will have to make your own way. Expect to get wet. The front of the valley is mostly wetland, which dries out as the land rises toward the head wall. Mari-juana was grown in the upper reaches in the 1970s and 1980s, and some may still be there.

To get to Wai‘ilikahi Falls, about 2.3 miles away, start on the trail leading to the water source. Cross the stream, watching for faint signs of a trail that follows the base of the valley wall. It will soon become hard to see, but ribbons tied to trees help mark the route. If you lose sight of the ribbons, stay close to the valley wall, and you will reach another stream that leads to the pool at the base of the falls. The water plunges into the pool here with a sheer drop of 320 feet. Be sure to take a refreshing swim. You can explore farther up the valley from here, but, as already noted, there will be no paths to guide your way.

**DAY 3  \ Return to Waipi‘o Valley Lookout.**

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**Day Hiking**

Day-hiking opportunities on the island of Hawai‘i are probably more varied than in any other area of comparable size in the country. Hike up an active volcano more than 13,000 feet high, and descend into the crater of another one. Walk across misty lava plateaus hundreds of years old, or on flows so new their surfaces still radiate the heat of their eruptions. Climb up an alpine peak or down a steep canyon wall. Trek over deserts where plants struggle to survive and into rain forests where plants prosper in jumbled profusion. All of this and more is possible in an area smaller than the state of Connecticut. The best of these hiking adventures is described below.

**CRATER RIM TRAIL (11.6-MILE LOOP; MODERATE)**


This trip in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park is second only to the “Mauna Ulu to the Sea” backpack for the variety of its scenery, landscape, and vegetation. Completely encircling both Kīlauea Caldera and Kīlauea Iki, the trail features forest paths, desert sands, lava flows, steaming bluffs, deep craters, and a walk-through lava tube. It begins and ends at Volcano House, across from the visitor center, but if you are staying at Kīlauea Military Camp (KMC) or camping at Nāmakanī Paio, you may start and end there.

From the visitor center, cross the road to Volcano House, and walk through the lobby to the terrace for a spectacular view overlooking Kīlauea Crater. With
the crater on your left, walk to the end of the terrace and the hotel grounds, where a hiker symbol marks the beginning of the trail. The path is paved here and descends into a forest of trees, ferns, and ginger. As you proceed, watch for signs to the observatory and Jaggar Museum. The first two turns are to the right, after which the direction will be pretty straightforward. The path is no longer paved now, and it soon begins to follow the crater rim, with more great views. You pass the Steaming Bluffs, and, a little over 2 miles from the start, you reach the Volcano Observatory and Jaggar Museum. Either stop now or see it another time, but there is a good view here of Halema‘uma‘u, Kīlauea’s fire pit.

When you leave the observatory, the forest begins to thin out, and the ground underfoot takes on a sandy quality. After 1.4 miles, the Ka‘ū Desert Trail branches off to the right. Stay left, and the trail soon crosses a large surface crack, which is the beginning of Kīlauea’s southwest rift. At about 1.4 miles from the Ka‘ū Desert Trail junction, the Halemā‘uma‘u Trail comes in from the left. You are now standing on the lava flow of 1982, the latest activity at Kīlauea’s summit. You have a choice here of making an extra 1.5-mile round-trip to the fire pit overlook, or saving it for another hike or a visit by car. About 1.5 miles beyond the Halemā‘uma‘u Trail junction, the route skirts the edge of Keanakāko‘i Crater, and, just over half a mile later, it crosses Chain of Craters Road.

The forest deepens now, with tree ferns and large ‘ōhi‘a trees the predominant vegetation. Nearly 2 miles from the road crossing, the trail intersects a dirt road and turns left, joining this road until it reaches the Thurston Lava Tube. This is a good opportunity to visit this quarter-mile loop through an illuminated lava tunnel.

To resume the hike, cross the road (Crater Rim Drive) and the parking area to the paved path on the opposite side. Turn right and follow the pavement a short distance until it enters the trees and begins a stepped descent. For the next 1.5 miles, the trail hugs the rim of Kīlauea Iki with dramatic, dropoff views into its crater. It also crosses the former Waldron Ledge Lookout, where most of the road and the parking lot plunged into the crater during an earthquake in 1983. The trail then follows this road remnant a short distance, returning to Volcano House.

