or a similar medication, but the only treatment for serious symptoms is to descend the mountain.

When you are ready to drive back down, remember to engage the low gear ratio lever on your vehicle, to give all your gears a “double low.” Stay in this low ratio all the way down to the visitor center and for the steep 2 miles beyond. If you would like to visit the summit area but prefer not to drive yourself, Waipiʻo Valley Shuttle and Tours (808-775-7121) offers tours of the mountain.

**Places to Stay.** One way to avoid or reduce the effects of altitude sickness is to allow time for your body to acclimate to the altitude. Some travelers do that by overnighting at **Mauna Kea State Recreation Area** before driving up the mountain. The park, at an elevation of 6,500 feet, offers inexpensive cabins, but no tenting is allowed. The cabins have kitchens, hot showers, rest rooms, bedding, and eating/cooking utensils. Reservations can be made through any State Parks Office (see Appendix A). **Note:** At the time of this writing, Mauna Kea State Recreation Area was closed for long-term repairs. Check for status.

**Backpacking Adventures**

**THE MAUNA LOA TRAVERSE**

(24 MILES, 3–4 DAYS: STRENUOUS)


Mauna Loa Backcountry (free park handout).

Mauna Loa is both the world’s largest mountain and largest active volcano. With a volume of 10,000 cubic miles, it has more than 100 times the mass of Mount St. Helens. Mauna Loa and its sister mountain, Mauna Kea, are the two highest mountains in the Pacific Ocean area, both higher than Japan’s Mount Fuji. Climbing the “long mountain” (its meaning in Hawaiian) is one of the world’s most unusual hiking experiences. The hiker is soon enveloped in a moonscape environment, devoid of vegetation or any other sign of life, with a silence broken only by the crunch of his or her boots. Yet it is a landscape possessed of a stark, awesome beauty.

Mauna Loa has erupted 39 times in the last 150 years, most recently in 1984. Although Kilauea has caused far more damage in recent years, an eruption of Mauna Loa usually causes more concern. The direction of Kilauea’s lava flows is generally predictable, restricted to its caldera and the Puna coast area, both sparsely inhabited locations. Mauna Loa, however, has threatened Hilo to the
northeast and has sent lava pouring southwest into the ocean, where subdivisions now stand, and to the northwest, where the plush resorts of the Kohala "Gold Coast" have sprouted. Because of its great height, and the huge amounts of lava it has historically spewed forth, Mauna Loa's potential for destruction is much greater than Kilauea's.

We know that early Hawaiians climbed Mauna Loa, possibly to make offerings to Pele, the goddess of fire. A member of Captain James Cook's crew attempted the climb from the Kona side in 1779, but failed. The first successful climb by a westerner was made 15 years later by a crew member of George Vancouver's expedition, using a route from the national park side of the mountain. A large U.S. exploring party under the command of Lt. Charles Wilkes reached the summit by the same route in 1841 and spent almost a month mapping the craters. The present trail was constructed by a company of U.S. Army engineers in 1915, at the suggestion of Thomas Jaggar, the founder of the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. The Red Hill Cabin was built in the same year, but it was not until 1934 that a cabin was constructed in the summit area at North Pit. Threatened by an eruption, the cabin was moved to its present location on the rim of the summit caldera in 1940.

There are three approaches to the mountain, one from Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, one from Highway 11 just south of the park border, and one from the Saddle Road between Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea. This section describes the approach from the park, descending via the Saddle Road route, and it offers the Highway 11 route as an alternative way down the mountain. The ascent from the Saddle Road is covered in the *Day Hiking* section of this chapter.

To get the most from the trip, you should allow four days, giving you a day to explore the summit area. Without the free day at the summit, the trip can be made comfortably in three days. If at all possible, try to arrange the trip as a traverse, as described here, ascending one side of the mountain and descending another. If you are unable to position vehicles at both ends, or to arrange a dropoff and pickup, return the way you came.

