

Traveling With Kids: Choosing Which Hawaiian Island Suits Your Family

People ask me all the time which Hawaiian Island is best for kids. And while my answer is always the same — they are all great and it just depends what you are looking for — that is really the politically correct response.

Here's how I'd break down the pros and cons of the islands in terms of hunting for a family friendly vacation.

Oahu: Home to the bustling metropolis of Honolulu and the tourist-hub of Waikiki, there is no other American city that so defies expectation. Here you'll find some of the best Asian fusion food on the planet, impossibly beautiful beaches, and relatively easy hiking trails through the city's mountains to access gushing waterfalls.

Yet the allure of Oahu doesn't end with its urban vibe. Like the other Hawaiian Islands, Oahu houses a bounty of nature; but unlike the other isles, Oahu doesn't feel so remote that you struggle find a good latte. With the communities of Haleiwa and Kailua offering outstanding cuisine, surf spots, and beaches, not to mention affordable house rentals, Oahu offers the most well-rounded experience of the islands.

Unfortunately it's crowded. With plenty of traffic, a hopping nightlife scene that might make the parents who used to party feel jealous that they have to be back in the hotel by nine, and the urbanity might offend those looking for that tropical paradise.

The low-down: Kids love it. If you are ok with crowds, Oahu rocks.

Maui: Many travelers looking for that polished family vacation with impossibly beautiful beaches head straight to the Valley Isle. Maui delivers the best that Hawaii has to offer with a thriving farm to table food scene, jaw-dropping tropical retreats, just enough adventure to cater to older kids, and some of the world's most stunning beaches on the western side of the island.

However many find the hordes of travelers they have to brave at the outstanding Maui Ocean Center, in the ocean, or on whale watching excursions, daunting. This is especially true when they hunt for less-popular destinations only to find the lush tropics of Hana need rain to survive.

The low-down: Kids love Maui. It is great for first timers who don't care how many people they have to share the beach with, or adventurous families wanting to swim in waterfalls and hike in dormant volcanoes.

Kauai: When most imagine Hawaii, it's Kauai they envision. Lush tropical greenery, waters that beg to be dived into, a slow pace, and plenty of hiking trails to waterfalls. Add

to the mix easy-to-learn-on surf breaks, kid-friendly beaches and playgrounds, a ridiculous amount of condos to rent, and sweet inns and resorts that cater to the whole clan.

Many are turned off by the amount of rain on Kauai, especially on the lovely North Shore.

The low-down: Kids love Kauai. It's simple — the kind of place that forces your family to hang out and enjoy each other and the island.

Big Island: Adventurers and resort fans line up to visit the Big Island. With an active volcano, the chance to snorkel with manta rays and dolphins, insane hiking trails that lead to epic stargazing, and a food scene that makes local parents proud, the Big Island is hands down a must for families with kids of all ages.

However, many younger kids can be freaked out by the volcano and the air quality for pregnant women and small children is unhealthy. The other drawback is that the Kona side is baking hot and the Hilo side is dripping with rain. Also a challenge is the sheer size of the island.

The low-down: Kids love the Big Island. It's an ideal destination for adventurous families, young and old. And there is nowhere else on the planet you can see a dependable active volcano

Lanai: It's quite surprising, and sweet, with its conifer trees, cool air, and dusty backroads. But the real draw is for people with deep pockets who have time and money to enjoy the two Four Seasons Resorts on the island.

Truth is, Lanai is **not for budget travelers**, especially ones with young kids, as the exploring is via off-road vehicles that are too bumpy for the younger set.

The low-down: If you've got cash to spend and want an upscale resort vacation sans crowds, look no further.

Molokai: There is *nothing* polished about this island. The food is mediocre; there are no real tourist services except taking a mule ride to the leper colony and the locals aren't lining up to greet you with leis. But if you want a laid-back beach vacation in a cottage, steps from a funky little beach this one's for you. Can be visited as a day trip by air or boat.

The low-down: Molokai is for adventurers, do it yourself families wanting a quiet getaway, and people uninterested in crowds.