



Molokai Sea Cliffs - Molokai, Hawaii

## Photographing the Islands of Hawaii

by

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### Introduction to the Hawaiian Islands

The Hawaiian Islands are an archipelago of eight primary islands and many atolls that extend for 1600 miles in the central Pacific Ocean. The larger and inhabited islands are what we commonly refer to as Hawaii, the 50<sup>th</sup> State of the United States of America. The main islands, from east to west, are comprised of the Island of Hawaii (also known as the Big Island), Maui, Kahoolawe, Molokai, Lanai, Oahu, Kauai, and Niihau. Beyond Niihau to the west lie the atolls beginning with Kaula and extending to Kure Atoll in the west. Kure Atoll is the last place on Earth to change days and the last place on Earth to ring in the new year. The islands of Oahu, Maui, Kauai and Hawaii (Big Island) are the most visited and developed with infrastructure equivalent to much of the civilized world. Molokai and Lanai have very limited accommodation options and infrastructure and have far fewer people. All six of these islands offer an abundance of photographic possibilities. Kahoolawe and Niihau are essentially off-limits. Kahoolawe was a Navy bombing range until recent years and has lots of unexploded ordinance. It is possible to go there as part of a restoration mission but one cannot go there as a photo destination. Niihau is reserved for the very few people of 100% Hawaiian origin and cannot be visited for photography if at all. Neither have any infrastructure. Kahoolawe is photographable from a distance from the southern shores of Maui and Niihau can be seen from the southwestern part of Kauai.

Lets get some proper pronunciation out of the way as most mainlanders do not pronounce the island's names properly. Oahu and Maui are the easy ones that most people get right – they are pronounced Oh-ah-hoo and Mau-ee. Hawaii is pronounced Ha-vah-ee; Kauai is pronounced

Cow-ah-ee; Lanai is pronounced Lah-na-ee; Molokai is pronounced Mo-low-kah-ee; Kahoolawe is pronounced Kah-ho-oh-la-ve. Finally Niihau is pronounced Nee-eeh-how.



Anaeho'omalū Bay - Big Island of Hawaii

Getting to Hawaii from Asia, Australia and North America is fairly easy. Most major air carriers have daily flights to Oahu, Maui, Kauai and Hawaii from several major North American, Australian and Asian hubs. Europeans and South Americans will generally have to fly to a North American hub and then proceed on another flight to Hawaii. Hawaiian Airlines offer frequent regular service between all of the islands that can be visited. A flight from the west coast of the US takes 5 to 6 hours and covers over 2000 miles. Since this is a part of the US, no passports or vaccinations are required for US citizens. If visiting Midway Atoll as part of a research or volunteer mission on a private chartered flight (there is no commercial service), a passport is required as Midway is an occupied territory of the United States, not an incorporated territory. It is not legal to bring fruits, vegetables, or any other form of food derived from living things in and out of Hawaii and you will be subjected to agricultural inspections. An agricultural declaration is required by all arrivals regardless of origin. Upon leaving Hawaii, all produce items purchased, such as Pineapples, are subject to inspection and require Dept. of agriculture inspection and approval. There are stores at the airports that take care of all of this for you. Once in the islands, rental cars and hotels are plentiful on Oahu, Maui, Kauai and the Big Island. Be forewarned that food, fuel and accommodations in Hawaii can be very expensive as so much of it must be imported to the islands. You should expect to pay double what you pay in the continental US for most items, more than that on Lanai and Molokai. A word of caution! Even the most veteran of sunbathers from the southern continental US or southern Europe will burn in Hawaii due to the much more direct sun angle throughout the entire year – always use strong sunscreen. All of the islands that can be visited are between the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer.

The leeward islands or the atolls that lie beyond Niihau are currently only visitable as part of a scientific research or volunteer team.