A climb of Mauna Loa requires careful preparation. Although weather on the mountain is generally good, you must be ready for adverse conditions. Despite its location in the tropics, snow, blizzards, and driving rain can occur at any time of the year. Temperatures can drop below freezing at night, and the upper elevations can be snow-covered any time between November and May. Warm clothing is essential, including rain and wind protection. If the weather is fine, you may be able to hike in a shirt and shorts, but if it changes, you will need long pants, a windproof jacket, and even gloves. You will also need warm
clothing in the cabins at night. One year, on May 31, a friend testing a new sleeping bag slept between snow banks at the summit. The temperature registered 12 degrees at midnight.

Mauna Loa is no place for sneakers or running shoes. Good, sturdy hiking boots are required to afford stability on rough, uneven lava and to withstand its sharp, jagged edges that can easily cut through sneakers. A hat is also a necessity or, better yet, two of them, a wide-brim for sun protection during the day, and a soft, wooly pulldown cap for cold and for sleeping at night. Additional equipment you will need is a warm sleeping bag, cooking stove, fuel, utensils, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, and sunglasses. Food should include an emergency supply, and you should carry at least two quarts of water per day while hiking.

Permits are required to climb Mauna Loa and can be obtained at the park’s visitor center. They are free and issued on a first-come basis no earlier than noon on the day before your trip. There are 8 bunks at Red Hill Cabin and 12 at the Mauna Loa Cabin. Stays are limited to three nights per site. Both cabins have mattresses, attached water catchment tanks, and pit toilets. Check the status of the water level at the cabins when obtaining your permit, and be sure to pick up a free trail map. Water found along the route or from the tanks at the cabins should be boiled or treated before drinking. You will not have exclusive use of the cabins unless your party is large enough to fill them, as cabins are shared by all permittees.

Trail markings on Mauna Loa consist of rock cairns placed prominently along the route. Sometimes the trail disappears entirely, and you will be dependent upon these cairns. For this reason, always keep the next marker in view. Since these cairns are made from the same black lava as the rest of the mountain, it can be almost impossible to see them at night, so be sure you start your day early enough to reach your destination before dark. Snow in the winter months can obscure the trail and cover dangerous cracks and fissures. Use extra caution so as not to lose the trail in such conditions.

It is critically important to remain on the trail on Mauna Loa. Hikers have been seriously injured breaking through unstable lava crust in off-trail locations, and it is inadvisable to climb in winter, when snow can cover the trail. One hiker who left the trail to examine a distant snow field has never been found. The mountain is so huge and so featureless that disorientation is a real danger if you stray far from the trail. If this happens to you and you cannot find the trail, make your way cautiously downhill, detouring around areas that appear fragile, broken up, or otherwise unstable. It will be a long, slow trip, but if you have the clothing and equipment described above and don’t panic, you will get down. If night comes while you are still on the mountain, stop, find a shel-
tered spot if you can, get in your sleeping bag, and wait until daylight. Under no circumstances try to travel at night.

It is possible to experience altitude sickness on Mauna Loa, although the long, slow approach from the park and the overnight at Red Hill Cabin should allow your body to acclimate to the thinner air on the mountain. Headache and nausea are the most common occurrences and can be treated with aspirin or a similar medication. Shortness of breath and perhaps a slight dizziness can be expected with sudden or prolonged exertion. More serious symptoms, such as severe nausea, disorientation, or chest pain, require immediate descent.

The best itinerary allows four days for this trip, as follows: one day to hike to Red Hill Cabin, one day from there to Mauna Loa Cabin, a day free to explore the summit, and a day to hike to the end of the trail at the weather observatory. The details of the trip are outlined below.

**DAY 1  Trailhead to Red Hill Cabin (7.5 miles).** Whether coming from Hilo, Kona, or overnighting in the park, you will need to drive to the junction of Highway 11 and Mauna Loa Road, about 2.5 miles west of the national park entrance. The Mauna Loa Road winds its way 13.5 miles to the trailhead. After passing Kipuka Puaulu, the road enters a pretty upland forest where koa trees soon predominate. Although paved all the way, the road becomes narrow and winding, one-way in places, and with several blind turns. Go slowly, and honk your horn at the worst spots. The road ends at a picnic shelter and lookout at 6,662 feet, and the trail begins here. There are a small parking lot and pit toilets, but no water. Red Hill Cabin, at Pu’u ʻUla’ula, lies 7.5 miles ahead, at 10,025 feet.

