
Adventuring in Kauai

Pickups and kayaks off Jurassic Park

Dear Fellow Diver:

While hanging out in Hawaii on vacation, I decided to search for an offbeat diving adventure, and Kauai looked promising. It was a lot like something you might see in a movie -- and with good reason. Since the '50s, Hollywood film makers have been using Kauai locations to create illusions of distant tropical paradises and jungles of terror. From the *Jurassic Park* of towering dinosaurs to television's *Fantasy Island* ("De plane, boss, de plane!"), this Hawaiian island has been the scenic backdrop for more than 50 major productions.

For all its glitzy past, I found Kauai delightfully laid back and, for the most part, rural. Rather than dive with one operation, I divvied up my week and selected three out of a field of ten -- one old favorite and two newer underwater players.

Tunnel Diving from the Tailgate

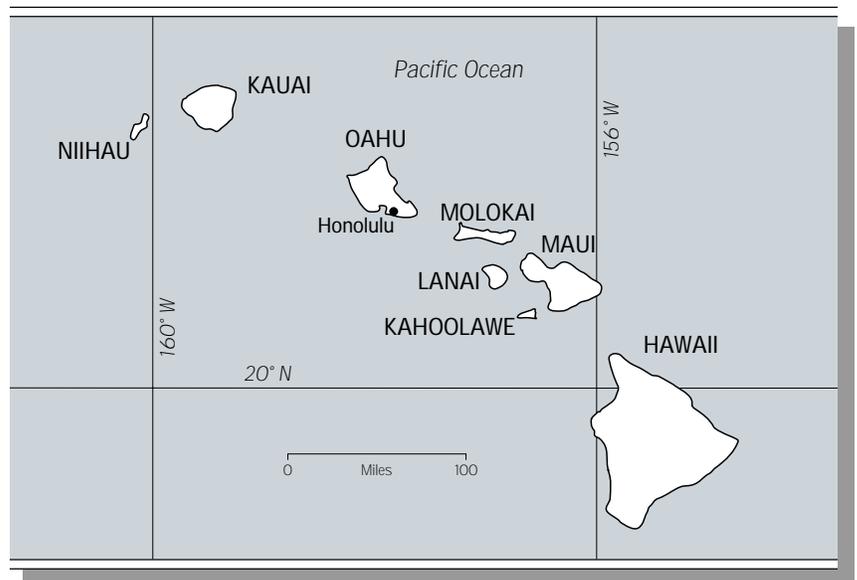
On the rugged north shore, I dove with George Thompson of Ocean Quest. George, an escapee from La La Land (aka Los Angeles), worked as a divemaster for many of Kauai's 12 dive operators before striking out on his own this year. With a pickup as a mobile dive shop, a wheelbarrow to carry tanks across the sand, and his house for an office, he runs a well-organized shore-diving operation. Like many ambitious, up-and-coming small operators, he still leads most dives himself.

His specialty is cavern diving off Tunnels Beach. Thompson leads divers through the lava-rock reef's 26 caverns and caves. It's a dive designed for small groups -- no more than three divers -- due to a few tight squeezes through the rocks and the possibility of rapidly deteriorating visibility in proportion to the number of fins involved.

On the morning dive, I stumbled upon half a dozen whitetip reef sharks sleeping inside the caverns, several large green sea turtles (one posing majestically on the bottom), small spotted green puffers (*opu hue*, *keke*, or *make make* -- "deadly death"), spiny lobsters hiding among the rocks, blue-striped butterfly fish (an endemic species), and aggressive mamos (sergeant majors) warning us away from their eggs. Not bad for a 45-foot dip.

Hawaii is a place where people go and dive, not a place where people go to dive. Nevertheless, there are a lot of divers getting in the water there every day, and therefore a lot of operators to choose from. Even laid-back Kauai has a large selection. Our reviewer tried to spread himself around and give us a look at what's there.

J. Q.



Hawaii

In Depth readers rate Kauai diving 2.8 stars for experienced divers and give the tropical fish life 3 stars, pelagics 2.5, small critters, 1.8 and not surprising, the coral only 1.5.