Pu'uhonua 'O Honaunau (Place of Refuge) - Big Island of Hawaii

## A Brief History

The Hawaiian Islands were born 70 to 100 million years ago when the Pacific plate ruptured causing hot magma to form the very first island. This was the island of Kure which has now eroded beneath the surface of the Pacific Ocean except for a small remnant of a coral reef. Kure Atoll lies 1600 miles west northwest of the easternmost tip of the Hawaiian Islands on the Big Island. Next, the islands that we call Midway Atoll, French Frigate Shoals, Necker, and Nihoa in the far northwest part of the archipelago were formed. These are also on their last breath in geological time scales. All of the leeward atolls are part of the world's largest marine wildlife refuge, Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Of the islands that we commonly refer to as the Hawaiian Islands, Niihau and Kauai are the oldest followed by Oahu, Molokai, Lanai, Maui, and Hawaii. In general the islands first formed in the northwest and proceeded to the southeast. All except Hawaii are declining geologically and eroding away although Haleakala, the main volcano on Maui, has not yet been declared extinct so there is a possibility that Maui could still grow. Hawaii, is still a young island, geologically speaking, and is very much growing with continuing volcanic eruptions from the very active Kilauea volcano and its eastern rift zone. To the southwest of Hawaii, the newest island is forming and growing. Its surface is only 3200 feet below the surface of the Pacific Ocean. In about 100,000 years, this will be the newest island in the Hawaiian island chain and it has already been named Loihi (pronounced Low-ee-hee).

The first settlers of the Hawaiian islands arrived from the Marquesas, more than 2000 miles to the south, in double hulled canoes in the fourth or fifth century. These settlers cultivated the land and farmed it with edible crops such as Taro, now a staple of an authentic Hawaiian diet. The fate of the original culture is not fully known but it is believed they were overthrown by settlers from Tahiti and receded into the cliffs and valleys; thereby giving birth to the legend of the Menehune – a tribe of short people that live in the woods away from civilization. The new culture was led by chiefs that established strong laws by creating taboos designed to evoke fear and thereby maintain order among the people.

In the 1700's, Captain Cook, while on his way to Alaska discovered the Hawaiian Islands when he made landfall on Kauai beginning the westernization of the islands. Initially Cook was thought to be a God but as time went on, the Hawaiian people began to become suspicious. When one of Captain Cook's followers killed a Hawaiian Chief, Captain Cook's life ended when he was repeatedly stabbed by a mob. Cook and his band are credited for much modernization in the islands but are also blamed for bringing venereal diseases, rats, and other negative aspects of modern culture to the islands.

The most revered figure in Hawaiian History is King Kamehameha the Great. He is credited for bringing together the islands under single rule rather than each island being under their own rule often resulting in conflict between the islands. This was done through force.



Byodo-In Temple - Oahu, Hawaii

Whaling modernized Hawaii. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whaling ships from all over the world followed the whales to the islands beginning the racial integration of the islands. In the mid 1800's, Hawaiians got the entrepreneurial spirit and started selling large tracts of land. Sanford Dole bought much of this land including essentially the entire island of Lanai. In 1894 the United States recognized the Hawaiian Islands as a Sovereign nation under Sanford Dole,

President – Republic of Hawaii. Then in 1900, Hawaii became an official territory of the United States and eventually, in the mid 1900's, became the 50<sup>th</sup> state of the USA. Today Hawaii still produces Pineapple and Sugarcane but these industries are very much in decline and Hawaii's main product is tourism.



Hulopoe Bay - Lanai, Hawaii

## Photographing the Islands

The Hawaiian Islands are a treasure for nature photographers. They offer everything from spectacular coastline, to large mountains, cliffs, volcanoes, canyons, and some exotic wildlife. In general, lenses in the 12mm to 300mm range will suffice for any landscape work. Most of the wildlife you will encounter in the islands is of the avian variety so if you plan to photograph birds, a longer lens such as a 500mm or 600mm lens is desirable. Filters such as a polarizer and neutral density filters will help produce better results. A tripod is essential for the best photographs, not only for slow shutter speed shots but to help mitigate the constant trade winds.