The first part of the trail is relatively level, making its way over reddish-brown lava flows about 2,000 years old. After an hour or so of walking, you will have come about 2 miles and will be at about 7,500 feet. You have left the forest behind, and remaining vegetation decreases sharply. In another hour you reach 8,200 feet, the vegetation line, where the last ʻōhiʻa trees disappear. Just before the 5-mile mark (2.5 hours), you have your first glimpse of your destination. Pu’u ʻUla’ula, a prominent reddish-brown spatter cone, can be seen 2 miles to the northwest. You are now at 8,900 feet. The cabin, which lies at its western base, does not become visible until you are almost upon it. The trail now follows a collapsed lava tube, finally crossing onto the rust-red lava flows of Pu’u ʻUla’ula, and the cabin comes into view.

Pu’u ʻUla’ula gets its color and its name (“Red Hill” in English) from the iron content of lava oxidized by years of weathering. A short climb to its peak affords a fine view over much of the island, including Pu’u ʻō’ō, the source of Kīlauea’s current eruption. A stone platform at the peak has a plaque pointing to major ar-
eas of interest. If you watch and listen around dusk, you may hear and see hoary bats flying about, one of the only two native Hawaiian mammals.

**DAY 2  Red Hill to Mauna Loa Cabin (11.6 miles).** Your destination today is Mauna Loa Cabin, at 13,250 feet, on the rim of the summit crater. Plan to leave early for this long hike with its 3,225-foot altitude gain. Expect to feel the effects of exertion more than you normally would, especially as you go higher on the mountain. This is not altitude sickness, but a natural reaction to reduced oxygen intake.

As you leave the rust-colored lava of Pu‘u ‘Ula‘ula, you seem to enter a world of black. But it is soon apparent that lava comes in many different colors. During the day, you will see a variety of different shades—brown, red, green, gold, and blue. After you walk 2.6 miles, the trail crosses onto the 1984 lava flow, the most recent eruption. You are now at 10,970 feet and will cross the 1984 flow two more times. After 4 miles, you reach a cone formed by an eruption on July 4, 1899, two months after the Battle of Manila Bay in the Spanish-American War. If the sign is still there, it will tell you that this is Dewey Cone, named in honor of Commodore George Dewey, the victor in that battle. The altitude is now 11,320 feet.

A water hole is located about 100 feet south of the trail in a collapsed lava tube at the 11,845-foot level, 5.6 miles into the hike. However, if the sign along the trail is missing, it will be almost impossible to find it. After hiking 9.5 miles (about five hours), you reach North Pit, a large crater now filled with lava from the 1984 flow. Elevation here is 13,000 feet. This is also your first view of Moku‘āweoweo, the immense caldera of Mauna Loa. Jaggar’s Cave, a small pit and sometimes a water source with an overhanging ledge, was used for shelter by the volcanologist when he overnighted on the mountain and by hikers to the summit before the cabin was built. If you follow the direction of the sign, it is less than 400 feet away.

Be careful when reading the signs here. Do not take the trail to the summit, but to the cabin, for they lie on opposite sides of the crater. The cabin is now 2 miles ahead—the longest 2 miles in the state—or maybe it just seems that way. You may be able to pick out two large rock cairns off in the distance on the eastern wall of the caldera, on the left. They are not far from the cabin. The trail drops to the floor of North Pit, crosses its eastern side, passes the sheer drop into Lua Pōholo on the left, and then makes its way to the top of the caldera wall. The cabin, set back from the caldera rim about 100 feet, occupies a spectacular setting. Even the outhouse has a fantastic view.

If a water shortage occurs in the cabin’s catchment tank, you will find a water hole about a quarter-mile south of the cabin, marked by a large cairn. It is 66
possible to see the cairn from the window in the cabin’s kitchen. I have always
found water here, although it might be frozen in winter. When the sun goes
down, the temperature will fall rapidly, but step outside anyway. You have
probably never seen the night sky as you will see it from here. This is one of the
few places in the northern hemisphere where the Southern Cross is visible.
Look for it on the southern horizon in late spring. On a clear night, the glow of
Hilo’s lights is visible in the northeast, and the summit of Mauna Kea looms to
the north. It is easy to believe that you are not on earth, but somewhere in outer
space.