**Kīlauea Iki Loop (5.7 miles; moderate)**


One of the most interesting trips in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park, this half-day excursion begins at Volcano House, crosses a corner of Kīlauea Crater, traverses the floor of Kīlauea Iki (Little Kīlauea), emerges at the Thurston Lava Tube, and then joins the Crater Rim Trail to return to the starting point. The
hike begins at the same point as the previous trip, at the trail sign to the right of the Volcano House (as you face it from the road). Descend on the same paved path, but bear left at the sign for Halema’uma’u Trail. You are now descending into Kīlauea Crater through a lush forest that includes native plants, several varieties of ginger, ferns, and ‘ōhi’a and sandalwood trees. Watch for several large fissures just off the trail, almost hidden by vegetation. They illustrate how dangerous off-trail hiking can be in a volcanic environment. The large rock fall on the left was caused by the 1983 earthquake and is part of the Waldron Ledge Road and parking area, which collapsed into the crater. You will cross this site on the return part of the loop.

Near the end of the descent, the crater floor comes into view, and Halema’uma’u Trail, marked by rock cairns, is clearly visible stretching across the crater floor. Bearing left almost immediately from the Halema’uma’u Trail is another, shorter trail, also marked by cairns, which stays close to the crater wall. Follow this trail. Notice that even on this inhospitable lava surface ferns and even small ‘ōhi’a trees have established themselves in cracks where moisture accumulates. The trail soon leaves the crater floor, ascending Byron Ledge, the divide between Kīlauea and its smaller namesake. Follow the signs to Kīlauea Iki and Thurston Lava Tube.

Lots of ‘ōhelo berries grow along this section of the trail. ‘Ōhelo, a relative of the blueberry and cranberry, is an orange or red berry that grows on a small shrub. Considered sacred to the goddess Pele, Hawaiians would not eat the berry without first offering some to the goddess of the volcano. In 1824, High Chiefess Kapi’olani, a recent convert to Christianity, approached Kīlauea and defied Pele by eating the berries without offering any to her. Many Hawaiians took this as a sign that the old gods could not stand up to the powerful new one introduced by American missionaries, and the act delivered one more blow to the traditional religion of the islands.

When Kīlauea Iki’s crater comes into view, watch for a trail junction on the right, which drops steeply on a stepped, rocky path to the crater floor. The path makes its way first across ‘a‘a and then pāhoehoe flows, reaching a pit at the base of Pu’u Pua‘i, a large cinder cone formed during the eruption of 1959. The pit was the source of a spectacular fountaining eruption in November 1959, which lasted for days and spewed lava a record 1,900 feet into the air. From here, the trail continues across the center of the steaming crater floor. At the far wall, the path climbs through a forest similar to the one at the beginning of the trip, reaching Crater Rim Drive and Thurston Lava Tube. If you have already visited the lava tube, do not cross the road, but bear left on the paved path. The trail quickly enters the forest again, and for the next 1.5 miles it hugs the rim of
Kīlauea Iki with sheer, dramatic views into its crater. Then it crosses the former Waldron Ledge Lookout, mentioned earlier, where most of the road and the parking lot plunged into the crater during an earthquake in 1983. The trail then follows this road remnant a short distance to Volcano House.

**Variation.** A shorter loop trip (about 4 miles) is possible by parking at Kīlauea Iki Overlook, just north of Thurston Lava Tube. From here, you may head in either direction on Crater Rim Trail, descending to the crater floor from the same trail described here, or at Thurston Lava Tube if you prefer to do the trip in reverse.

**Nāpau Crater Via the Nāulu Trail**

10.5 MILES ROUND-TRIP; MODERATE


The trailhead for this trip in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park is located on the Chain of Craters Road across from the Kealakomo picnic pavilion, about 10 miles southeast of the intersection with Crater Rim Drive. The route crosses huge lava fields and passes through a giant fern forest before reaching the rim of one of the largest craters in the east rift zone. Because this is an active eruption area, a hiking permit, which may be obtained at the visitor center, is required. No water is available anywhere on this trail.