### The Island of Hawaii - "The Big Island"

If you have never been to the Hawaiian Islands and want to visit just one island that offers a lot of everything that Hawaii has to offer, the Big Island is a great place to go. It is huge! All of the other islands combined have significantly less landmass than the island of Hawaii alone. Hawaii has white sand beaches, green sand beaches and black sand beaches. Hawaii has rain forest, upland farmland, waterfalls and spewing volcanoes! A week of shooting from dawn to dusk will only scratch the surface on this island. Not to be missed are the Black Sand Beaches and sea turtles that sun themselves on them, the waterfalls including Rainbow Falls and Akaka Falls in the Hilo area as well as the Hawaii Tropical Botanical Gardens just north of Hilo. On the northern tip of the island, you will find two spectacular valley lookouts - the Pololu Valley and the Waipio Valley. An incredible experience is Hawaii Volcanoes National Park where you can see

real lava flows when eruptions are occurring. You can hike out among the lava fields and see glowing rocks and oozing lava. The drive to see the sunrise from 13,800 feet on the top of Mauna Kea is unbelievable and there can be snow there much of the year, especially when Kilauea is highly active as it throws much more steam into the atmosphere that cools as it goes up and falls as rain in the lower elevations and snow in the higher elevations above 12,000 feet. Mauna Kea is the tallest mountain from base to tip on Earth topping 33,000 feet from its underwater base to its nearly 14,000 foot elevation above sea level. An outstanding historical site is Pu'uuhonua o Honaunau or The place of Refuge where you can photograph ancient tikis against the sunset in an area that the accused could find refuge from the tyrannical and deadly governing peoples of ancient Hawaii. The bays including Anaehoomalu Bay (or just A-Bay) and Pauoa Bay on the western "Kona" coast are spectacular, especially at sunset. The big island is a place where a helicopter tour is highly recommended as you will see the volcanoes from the air, fly into some waterfall laced valleys and much more. As always, a "door's off" helicopter experience is best for photography. Big Island photos indexed by location can be seen here: [http://www.ejphoto.com/big\\_island\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/big_island_page.htm)



Kilauea Volcano - Big Island of Hawaii

### Maui - "The Valley Isle"

Maui is a photographer's dream with incredible beaches, an abundance of roadside waterfalls on the challenging road to Hana, and some very interesting geological formations. The Iao Needle in the "saddle" of the island (the low land that connects the volcano to the east and the older one to the west) is an interesting formation of rock that looks like the point of a needle. Haleakala is Maui's main volcano and the road rises to 11,000 feet to the edge of one of the world's largest volcanic craters. The landscape inside is otherworldly – it's like you just got off your spaceship on Mars. Haleakala is a very popular place to shoot sunrise but be prepared for

cold. At 11,000 feet above sea level, temperatures are as much as 50 degrees Fahrenheit lower than along the coast and it can be very windy so bring some warm clothes if you are planning to visit here. You will also find the unique Hawaiian Silversword plant at Haleakala's summit - the only place on Earth where this Yucca like plant grows. The twisty road up to Haleakala also has excellent bird photography at its various stops. On the eastern end of Maui lies the city of Hana and just south of Hana is a unique red sand beach called Koki Beach which has some great rock formations. Just a bit south of that lie the Seven Sacred Pools, a gorgeous area of pools and small waterfalls. Get there very early if you don't want hundreds of people in your photos. Beware that it rains most of the time near Hana so if you get a forecast for good weather, go there immediately! Along the western shore of the Haleakala side of the island lies La Peruse Bay, a great place to photograph tide pools and see dolphins which frequent the area. The island of Kahoolawe as well as the diving and snorkeling islet of Molokini can be seen from this area. Maui is also an excellent island for a helicopter tour. Maui photos indexed by location can be seen here: [http://www.ejphoto.com/maui\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/maui_page.htm)



Haleakala - Maui

### Oahu - "The Gathering Place"

Oahu is very heavily populated and it also has by far the most tourists. It does have a lot to offer photographically especially along the northern shores which is away from the crowds of Honolulu. There is probably no better place on earth to photograph colossal pipeline waves than there is along the north shore of Oahu in winter. The Turtle Bay and Kulima Cove areas at the northernmost tip provide exceptional seascape photography opportunities and tide pool shooting. The eastern side of the island also provides plenty of opportunities. The Valley of the Temples is a beautiful area with temples from various different religions and is highlighted by the incredible Byodu-In Buddhist Temple. The Mokolii or Chinaman's Hat islet can also be

photographed from the eastern side of the island. If you like to photograph people, culture or street photography, Honolulu and it's various sections are fantastic destinations. For historical buffs, Pearl Harbor is a must see location. Be prepared for large crowds and horrendous traffic anywhere near Honolulu. Oahu photos indexed by location can be seen here:

