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Hawaii's Big Island By Bike: A Heart-Racing, Spectacularly Scenic Trip

Once the lava rocks stopped flying, a determined cyclist set out—with little more than a credit card—on a five-day journey to circle Hawaii's largest isle



Mauna Kea in winter, as seen from Kohala Mountain Road, where the author ended his five-day cycling trip.

PHOTO: JAMES STURZ

By James Sturz

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HERE'S WHAT happened in 2018: My wife and I built a house in Hawaii and I brought my bicycle from New York with the intent of circumnavigating the Big Island. Then, for 125 straight days from May to September, Kilauea Volcano spilled and shot lava from two dozen fissures, covering 13.7 square miles of land and more than 700 homes, while filling the air with vog (volcanic smog) and the roads with lava rocks and ash. I put the ride on hold.

Kilauea eventually quieted, the skies turned blue, and in November my friend Bart came from San Francisco and we got on our bikes. I'd mapped the route at 264 miles. Knowing the hills, we didn't want to carry too much gear—the Big Island is the U.S.'s largest, nearly the size of Connecticut, but with mountains.

We found seat bags just large enough for an extra jersey, post-ride clothes, flip-flops, toiletries, tools, spare inner tubes and CO2 cartridges. Anything extra went in our jerseys' pockets. I mounted a miniature air pump on my bike's frame. Finally we took our phones, loaded with apps that might be useful for finding rooms en route. Cyclists call this "credit-card touring." We planned four nights.



Riding through Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

PHOTO: ALAMY

We took off in the morning from Kapa'au in the very north, heading around the island counterclockwise to keep on the ocean-side of the road and take advantage of favorable winds. Cattle grazed the lush hillsides of North Kohala; to our right was always coast. The two-lane highway has always been one of my favorites; it's named after Akoni Pule, the state legislator who pushed for its creation and who so loved the Hawaiian House of Representatives that for the one term he wasn't re-elected in the 1950s he worked as its janitor instead.

Relief In Sight

The air grew hotter as we rounded the Kohala and Kona coasts on the island's west side, and dark-brown lava fields flanked us. Our first real break, after 25 miles, came when we spotted a man selling coconuts and pineapples from his pickup. The temperature was in the high 90s, and we felt it as soon as we stopped. We'd been adding electrolyte tablets to our water bottles, but the local stuff was tastier and cold. Once we finished drinking, he scooped the coconut meat into Ziploc bags. Stuffed into our jersey pockets, they gave our backs a chill.

Our first two flats came shortly afterward, as we passed the island's resorts. The road is part of the 112-mile loop Ironman triathletes bike each October, and the island's most trafficked route. As we approached Kailua-Kona, we passed a group of Ultraman runners who had cycled 171.4 miles the day before, and now were completing double marathons. Properly chastened, having only cycled 63 miles ourselves, we checked into the Sheraton in Keauhou just before dusk. We unwound at its outdoor restaurant and watched manta rays somersaulting at the ocean's surface.

Day 2 Begins

The second day was harder, with steep climbs in full sun. Each time I took my helmet off, sweat trickled from it. We stopped to chat with other cyclists—a couple from Salt Lake City circling the island, and ones from Lake Tahoe and Toronto out for the day. After lunch at a fruit stand in Captain Cook amid South Kona's tropical lushness, we pedaled past coffee orchards, where the aroma of roasting beans impregnated the air.



Hilo Bay on the island's east coast.

PHOTO: ALAMY

The shoulders had been narrow and gravelly for much of the morning, but we hit wider, new asphalt as we entered Ka'u, Hawaii's largest district and, being mostly desert, among its least populous. After a day climbing over 53 miles, we zipped downhill for the last 6.5 miles from Waiohinu to Naalehu, the southernmost community in the U.S. The grasses and trees we passed were blindingly green in the afternoon sun.

Our Airbnb that night had a washer and dryer, nearly as welcome as the shower and beds. Day 3 started with a climb up Cane Haul Road, a remnant of the days when sugar cane was a thriving industry in Hawaii. The trip's most beautiful ride, it was 13 miles up and down, past rolling hills, forested cinder cones, cattle, horses, sheep, saffron finches (imagine sticks of butter darting through the air), and cane grass arching over the road. To one side lay the vast ocean; to the other, Mauna Loa, looming at 13,678 feet.

The day took us to Volcano Village, up more hills, the hardest so far. Our third flat came just before the national park, where the perils turned out to be kiawe thorns, not lava bombs. We had lost our bike pump along the way, so Bart limped the last 7 miles on a squishy tire. Road workers repairing earthquake and eruption damage flashed us shakas, the classically Hawaiian gesture to hang loose. By the time we pulled into our next Airbnb, we'd covered 42 miles, and cycled through temperatures from 93 to 55 degrees. We stowed our bikes and went to dinner on foot, amid tree ferns as tall as houses.

A Deflating Twist

The morning was all downhill: first, literally—a 6-mile descent at 30-plus mph with nary a pedal—and then, figuratively, when it was my turn for a flat. I went the next 11 miles with a problematically pillowy back tire, until the kindness of pump-owning strangers saved me.

At Hilo, we bought a new pump and tubes and breakfasted at a diner where the eggs and hash browns came with seared ahi tuna. For the rest of the day we shared the road with tulip-tree blossoms, fallen lauhala fruits and a few wild pigs and chickens, to Honoka'a, 69.5 miles from where we'd begun that morning.



The author (right) at a fruit stand in South Kohala.

PHOTO: JAMES STURZ

Our final day would be our shortest, its sole real challenge crossing Kohala Mountain, the only of Hawaii's five volcanoes that's extinct. Unlike the other volcanoes that tower above the clouds or bake in the island's heat, it's covered by verdant pastures, home to many of Hawaii's ranches.

Back in North Kohala, where we'd started, we crested the mountain at 3,564 feet. The way down was pure icing. My bike's computer showed I hit 44 mph—the fastest I'd ever gone.

RIDE THE WAVE / How To Plan Your Own Two-Wheeled Tour of the Big Island

Guided Cycling Trips



ILLUSTRATION: JORDAN CARTER

Backroads and Lifecycle Adventures offer organized escorted or personalized multiday tours (backroads.com, lifecycleadventures.com). Big Island Bike Tours arranges multiday, full-day or half-day excursions (bigislandbiketours.com). If you're looking for a little company, Bikeworks in Waikoloa and Kailua-Kona organize up to a half-dozen weekly road and mountain bike group rides on the island's west side, attracting as many as 70

cyclists on weekends (bikeworkskona.com/event-calendar). Looking for something faster? The Hawaii Cycling Club runs its own weekly Kailua-Kona ride, but is also a hub for information about the island's annual road races, with annual or daily membership options (hawaiiicyclingclub.com). Looking for something harder? Check TriFind, if you prefer your cycling sandwiched between swimming and running (trifind.com).

Bicycle Rentals

If you'd rather go it alone, Bikeworks in Kailua-Kona, Bike Works Beach & Sport in Waikoloa Beach Village and Mountain Road Cycles in Waimea all rent road

bikes, and sell tools and gear as well. You can, for instance, rent a 2018 carbon-fiber Scott Addict 30 Disc bike from Mountain Road Cycles for 5 days for \$150 (bikeworkskona.com, bikeworkshawaii.com, mountainroadcycles.com). Hilo Bike Hub in Hilo sells gear and performs repairs (hilobikehub.com).

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