After parking at the pavilion lot, cross the road, and locate the trailhead at a bulletin board. The route begins with a long, gradual uphill over a vast pāhoehoe flow, with lava spreading in all directions as far as the eye can see. You are hiking over the massive outpouring from Mauna Ulu, which took place from 1969 to 1973. The way is marked by a series of rock cairns. Watch for them carefully, as the trail impression is often faint on the smooth lava. Occasionally, the trail crunches over patches of rough ‘a‘ā, and through small kīpuka, where isolated trees and other vegetation have been spared by the surrounding lava.

After about 2 miles, the Nāulu Trail ends at an intersection with the Kalapana Trail, coming in from the right. This junction is confusing, so be careful to take the correct route. The route now passes over remnants of the old Chain of Craters Road, covered by the 1969–1973 flows; the asphalt, center line, and some highway signs are still visible. Make sure to continue north, and you soon enter a deep forest of giant tree ferns and other rain forest plants. Watch for orange metal tabs on trees, which mark the trail along this section. After 1.2 miles, the Kalapana ends at an intersection with the Nāpau Trail. Turn right, along the Nāpau, where the route proceeds through a lighter, mixed forest. After about 1.5 miles, watch for the sign describing the remains of a pulu factory on the left.
(for a description of this feature, see Backpacking Adventures, this chapter). Shortly after the pulu factory, the trail ends at the rim of Nāpau Crater. Across the crater in the distance looms the cone of Pu‘u ʻōʻō, the source of the current eruption, which began in 1983.

Variation. For those willing to tackle a long day, an exciting extension of the trip reaches the base of Pu‘u ʻōʻō, the current source of the park’s active lava flows, which would extend the distance to 15 miles. (If you plan to do this, please see Mauna Ulu to the Sea, Day 2, Backpacking Adventures, this chapter.)

**KAʻAHA TRAIL (8 MILES ROUND-TRIP; STRENuous)**


This trip allows day hikers the chance to experience some of the dramatic coastal scenery of Hawaiʻi Volcanoes National Park normally reserved for backpackers (see Backpacking Adventures, this chapter). Beginning at the overlook at the end of Hilina Pali Road, it descends 2,280 feet to the shoreline, 4 miles away. The trail switchbacks down the Hilina Pali, a drop of 1,300 feet,
and then crosses a wide lava plain to reach a shallow cove on the coast. No shade exists except for three separate trees spaced along the switchback, and a small area within the Ka‘aha Shelter near the shore.

The view from the overlook provides a grand sweep of the coastline. Two trailheads are here. Make sure you take the Ka‘aha Trail, which leads to the left; the Kā‘u Desert Trail branches off to the right. Soon into the descent you will be able to see a U-shaped cove indenting the shoreline. This is Ka‘aha, your destination. The trail is easy to follow as it switchbacks down the steep pali. Footing is generally good, but there are some rough spots of sharp rock and loose ‘a‘ā. If it’s a hot day (and it usually is), take advantage of the shade provided by the three trees.

At the base of the pali, a long line of large ahu (rock cairns) marches toward the sea, marking the route. You will soon reach a trail junction. Take the right fork, toward Ka‘aha. The gradual descent over the old pāhoehoe lava plain is relieved only by brown grasses and some scrub brush. Several lava tubes lie along the route, one with a surprise—a healthy guava tree growing in the entrance. The accident of its seed falling in one of the few spots in this arid place where water can collect provided our group with a tasty treat. The lava tubes along the trail may be worth exploring, and it is possible that they may be different collapses into the same long tube.

At 1.4 miles from the first trail junction, a second appears. Again, take the right fork, and the trail climbs down a short, rocky escarpment to reach the Ka‘aha Shelter. The most noticeable feature of Ka‘aha is that it is a green oasis in a sea of black. Fresh groundwater, close to the surface, allows naupaka and a few other types of plants to prosper. The shelter is a small, three-sided, roofed structure, with a dirt floor. A water tank, fed by a roof catchment, usually contains water that should be treated before drinking. A pit toilet is nearby.