[http://www.ejphoto.com/oahu\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/oahu_page.htm)



Kulima Cove - Oahu

## Kauai - "The Garden Isle"

Kauai is the definition of a lush paradise destination. As such, one must be prepared for rain. Kauai sports one of the wettest spots on earth at the summit of its main volcano, Mt. Wai'ale'ale, which can receive over 500 inches of rain in a year. Some highlights on this island include Waimea Canyon; sometimes referred to as the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. This is a spectacular canyon lined in reds and greens. Not to be missed are the Kalalau lookout at the top of Waimea Canyon and the Napali Coast on the northwest side of the island. For photography, it is best to either take a zodiac boat to shoot the Napali Coast or to take a helicopter tour, preferably one flown with no doors. If you opt for a helicopter tour and you will be shooting through windows, wear all black including long sleeves and black gloves to prevent reflections from ruining your photos or charter a helicopter that has its doors removed. One of the most incredible experiences you will ever have can be experienced in a helicopter tour that takes you into the crater of Wai'ale'ale – waterfalls streaming down more than a thousand feet all around you. Many of Kauai's most spectacular waterfalls, including the spectacular Manawaiopuna Falls made famous by the opening scene in the original Jurassic Park Movie, a helicopter is the only way to see them. Some great waterfalls like Opaeka'a Falls and the twin Wailea Falls can be seen from the roadside but a little effort away from the car will give you better vantage points. Wildlife shooters will appreciate the Kilauea National Wildlife Refuge where you can photograph numerous ocean bird species such as Laysan Albatross,

Shearwater, Petrel, and many more. A very picturesque Lighthouse in this location makes for a great morning shot as well. While Kauai can be wet, the westernmost part of the island, as is the case for all of the Hawaiian Islands is much dryer. Here you will find the very large and largely deserted beaches and rock formations of Polihale. Even the resort area of Poipu on the southern tip of the island gets much less rain than the interior, east or north and provides some great sunrise and sunset shooting opportunities including the famous Spouting Horn where a lava tube shoots water high into the air especially during the time of the incoming tide. Kauai photos indexed by location can be seen here: [http://www.ejphoto.com/kauai\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/kauai_page.htm)



Napali Coast - Kauai

### Molokai - "The Friendly Isle"

Molokai is much less travelled than the Big Island, Maui, Oahu and Kauai but offers some spectacular cliffs and waterfalls that drop thousands of feet into the ocean. Molokai is still like Hawaii was before the tourist revolution modernized the bigger islands. Accommodations are very limited and not up to the standards of the rest of Hawaii but for a photographer it is a true gem. One can easily spend a week photographing this island from east to west along the southern coast as well as its rainforest interior. A helicopter tour out of Maui can take you along these cliffs which are among the most spectacular, photographically, on earth. To get good light on the cliffs, an early or late in the day flight in the peak summer months is recommended since the cliffs are north facing and the island is below the Tropic of Cancer line resulting in early and late light hitting the northern cliffs. King Kamehameha's Royal Coconut grove is located on Molokai and the western part of the island is the home of one of the world's truly great beaches and there will likely not be anyone on them. On much of this island, you will find yourself alone and not bothered by others getting into your shots. Visiting the leper colony of Kalaupapa either by air or mule is also a highly interesting and photographically rich area especially from the eastern edge of this peninsula looking to the east from Kalawao. Eastern Molokai offers some

exceptional seascape photography and the Halawa Valley is not to be missed including the high overlooks prior to driving down into the valley. Molokai photos indexed by location can be seen here: [http://www.ejphoto.com/molokai\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/molokai_page.htm)