J. Q.

Thompson knows the caverns of Tunnels Beach better than any other commercial diver on the island. In fact, he's romantically attached to the site; he met his wife, and married her, on this beach. He charges the standard rate on the island -- \$90 for a two-tank dive, \$65 for a single -- but a word to the wise: Bring your own gear. I saw a honeymoon bride return from her resort course with a serious problem with her rental regulator -- it had stopped giving her air underwater. I used one of their BCs which BCed with no problems, but the regulator problem deserves a note of caution.

Bubbling Over with Bubbles Below

I couldn't go to Kauai without diving with Bubbles Below, arguably the best operator on the island. With its limit of six divers per boat trip, this is no cattleboat operation.

I met the owners, Ken and Linda Bail, when they picked me up at one of the designated boat harbors around the island. In search of the day's best diving conditions, they depart from various points according to the seasons.

Their 35-ft Radon (recently extended five feet to accommodate a new inboard drive system) is well suited for Hawaiian waters. It offers a stable ride with a few creature comforts: hot-water hose shower, dry storage in the bow, a shaded cockpit area.

On board, Ken concerns himself with navigating to their unmarked south-shore sites while Linda offers a genuinely enthusiastic and comprehensive dive briefing. With the aid of a cut-up marine-life guidebook, she provides a preview of what to look for

below. The marine life education will continue below the surface, if you're interested Linda will make the extra effort to find the smallest nudibranch or an elusive seahorse. She likes to talk -- even through her regulator.

We anchored at a site named Turtle House, so close to a green sea turtle hangout that the anchor nearly beamed them. There's no dive mooring system on Kauai -- good for divers but potentially harmful to marine life.

If you're the type who likes to predict tomorrow's diving visibility, Kauai has a new fax service you may find useful. For \$20 a month, HAWAII FAX will deliver an extensive wind, swell, and wave-interval forecast to your fax machine.

Visibility Forecasts

It's a detailed, three-page report with surface analysis charts, tide tables, ship, and weather-buoy reports. Weather junkies will love it. You can have it transmitted to your hotel's fax machine for \$1 per report (plus phone charges).

Separate faxcasts are available for Hawaii, Indonesia, Fiji, Tahiti, Australia, South Africa, Mexico, and Central America, among other places. Call 808-337-9509.

N. P.

Turtle House, as the name implies, is loaded with sea turtles swimming about or contentedly resting on the sandy bottom. Visibility was poor island-wide the day I was there, due to 40-knot northeast winds and 6- to 10-foot swells. Natives insisted it was unusual weather for springtime; a few dive operators wouldn't even venture out that day.

I think one of the better trips with Bubbles Below is the journey to the forbidden island of Niihau, 20 miles west of Kauai, that involves a strenuous three-hour channel crossing --

not recommended for those prone to seasickness. Niihau is part of the United States, but it's privately owned. Visitors are not permitted to land but can dive offshore. Because of the rough crossing and drift diving, this trip is recommended for experienced divers only, but Niihau and Lehua, a blown-out volcano crater about mile north, are excellent dives with steep vertical walls, fish life galore, and outstanding visibility. These three-tank trips are done when weather permits; unfortunately, it was not permitting during this trip.

Another Pickup, a Kayak, and a Strong Wind

For variety, I tried a morning dive with another new player, Gary Brady of Diving by Kayak. Gary's a Texas transplant who paid his Kauaian water dues by leading kayaking trips for Kayak Kauai. Then one day a brainstorm hit him: taking divers out on ocean kayaks.

Operating out of a really sad Mazda Sundowner pickup, Gary launches his kayaks at points inaccessible to boats, and beyond the range of shore divers, to dive unvisited sites. He will take you on a \$90 two-tank dive anywhere on the island that is safely accessible by kayak. Custom dives are his strong point.

I arranged a meeting with Gary by ringing his pager. The next day, we drove to a south shore site and found the high winds and waves a bit much for the kayaks. So after Gary filled his radiator with water, we headed east to Koloa Landing, where the sea looked more manageable.

We loaded our gear into two kayaks and headed out through the surf. About a half mile out, Gary lashed the kayaks together, then dove down and tied the kayaks to a lava rock formation.