A trail marked by small ahu leads to the cove on the shoreline. The cove itself is too shallow for swimming, but it is a fine place to soak in one of its tide pools, some covered with a thick carpet of green pickleweed. A tiny accretion of brown sand on the left side of the cove borders one of the deeper pools. Entry to the open ocean should be made with care. On most days, waves crash hard against the rocky shoreline, making any entry dangerous. Calm, windless days may provide an opportunity for ocean swimming, but even then it is prudent not to stray too far from shore. A stroll eastward, toward Kalue Point, reveals two large metal tanks with spigots near the bottom. Our party found fresh water in both of them, a possible source if the shelter tank is dry.
NEW HVNP COASTAL LAVA FLOWS
(MILES VARY; MODERATE)


Depending on current activity, visitors to Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park are allowed to explore the cooling lava and hike over it under certain conditions. Distances will vary, and the rating of the hikes is usually easy, but with sometimes difficult footing. Park authorities often mark out trails across the lava fields, if they feel it is safe to do so. These trails are not permanent, and they come and go with Pele’s whims. Check at the visitor center or with the rangers at the end of the road for the latest status. To reach the new flows, and for exploring along the way, please see Adventuring by Car, this chapter.

KAHAUALE‘A TRAIL TO ERUPTION SOURCE
(8.5 MILES ROUND-TRIP; MODERATE)

Maps: USGS topo quads—Kalalua, Volcano.
Trails Illustrated, Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park.

This adventure has two things going for it. It is a beautiful hike through a lovely, fern-blanketed rain forest, and it is the shortest, safest route to Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō, the site of the current Kīlauea eruption. The trailhead is located at the end of Captain’s Drive/Ala Kapena Road in Glenwood, off Highway 11. The trail, built in 1991 to provide state fire crews access to the eruption area, is not shown on any of the above map references.

From Hilo, drive southwest toward Volcano. Between mile markers 19 and 20 (just past the Hirano Store), turn left on South Glenwood Road. In less than a mile, the road curves right and then left, becoming Captain’s Drive/Ala Kapena. At 3.2 miles from the highway turnoff, the road becomes a narrow, two-track route through the grass for another 0.3 mile, ending at a small turnaround. A prominent sign marks the trailhead.

The route is generally level, with only a few minor ups and downs. Be prepared for mud; lots of it lurks in low spots and oozes in pools across the trail. Some of these pools you can find your way around, some have logs corduroyed for stepping on, and others require just wading right through. A good stick is valuable to probe for firm ground. The forest is almost exclusively ‘ōhi‘a and tree ferns, typical of Big Island forests at this altitude in the Puna district. The trail is in good condition and easy to follow, marked well with blue ribbons all along the route. At times, patches of an old pāhoehoe flow appear under the mud along the way.

After stepping (or jumping) over a wide crack about 4 miles into the hike, the
A burned-out truck and car are trapped forever in the 1990 lava flows that destroyed the town of Kalapana.

forest begins to thin and dry out. It ends dramatically at a wide pāhoehoe lava field, strewn with hundreds of bleached, gray skeletons of trees killed by the eruptions of Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō, which rears its smoking peak just ahead. Sit down on one of the larger fallen trees, pull out your lunch, and enjoy a view that few folks ever see. If the lava field at the end of the forest is covered with fog or mist, do not stray far from the wood line; it could be difficult to find your way back to the trail. The rough 'āā skirt around the base of the Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō cone will prevent you from approaching too close to the vent, but in no case should you attempt to climb the cone, which is unstable and dangerous.

Kalapana Lava Flows (4 Miles Round-Trip; Easy)
Maps: USGS topo quad—Kalapana.
Trails Illustrated, Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park.

Although the hike described here begins only 7 road miles from the “New Lava Flows” day hike in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park (above), that road now lies buried under thousands of tons of lava. It requires a 66-mile detour to reach the Kalapana area from the coastal park boundary (see Adventuring by Car, this
chapter). To reach the lava flows, drive south from Hilo on Highway 11 to the junction of Highway 130, about 6 miles. Turn left on 130 and follow it until you reach a barrier where lava flows have covered the road. Park off the highway.