**DAY 3 Layover.** This is a day to relax and explore the summit area. First,
take a good look at Moku’āweoweo. This huge caldera is more than 3 miles
long, 1.5 miles across, and 600 feet deep. Its floor is covered to a depth of 6 feet
by lava from the 1984 eruption. The cairn at the caldera edge in front of the
cabin was put there by the Wilkes expedition of 1841, and just south of the cabin
are remains of the rock walls built as windbreaks for the group’s tents. On the
opposite (west) side of the caldera, you can see the summit of the mountain at
13,677 feet. A possibility for this exploration day is a 9.5-mile round-trip hike to
the summit, on the other side of the caldera. But you can save nearly half this
walking by making the summit hike en route to the observatory on your descent
tomorrow.

The path leading south from the cabin soon forks. The left fork is the begin-
nning of the ‘Ainapō Trail, which will be discussed later. Take the right fork and
continue south along the caldera rim. About 1.7 miles from the cabin, you will
reach South Pit, a deep cut in its wall joining it to the main caldera. Lava from
the 1984 eruption spilled into the south end of the pit and beyond. Two addi-
tional pit craters, Lua Hohonu and Lua Hou, lie a quarter-mile and a half-
mile south of South Pit, respectively. The 1984 flows barely missed Lua Ho-
honu, nor did they enter Lua Hou.

Another option for the day is to descend into Moku’āweoweo Crater by
climbing down a steep rock slide roughly parallel to the water hole and explor-
ing the crater’s still steaming floor. It is also possible to cross the crater floor and
climb out via the 1949 cinder cone. You could then turn right and hike along the
rim to the summit cairn and return to the cabin by way of the Summit Trail and
the Cabin Trail. This would be a great adventure, but keep in mind that the al-
titude will take its toll on the uphill portions of the trip, particularly the ascent
back out of the crater.

**DAY 4 Mauna Loa Cabin to Mauna Loa Weather Observatory (6 miles).** This downhill hike, which should take about three hours, leads to the
opposite side of the mountain, where the trail ends at 11,000 feet. If you plan a
side trip to the summit cairn, add 5.2 miles (round-trip) and at least three more hours.

Begin by retracing the route back through North Pit to the intersection of the summit and observatory trails. From here, it is 3.8 miles to the observatory and 2.6 miles to the summit. As you continue toward the observatory, the trail crosses a rough four-wheel-drive road used for access to the former location of the weather observatory. You are at 12,860 feet. In just over another half-mile, the trail intersects the four-wheel-drive road again, this time following it for about a quarter-mile before turning off to the left. Watch for a small sign that says “Trail.” You are now at 12,425 feet.

After leaving the four-wheel-drive road, the trail virtually disappears, and the route continues over smooth black boulders marked by rock cairns. Watch for two large cairns marking a wide, collapsed lava tube. At this point you are at 11,800 feet, with 1.5 miles to go. You will now be able to see the white dome of the weather observatory. After you have gone a total of 4.7 miles, you cross the four-wheel-drive road for the last time at 11,685 feet. The trail ends when it intersects the same four-wheel-drive road for the last time. Turn right and walk up to the parking lot, where, hopefully, your ride or vehicle is waiting.

Alternate Descent via the ‘Ainapō Trail (18.2 miles, 1–2 Days). The ‘Ainapō Trail was the path used by ancient Hawaiians to climb Mauna Loa, and it was the main route up the mountain until construction of the Mauna Loa Trail in 1915. The first ascent of the volcano by a Westerner was made along this trail when Archibald Menzies, the surgeon of the Vancouver expedition, made the climb in 1794. After the Mauna Loa Trail was built, the ‘Ainapō slowly fell into disuse, and portions of it disappeared. State Division of Forestry and Wildlife crews reestablished the trail in 1993. A new trail cabin, about midway between the summit and Highway 11, was constructed at that time.