Halawa Valley - Molokai

### Lanai - "The Pineapple Isle"

Lanai is probably the least photographed of the inhabited. The southern tip of the island, which sports a beautiful Four Seasons resort also has some very interesting landscape photography opportunities highlighted by a sea stack called Pu'u Pehe or Sweetheart Rock. Most of the other most photogenic areas on the island require a high ground clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle which can be rented either from the Four Seasons or from the single rental car agency on the island located in Lanai City in the center of the island. An otherworldly 4WD destination on Lanai is Keahiakawelo or Garden of the Gods. This is an area where the island's volcanic past is very much on display in a field of erratics (volcanic boulders) ejected by the island's volcano Lanai Hale. The interior of the island has hiking trails that take the photographer into Lanai's rainforest. To reach the more remote parts of Lanai one must have experience in off-road four wheel driving as you can encounter some of the most rugged, steep and dangerous driving conditions that most will ever encounter. Do not attempt some of these tracks unless you really know what you are doing. For underwater photographers, Lanai is the place to go. There are daily dive and snorkel charters out of Maui that will take you to all of the hot spots. As the years go on, Lanai, originally owned by Dole and now largely under private ownership. Like Molokai, you might not see another photographer your entire time on Lanai. Lanai photos indexed by location can be seen here: [http://www.ejphoto.com/lanai\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/lanai_page.htm)



Hulopoe Bay - Lanai

#### Kahoolawe - "The Target Isle" and Niihau - "The Forbidden Isle"

As stated above, it is highly unlikely that a photographer will be able to photograph these islands from ground level. They are undeveloped and essentially off limits to all but a very few. While I am sure a landscape photographer could find interesting things to shoot, they are the least interesting islands as they are low, flat volcanic rocks without much vegetation and absolutely no infrastructure. A helicopter tour of Maui as well as the shoreline along the southwestern most part of Maui in the morning have the potential of some distant shots of Kahoolawe. The same is true for Niihau; a helicopter tour or the southwestern most parts of Kauai can yield some shots of Niihau.

#### The Leeward Atolls

The Leeward Atolls are all part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. This area is currently off limits to tourism. Several years ago it was possible to visit the three islands that make up Midway Atoll but government misappropriation of the funds paid by visitors into the general fund has shut down this incredibly rich wildlife photography area. The author is one of the fortunate few that has visited Midway but today it is only possible to visit this and other Atolls as part of a scientific or volunteer expedition. These are usually several month assignments that leave little time for photography. While Midway Atoll is primarily a wildlife photography location, should it ever reopen to eco-tourism, there are also some landscape photography opportunities along the shores.



Midway Atoll

### **Wildlife Photography in the Hawaiian Islands**

Wildlife photography in the Hawaiian Islands consists primarily of bird photography. Humpback Whale photography near Muai in the Winter is popular - there are numerous boat charters that can take you into the areas that are frequented by them.. Hawaiian Green Turtle is also possible but in severe decline. The southeastern shore of the Big Island and the north shore of Oahu are the highest probability area for the turtles. The highly endangered Monk Seal is found in the leeward islands if you can find a way there but it is also illegal to approach them inside a distance of 150 feet. Easy to find on most islands are birds such as Crested Cardinal, Yellow-billed Cardinal, Zebra Dove, Common Myna, Pacific Golden Plover, Wandering Tattler, Black-crowned Night Heron, Java Sparrow, and Saffron Finch. There are numerous exotic species that live in the island interiors and are much tougher to photograph including the much sought after I'iwi. The Audubon Society publishes the booklet "Hawaii's Birds" which is available in any bookstore on the islands for much more information. I would not be caught without this small book while visiting Hawaii.

The Kilauea National Wildlife Refuge on the northern tip of Kauai is one of the best places to photograph birds in the islands. Laysan Albatross, Red-footed Booby, Hawaiian Goose (Nene), Red-tailed Tropicbird and many others are photographable in flight from this spot.



Laysan Albatross

The Hawaiian Islands are one of the world's true treasures and are fantastic for photographers. They are accessible from any part of the planet despite their remoteness due to most of the world's major air carriers serving them. The next time you think Hawaii, rather than thinking about an umbrella drink on the beach, think about the incredible photos you could get when you go there for a visit.

All of E.J. Peiker's Hawaii portfolio can be viewed here:

[http://www.ejphoto.com/hawaii\\_page.htm](http://www.ejphoto.com/hawaii_page.htm)

#### References:

By far the best travel books for Hawaii are Maui Revealed, Oahu Revealed, Hawaii The Big Island Revealed and The Ultimate Kauai Guidebook – all published by Wizard Publications (<https://www.hawaiirevealed.com/>)

Hawaii's Birds – Hawaiian Audubon Society