FOR
All swimmers. You can see a variety of fish in water only 2 to 3 feet deep. Hesitant swimmers, including children, can enjoy the marine life fully in standing-depth water.

EQUIPMENT
You’ll need a mask and snorkel to see fish, even in water only 2 to 3 feet deep. Fins help you swim with less effort but are optional. If you don’t have your own snorkeling gear, you can rent it at a concession in the lower park. It’s important to get the right sizes.
Water-filled masks or blistered feet can cloud this fine snorkeling experience. If your mask leaks or fins don’t fit, try adjusting the straps or ask for replacements.

It’s common to see experienced snorkelers and divers spit into their masks. The saliva coating prevents masks from fogging, an annoyance that can put a damper on the day. Alternately, you can bring a small bottle of antifogging gel (sold in all dive shops) with you, or ask at the rental facility to spray the inside of your mask with their soap-and-water solution, another antifogging trick. After gel or soap treatment, rinse the mask lightly with seawater before donning.

**DIRECTIONS**

Enter the water at the north (Back Door) end of the sand beach and swim left. A variety of fish graze along this rocky shoreline in only a few feet of water. After that, depending on your swimming skills and comfort level, you can swim to any sand-bottomed spaces inside the reef.

If the tide is high, you can float over the top of the reef flats to adjacent open spaces, being careful not to touch or kick the reef. During middle and low tides, the
water barely covers the reef. You must then swim back near the beach and walk, wade, or snorkel to a new area.

SAFETY TIPS

Before you step into the water, watch the waves for a few moments for height and frequency. Always face the ocean so you can see what’s coming. If the waves are breaking over the reef, what begins as knee-deep water can quickly become waist-deep water. Surges can cause you to lose your balance. Nonswimmers and parents with young children should not wade more than a few feet from the beach.

First-time snorkelers should don mask and snorkel and practice breathing in shallow water, as these two girls are doing.

The beginner below can touch the bottom with his hands and knees. (Hint: To walk in swim fins on land or water, walk backwards.)
Always swim with a buddy and tell him or her if you’re having trouble with your equipment or are feeling uneasy.

If you’re more comfortable in shallow water, snorkel there. You don’t have to swim in deep water to enjoy marine life in Hanauma Bay. These large fish are chubs. Most chubs are silver, but occasionally a yellow individual, shown here, appears.
Beginners should stay away from the entrances to the two channels leading outside the reef, labeled Back Door and Cable Channel on the map. Both areas are marked with two white buoys that say “Strong Current” (pictured). The channels usually have outgoing currents that can carry you into deep water. If you get caught in these currents and can’t make headway swimming against them, take a deep breath to calm yourself and then call and wave for help.

Lifeguards watch these areas carefully and will help you back in if necessary. Note where you put your hands and feet. Coral rock, even rounded, is sharp and can easily cut and scrape skin. Also, reef holes are the homes of several types of marine animals that might bite in defense if you suddenly lay a hand or place a foot in their vicinity. Sand areas are the best places to stand and rest.
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

**Antler coral (close-up), Pocillopora eydouxi**
Coral reefs look like rock walls, hills, and floors, but they are living structures made by animals that secrete limestone skeletons. Each minute creature, called a stony coral, cements its cuplike skeleton (look closely to see the tiny round cups) next to its neighbor until the colony eventually becomes a ridge, bank, or mound. These formations contain millions of individual animals and grow continually. Because a thin layer of tissue grows over the entire structure, connecting all the polyps in a colony, it’s important to keep hands and feet off coral. Touching damages the coral bodies. Repeated touching kills them.

**Cauliflower coral (ko’a), Pocillopora meandrina**
It’s easy to identify this well-named coral because it’s shaped like a head of cauliflower. These pink or tan colonies grow from 10 to 15 inches in diameter, live for about twenty years, and then die. Cauliflower coral heads grow in surge areas where other corals can’t survive. You can see this coral both
inside and outside the reef. Look inside the wavy folds of these heads for crabs, fish, and other marine animals that hide there. An arc-eye hawkfish perches on the top left of this head.