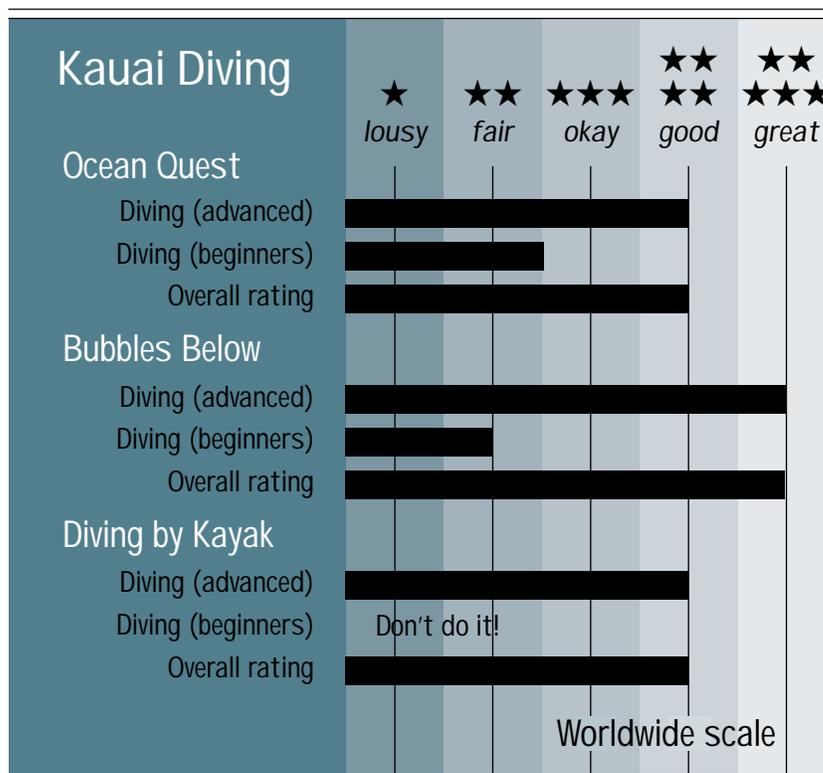
I rolled out with mask and fins on. Between breaks in the waves I managed to don my weight belt and BC. Again, the visibility was terrible, but after five minutes I found Gary amongst the lava rocks.

Other than a few Moorish idols and puffers, there wasn't much to see on this dive. But I didn't expect much; we both knew conditions weren't the best. My one motivation was to try the kayaking routine.

We completed an uneventful dive, found the kayaks, and attempted to paddle back in. I say attempted, because it soon

Diving by kayak, although still a little rough around the edges, has potential to become one of Kauai's most exciting attractions for advanced divers.

J. Q.



became obvious that in 30-knot winds our bodies made great sails, driving us westward while we futilely paddled east.

Rolling over the side, we grabbed the bowlines and swam the lightweight kayaks toward shore. If we had stopped kicking, the surf would have driven us into the unforgiving rocks -- not a good way to end a morning. We had eaten our Wheaties, though, and although it was difficult, we made it back to our launch site.

Ditty Bag

Kauai is not a bargain-basement island. Accommodations range from the luxurious Princeville Resort on the north shore, starting at \$275 per night (808-826-9644), to the family-oriented Outrigger Hotel centrally located on the east shore, \$135 per night (303-369-7777). An excellent value at \$95 per night, if you can get a reservation, is the fully equipped Sunset Kahili Condominiums on the south shore (808-742-7434). . . . Fly Aloha or Hawaiian Airlines from Honolulu. Do it in style: Chrysler LeBaron convertibles are readily available at the Lihue Airport. National Rental Car offers fast, convenient service without the shuttle-bus drill. . . . Ocean Quest, 808-822-3589; Bubbles Below, 808-822-3483; Diving by Kayak, 808-241-2026.

Gary broke out a few beers and some tasty salted marlin for apres-dive refreshments. As I looked back at the crashing surf, the strains of television's *Hawaii Five-O* theme song played in my mind. To the left were outriggers waiting to be launched, perhaps on a calmer day. If I let my imagination run wild, I could become a character in a film here. Fortunately, I had escaped in the last reel in this adventure series.

N.P.

Other Views of Hawaii

In Depth reader Doug Cooper, Princeton, New Jersey, who was certified in Hawaii in 1988 and has been returning to dive every year since, says that his choice on Kauai is definitely Bubbles Below. "This may be the best outfit I ever went out with. They even supplied the dive computers! The best place to stay on Kauai (if you want to use the beach) is in Poipu. It has been rebuilt since the hurricane and most things are open again."