Before you start out on the hike described below, you should keep some things in mind. New lava is rough and unstable. Although it may appear hard and feel firm underfoot, nothing prevents the crust from breaking, or even the roof of a lava tube from collapsing under your weight. And, although it seems totally useless and probably is, much of this land is still private property. You may be walking over someone’s former home, and the land still belongs to him. Should you come upon an undamaged house or plot of land, do not trespass on the property, and treat it with the same respect as you would any other.

To begin the hike, cross the barrier on the highway. You should soon find a rough, bulldozed road that approximates the route of the buried highway. From where you stand, if you look seaward, you will see a scattered line of trees in the distance. Head out across the lava field toward the right side of this tree line. You will have to pick your way. The surface is rough and jumbled in places, and you will need to detour around cracks and fissures. Look back from time to time to establish reference points for your return trip. As you approach the tree line, you will come upon a bus trapped in the lava and the remains of a house marked by a scorched sink, refrigerator, and metal roof paneling—heavy objects all, but afloat on an even heavier sea of lava.

Upon reaching the tree line, you will discover that the lava flows spared a long strip of vegetation along the coastline. This is called a kīpuka, an island of untouched land surrounded by lava. There are several homes within this kīpuka, some with marooned cars still parked nearby and swings and seesaws in the yards. Near the right end of the tree line, make your way over the raised lava bench into the trees. Some searching should reveal a path leading seaward that takes you to a lovely, small, sandy cove. Swimming here is safe only on calm days, and then only within the cove itself, but it is a great spot for lunch and for just relaxing. When you are ready, retrace your route, guiding on the reference points you picked out earlier.

WAIPI’O VALLEY (2–6 MILES, HALF TO FULL DAY; DEPENDING ON ACTIVITIES, STRENUOUS)
Maps: USGS topo quad—Kukuihaele.

For a description and background information about this beautiful valley and how to get there, please see Adventuring by Car, this chapter. This hike begins at the Waipi’o Valley Lookout, one of the most scenic spots in the state. A conventional car cannot manage the 25 percent grade on the road leading down into
the valley, so, unless you have a four-wheel-drive vehicle, park at the overlook and proceed on foot. It takes about 20–30 minutes for the downhill trip, and 30–45 minutes back up. The grade is very steep, as your legs will soon tell you.

Once on the valley floor, turn right to go to the beach, or stay left for an exploration of the near part of the valley. If you choose the valley, the first turn in the road will reveal a magnificent amphitheater side valley with twin waterfalls, Hiʻilawe and Hakalaoa, making a sheer drop of 1,200 feet (1,600 feet total).

To hike to the base of Hiʻilawe, walk down the road to the first stream crossing, look for a faint path bordering the bank, and proceed upstream. The trail crosses the stream several times, and it may be necessary to wade or hop the rocks in the stream part of the way, but keeping a good lookout for the trail will minimize this. The hike will take about an hour each way.

Back from the falls, the dirt road meanders by a few houses and rock walls, and the road crosses two fords where you will get your feet wet. Eventually, you will have to retrace your steps. The upper reaches of the valley are fenced off by private property. Turning toward the coast instead of the valley will bring you to Waipiʻo’s windy, black sand beach, backed by a long grove of ironwood trees. Here, the beach stretches almost a mile to your left, while a boulder-strewn shoreline greets you on the right. The switchback trail ascending the north wall of the valley leads to isolated Waimanu Valley, described in Backpacking Adventures, this chapter. Standing far enough out on the beach reveals a waterfall about half a mile off to the right, plunging over the cliff and into the sea. You can reach this waterfall by rock-hopping along the coast, exercising caution, as some of the rocks are unstable and in slide areas.

Wade Wailoa Stream if the water is not high, and follow the pretty path through the ironwoods toward the valley’s north wall. The beach scene is beautiful, but there is no hint that you are traversing what was in ancient times one of the most sacred places in all of Hawai‘i. Lying in the dunes just off the path on the left (mauka) are the remains of the Pakaʻalana Heiau, which served for several hundred years as both a puʻuhonua (place of refuge) and a luakini (human sacrifice temple). The heiau is also closely associated with Līloa, a 15th-century chief, who built his residence adjacent to it. Līloa is one of the two chiefs whose sennet caskets were stolen from the Bishop Museum in 1994 (see Waimea and the Hāmākua Coast, Adventuring by Car, this chapter). Said to have been removed from Līloa’s mausoleum in 1830, the caskets were believed to have been taken in order to be returned to be reburied in a secret place in Waipiʻo Valley.

