

Island Hopping While at Aulani: A Disney Resort Review

by PJ Pettigrew, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Our family of three, two parents and an 8-year-old daughter, recently enjoyed our first (of many, I hope) visits to Aulani: A Disney Resort and Spa.

During the planning for this trip, we wrestled with the idea of whether to island hop from Aulani or not. Traveling to Hawaii from the southeast would be the longest flights we have taken since our daughter was born so we wanted to make the most of our trip and see as much as possible. Since our daughter has learned about the states in school and equates Hawaii with volcanoes, I wanted to take her to Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island, but finding the best way to accomplish this resulted in many options.

Since the main attraction of our vacation was Aulani, I first looked at a day trip from Honolulu to the island of Hawaii but was shocked at the prices I found. Many tour companies offered such a trip which included an early morning flight on Hawaiian Airlines, a full day of touring the island of Hawaii - seeing the sights including Volcanoes National Park, then catching the last flight back to Honolulu that night. The average cost of this tour that I found was \$350 per person. This seemed a bit high to me so I priced the pieces out separately to compare.

□ I found that Hawaiian inter-island fares constantly change but flights between Honolulu and Hilo (the closest airport to Volcanoes National Park) could be had for as low as \$70 per person each way and entry to Volcanoes National Park is only \$10 per car. So, looking at price alone, I felt that we could do our own day trip at a fraction of the cost of a tour group and go at our own pace. However, I also understand that having a knowledgeable tour guide is a huge benefit when visiting a place for the first time, but the tour group still seemed pricey. Also, with an 8 year old, the itinerary made for a very long day and I was afraid our daughter would poop out before we reached the pinnacle of the volcanoes.

□ At the same time I was researching volcanoes, I was also watching airfares to Hawaii. This is when I realized that we could fly into Hilo directly for about the same price as Honolulu. So, I had the thought of flying to Hilo, staying a couple of days to see the sights, and then flying Hawaiian Airlines one-way to Honolulu to begin our stay at Aulani. I was surprised to find that our airfare from the southeast flying into Hilo but out of Honolulu on the way home was within \$20 of flying round-trip

to/from Honolulu. Everything was starting to come together and looking like a no-brainer decision.

I was still interested in a guided tour of the National Park, so looked into local tours available. There are many, many tour groups available on the Big Island which combine multiple activities to fit every desire. My daughter was very interested in Zip Lining since she was big enough for many outfits. (Locally, she has only been able to complete kid's zip courses since she is not heavy enough to get from one end to the other on the adult zip courses.) I was able to find a combo tour which included Zip Lining and a Volcano Tour through Kapohokine Adventures. Everything had come together.

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□ Ultimately, we flew directly into Hilo and stayed two nights at the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel at a rate of \$149 per night with a rental car. On our first day on the Big Island, we toured on our own and visited several of the famous waterfalls, played in the ocean off Coconut Island, and enjoyed the picturesque Four Mile Scenic Highway. The second day with the tour group, we went zip lining on a most excellent course then visited the Pala Hana Lava Flow on the way to Volcanoes National Park where we enjoyed dinner at the Volcano House restaurant and a tour of Volcanoes National Park ending with the nightly lava glow. After two full days at our own pace and for about the same price as the one day island hop excursion, we flew to Honolulu to begin our Aulani adventure.

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□ I realize time may be an issue when deciding to spend time on other islands while visiting Aulani, but I can say that we really enjoyed seeing more of Hawaii than just Oahu. After arriving at Aulani, we were VERY happy that we visited the Big Island first because once we arrived our daughter did not want to leave…EVER!

About The Author: PJ Pettigrew is a rocket scientist living out her dreams at NASA, life-long Disney fan, and now a Disney mom who is enjoying experiencing Disney through the eyes of her daughter as if it were all new again.

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