Another reader, who ended up with Bubbles Below because it was the operation his instructor chose while he was becoming Nitrox certified, agrees with Doug. "The Bubbles Below personnel strive to educate you about the area and what makes it different, and point out many things below the surface that would otherwise be missed by someone unfamiliar with the location. Advertising information about this operation is accurate. Safety consciousness practiced to a high degree. Stay away from the big operators that promise you the moon but only deliver a small piece of the cheese." (7/94)

Dr. Sherwin Isenberg, Los Angeles, had similar opinions about Bubbles Below: "Excellent -- friendly, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic." However, his luck on weather conditions wasn't so good. "It is advisable to dive Kauai in a season other than winter. . . . It was rainy, cloudy, and visibility was poor. The diving was disappointing, except that there were groups of turtles on almost every dive." (3/95)

Greg and Nancy Earle of Sterling, Virginia, stayed at the Grantham Resort and thought it was an excellent value. "No

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dive packages, but for \$100 a day you get a nice condo, no maid hassles, and close proximity to Poipu Beach." They were less satisfied with their choice of dive operations, Fathom Five. "Divers haveno freedom. Except for Charlie, the divemasters seemedto be generally bored with their jobs and viewed divers as a nuisance to be tolerated. Considering the high price of Hawaiian diving, we expected better service. Other than Charlie, divemasters were also inconsiderate of the reefs and sea life. They actually picked up shells from the bottom and offered them to the divers as souvenirs!" (4/95)

Crazy about Diving

Does scuba diving cause brain damage?

The popular sport of scuba diving is probably bad for you, according to Dr. Juergen Reul and colleagues at the Technical University in Aachen, Germany. In an article in the medical journal *Lancet*, the researchers said divers were aware of the dangers of decompression sickness, but that "not all will know they may be risking pathological changes to their central nervous system and spine that accumulate over the years."

It is already known that professional divers can suffer permanent neuropsychological changes, such as memory disturbance and depression, probably because of gas bubbles in the blood.

Dr. Reul and his colleagues studied members of amateur diving clubs in Germany and compared them with swimmers and runners. Scans of the brains and spines of 52 amateur divers and of 50 control subjects found 86 brain lesions in 27 divers and 14 lesions in 10 nondivers. Spinal changes in the divers were mostly in the neck — 32 divers had at least one abnormal intervertebral disc, compared with only nine nondivers.

According to the *Lancet* article, "What the researchers cannot predict is whether the lesions will go on to produce symptomatic disorders."

The criteria for inclusion of the 52 divers in the study were a history of diving four years or more, at least 40 dives per year. I compared the data collected from divers and nondivers and found that the only significant differences in the characteristics listed was that the divers both drank and smoked more.

Divers Alert Network (DAN) responded quickly to the *Lancet* article, stating that recreational divers should not be unduly concerned. "The findings of Dr. Reul and colleagues from the Technical University of Aacheri, Germany, need to be put in context and not cause more concern than is appropriate. First, these findings are not new. It has been a controversial question for many years whether or not both sport and commercial divers have changes in their brains as a result of diving, but there has been no substantive proof."

DAN goes to say that the supposition of any damage to the brain rests on the occurrence of so-called "silent" bubbles, the existence of which has been demonstrated by Doppler studies, but the theory that these silent bubbles cause changes in the brain remains unproven.

Silent bubbles are more likely in deeper dives and with more rapid ascents. DAN states, "In this regard, all our recent knowledge, as pointed out in a recent DAN editorial, advises slower ascents from the standard 60 feet per minute. Most suggest 30 feet per minute or slower today. Further, recent research shows a three- to five-minute stop at 15 feet does markedly reduce or eliminate silent bubbles. DAN will soon be mounting a research study to investigate the occurrence and control of silent bubbles and the effect that the rate of ascent has upon them.

"In the meantime, divers should not be unduly concerned about this information. More research is needed, but the world is filled with many divers who have been diving for over 40 years who show no unusual deterioration in their abilities which would affect their quality of life."

DAN points out that Dr. Reul found no relationship between