A permit is required to overnight on the trail, and camping is permitted only at the cabin. This permit is in addition to the one required from the national park for use of the cabins on the Mauna Loa Trail. You may make reservations for use of the ‘Ainapō Shelter (it is really a comfortable cabin) not earlier than one month in advance by calling 808-933-4221. The written permit may then be obtained from the State Forestry and Wildlife office at 1648 Kilauea Avenue, Hilo, HI 96720. Although the descent can be made in one long, downhill slog (providing your knees are up to it), a more reasonable and enjoyable choice is to overnight at the ‘Ainapō Shelter. You can also ascend the mountain via the ‘Ainapō Trail, but, because it is considerably steeper than the Mauna Loa Trail route, using the ‘Ainapō for the descent makes for an easier, quicker trip.

It is 7.5 miles from the Mauna Loa cabin to the ‘Ainapō Shelter, which lies at
7,750 feet elevation. The 5,500-foot descent traverses alpine stone desert terrain, which is devoid of vegetation until the trail reaches lower elevations. The shelter is a fully enclosed cabin containing six bunks with mattresses and a table with six stools. Water that should be treated before drinking is available from a catchment tank, and a clean, odorless composting toilet is on the cabin’s porch. A separate structure houses a stall shower and a dish-washing area. It is 2.7 miles from the shelter to the lower end of the trail, which now passes first through a subalpine shrub/ʻohiʻa forest, and then a mesic koa/ʻohiʻa forest. The trailhead is marked by a gate entering the Kapāpala Forest Reserve at an elevation of 5,650 feet. Here, you can be picked up by a four-wheel-drive vehicle, if you can make the arrangements, saving an additional 8-mile hike to the highway.

Assuming that you are continuing on foot, 2.3 miles more brings you to another gate, the end of the forest reserve. You are now on private land belonging to Kapāpala Ranch, where the state has obtained a right of way for access to the ʻAinapō Trailhead. This access is open during daylight hours only, and deviation from the access corridor constitutes trespassing. You have 5.7 more miles
to go. On your way down, you will pass the ‘Ainapō Ranch House and two cor-
rals before reaching Highway 11, midway between mile markers 40 and 41.

**HAWAI‘I VOLCANOES COASTAL LOOP**

(28.3 MILES, 5–6 DAYS; MODERATE TO STRENUOUS)


Except for the portion along the Chain of Craters Road, the coastal area of Ha-
wa‘i Volcanoes National Park is seldom visited. For the most part, the area has
been left to occasional backpackers and a few sturdy day hikers. At first ap-
ppearance, it may seem that there is good reason for this isolation, for this land-
scape is stark, dry, and windswept, with scant vegetation and little protection
from the elements. Despite over 30 miles of coastline, only a few locations per-
mit entry into the refreshing cool of the sea. But these places are jewels, oases in
a desert of hard, black rock. And sweeping views of dark cliffs against a bright
blue sea create a wild, unforgettable beauty.

This little-traveled part of the park lies southwest of the Chain of Craters
Road. A brief glance at the *Coastal & East Rift Backcountry* strip map, which
you can obtain free from the visitor center, will show that many itineraries are
possible over its five trails and their connectors. As is usually the case, the best
itineraries are those where you can be dropped off at one point and picked up at
another. Overnight stops are possible at five locations. All but ‘Ăpua Point
have shelters of some sort, with additional tent camping permitted. Each has a
pit toilet, and all but ‘Ăpua Point have catchment water that should be boiled or
treated before drinking. A permit is required for overnight stays and is obtain-
able free at the visitor center. While there, check on the water level in the catch-
ment tanks where you will be staying.

**Pepeiao Cabin** contains three beds, three extra foam mattresses, a table,
and counter space. Located in a thinly forested *kipuka* at about 1,700 feet, it
is the only site not on the coast. Ka‘aha, Halapē, and Keauhou have identi-
cal three-sided roofed shelters with gravel floors and simple outdoor grills. At
times, all have healthy roach and ant populations, which may make you decide
to opt for a tent.

The itinerary below is designed to show the best features of this striking,
lonely coast. It overnights at Pepeiao Cabin and then visits all three of the
coastal locations, allotting six days for the trip, including a layover day at Ha-
lapē. You may use the map references and the information below to plan your
own shorter, or longer, trip.