**Cauliflower coral**

(Close-up)

Living corals take on the color of the microscopic seaweeds, pink in this picture, that live inside the coral’s cells and nourish them. The tiny plants and their coral hosts can be various shades of pink, purple-green, blue, yellow, and brown. In Hanau-ma Bay’s deeper water, outside the channels, large coral heads are alive and growing. Their skeleton cups are hard, but the animals’ bodies that line and connect the cups are soft and fragile. Countless fish and invertebrates depend on healthy coral reefs to survive, using them as food, hiding places, and sites to lay eggs. Some living reefs are centuries old.

**Fossil coral**

Most of the coral inside the reef is fossil coral rock killed thousands of years ago when falling sea level exposed the coral animals to the air. Today, live coral grows in plates, patches, and clusters on the dead reef’s surfaces. If you need to rest, try to stand only on sand, like the pair of snorkelers above.
**Coralline algae**
The fossil reef supports countless types of seaweeds that are food for Hanauma Bay’s fish and invertebrates. The maroon and lavender bits in this rock are hard, calcium-containing seaweeds called coralline algae. Scattered among these hard red seaweeds, you can see soft green seaweeds as well as furry brown seaweeds (lower end). Coral reefs, both dead and alive, teem with life and do best without human hands and feet touching them. Unless you need to sit on or grasp rocks for safety, avoid walking on, handling, or kicking any reefs in the bay.

Besides tiny seaweeds living within the tissues of all reef-building corals, seaweeds also thrive on the tops, sides, and in holes of the bay’s fossil reefs. Try not to walk, stand on, or hold on to any coral rock. Even touching can kill marine plants and animals trying to grow there. Sitting on coral rock to look around, such as this snorkeler is doing, can damage plants and animals.
**Rock-boring urchin** (*'ina kea*, *Echinometra mathaei*)

Notice the round holes 2 to 3 inches in diameter in the coral rock here. Rock-boring urchins make these holes by scraping at the coral with their teeth and spines. Most of these urchins spend their entire lives in their burrows, living on bits of seaweed that get caught on their spines. These spines are only mildly sharp and contain no toxin. This species is either green tinged or, as pictured, pale pink.

**Hawaiian flagtail** *(āholehole*, *Kuhlia sandvicensis*)

During the day, Hawaiian flagtails usually rest together in a dense school in 2 to 3 feet of water along the rocky shoreline where the sand beach ends at the north (Back Door) side of the bay. These 6-to-12-inch-long fish are among the most common you’ll see in that part of the bay. At night, the fish scatter to eat animal material adrift in ocean currents.
Sharpnose mullet (ʻouoʻa), Neomyxus leuciscus
Most mature mullet are about 20 inches long, but because of the bay’s abundance of food, the mullet here sometimes grow larger. Mullet aren’t often seen in snorkeling areas, but they are common in Hanauma Bay. Look for bulky, silvery fish with rounded snouts and downturned lips. The large fish cruise over the bottom, sucking in sand containing dead plant and animal material. The fish expel the sediment out their gill openings.

Chub (nenue), Kyphosus sp.
Chubs, also known as rudderfish, live on coral reefs and in places with rocky bottoms where they graze on bottom-growing seaweed. Mature chubs are larger than mullet, growing to about 24 inches long. You can pick the silvery chub out of a crowd by looking for fish with a bluish tinge.
Thornback cowfish (*makukana*), *Lactoria fornasini*
These unusual-looking 6-inch-long fish are members of the trunkfish family, which look like little trunks with eyes, mouth, and fins. Cowfish paddle slowly around rocky and sandy bottoms, giving snorkelers good viewing opportunities. The common name of these tan fish with blue spots probably came from the “horns” on their heads.

Hawaiian whitespotted toby, *Canthigaster jactator*
Tobies belong to the pufferfish (or blowfish) group that, when threatened, can inflate themselves by sucking air or water into their bodies. Another feature common to most pufferfish is the presence of a powerful toxin in their skin, flesh, and organs. The 3-inch-long whitespotted toby is both the smallest and the most common of Hawai‘i’s pufferfish. These fish eat a wide range of plants and animals.