar on site or head out for lunch.
Best for	Most first-time visitors.

PEARL HARBOR FULL DAY	
8:00 a.m.	USS Arizona program.
9:30 a.m.	USS Bowfin and museum.
11:00 a.m.	Shuttle to Ford Island: Battleship Missouri, lunch on site.
2:00 p.m.	Pearl Harbor Aviation Museum.
4:30 p.m.	Back to the visitor center before close.
Best for	History lovers, veterans and families with kids 10+.

Which add-on should you choose?

One add-on: the Missouri (where World War II formally ended, and a huge ship kids love exploring). Two: add the Aviation Museum if your family likes planes, or Bowfin if you are short on time (no shuttle). The submarine itself has a minimum age for boarding, so families with toddlers should choose the Missouri or Aviation Museum.

Reservations

Chapter 25 -- what to book and when

Book these in this order. Times are Hawai‘i Standard Time; convert to your home time zone and set two alarms. Official sources are linked directly -- never pay a reseller for something that is free or bookable officially.

Attraction	Required?	When it opens	How far ahead	Official source
USS Arizona Memorial program	Strongly recommended (standby otherwise)	3:00 p.m. HST	8 weeks (56 days) and 1 day ahead; up to 10 tickets per day	Recreation.gov
Diamond Head (non-residents)	Yes	Midnight HST (rolling)	Up to 30 days	gostateparks.hawaii.gov
Hanauma Bay (non-residents)	Yes (limited walk-ins)	7:00 a.m. HST	2 days	pros.hnl.info
Hanauma Bay + transport package	Optional	Check operator	Further ahead than City tickets	Roberts Hawaii
Ford Island Bus Tour (Utah, Oklahoma)	Yes	Check site	Check site	Recreation.gov
Battleship Missouri, Aviation Museum, Bowfin	Recommended	Anytime	Days to weeks	Missouri / Aviation / Bowfin
‘Iolani Palace	Yes (timed tours)	Anytime	1-3 weeks in busy seasons	iolanipalace.org
Kualoa Ranch	Yes	Anytime	2-6 weeks; more for holidays	kualoa.com
Polynesian Cultural Center / Ali‘i Lū‘au	Yes	Anytime	2-6 weeks	polynesia.com
Other lū‘au	Yes	Anytime	1-4 weeks	Operator sites
Bishop Museum	Optional	Anytime	Day of is usually fine	bishopmuseum.org
Waimea Valley	No (admission at gate)	--	Day of is fine; check seasonal days	waimeavalley.net
Surf lessons, snorkel tours, sunset sails	Recommended	Anytime	Days to 2 weeks	Operators / Viator
Rental car	Yes	Anytime	As soon as dates are set	Expedia

Reservation timeline

2-3 months out: flights, lodging, rental car, Kualoa, PCC, lūʻau. **8 weeks out (3 p.m. HST):** USS Arizona. **30 days out (midnight HST):** Diamond Head. **1-3 weeks out:** ʻIolani Palace, Historic Sites, tours. **2 days out (7:00 a.m. HST):** Hanauma Bay. **Day before (3 p.m. HST):** second chance at USS Arizona tickets.

What sells out first: Hanauma Bay and USS Arizona tickets (often within minutes of release), then early Diamond Head entry and parking slots, then Kualoa UTV, zipline and horseback tours and popular lūʻau nights in summer and holidays.

This Free Preview Ends Here

The complete guide is 78 pages and 38 chapters. Beyond what you just read, it includes:

- Every major attraction rated MUST DO to DO NOT GO, with cost, parking, timing and family notes
- Beaches by season and ability, snorkeling, and where conditions become unsafe
- Legal hikes, waterfalls, and the popular hikes you should NOT attempt
- A complete North Shore mini-guide, Waikīkī and Honolulu, culture and pronunciation
- An honest lūʻau comparison and a Kualoa Ranch tour guide
- Food, sunrise and sunset spots, photography and drone rules, wildlife laws vs guidelines
- 3-, 4-, 5-, 7- and 10-day itineraries, plus special-interest plans for families, hikers and no-car trips
- Getting around, parking, kids, best time to visit, packing, budgets, safety and a rainy-day plan
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