Near the valley’s western wall, a trail leads up the valley, passing houses en route, some of them so comfortable and complete you will wonder how their
owners were able to bring sophisticated construction materials to this difficult location. A good turnaround spot is the pool at the base of Nāalapa Falls. A very steep climb to the left of the pool leads to higher segments of the falls and more pools.

**Mauna Loa Summit from the Saddle Road**

(12 miles round-trip; strenuous)


This hike is strenuous by anyone’s definition. Beginning at a weather observatory in the saddle between Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa at an elevation of 11,000 feet, it rises steeply over lava boulders, cinders, and ‘a’a and pāhoehoe fields, finally reaching the summit of the mountain at 13,677 feet. Altitude sickness is a possibility, primarily because of the high start, which gives the body little opportunity to acclimate to the altitude. Despite these disadvantages, this hike is dramatic and rewarding, providing sweeping views, including a look into the crater of the world’s largest active volcano. And it provides an alternative for those who would like to climb the mountain but cannot spare the three to four days necessary to make the backpack from Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park.

Make sure you have long pants, a warm windbreaker, and a hat in your pack, if you are not wearing them. This hike is not a good idea in the winter months if snow is on the mountain—and it usually is. Snow can obscure the trail and hide cracks and fissures that can cause serious injury if stepped in unawares, as has happened to hikers in the past.

One difficulty in reaching the trailhead is the previously mentioned problem of most rental car companies not allowing their cars on Saddle Road (Highway 200). Unless you choose to ignore the restriction (some drivers do), rent a four-wheel-drive from Harper’s Car Rental (808-969-1478), which will permit driving on the Saddle Road. This rental will also provide the opportunity to drive to the summit of Mauna Kea (see Adventuring by Car, this chapter). You will also be able to stay in the cabins at Mauna Kea State Recreation Area (6,500 feet) the night before the hike, providing an earlier start and good overnight acclimatization, thereby reducing the possibility of altitude sickness on the climb. As of February 2003, Mauna Kea State Recreation Area was closed for long-term repairs. Check for status.

An early start is essential for this hike. The trail is long and steep, and the altitude will slow you down. You cannot afford to be still on the mountain after dark. The lower portions of the trail are marked by rock cairns the same black color as the lava. They are almost impossible to pick out at night, even with a powerful flashlight, and there is no foot trail impression to follow. You should
be at the trailhead no later than 7 a.m. If starting from Hilo, allow 90 minutes to reach it, or 30 minutes from the state park cabins.

Coming from Hilo, leave town from the northwest on Highway 200 and drive for about 28 miles, watching for a small hunter check-in shack on the left. A paved road leads to the right at this same point. Do not take this road, but turn around and head back toward Hilo, the same way you came. I have deliberately taken you too far, since the road you want is hard to see, while the shack is an easy landmark. Less than half a mile from the shack, a large hill is on the right. Immediately after it is a partly paved, partly gravel road leading off to the right. Turn here. (If you are coming from Mauna Kea State Recreation Area, or from the Kona side of the island, simply slow down when you spot the shack, then follow the rest of these instructions.) Follow this narrow, winding road for about 8.2 miles to several antennas and dishes. Make a sharp right turn here, and the road soon becomes completely paved, but still narrow. Another 9 miles brings you to a small parking lot, with the weather station above it. A sign points down a rough four-wheel-drive road, which passes in front of and below the observatory, to the trailhead.

The first part of the trail is boulder-hopping, following cairns rather than a foot trail. Some of the natural lava formations resemble the cairns, so watch carefully to keep to the route. (For some reason, this seems more of a problem on the way down.) At 1.2 miles, you cross the same four-wheel-drive road you started on, and you will cross it two more times. This road was built in 1951 for access to the original weather observatory, which stood at 13,450 feet. Logistics proved too difficult over this very poor road, and in 1956 the observatory was moved to its present location.

At 1.5 miles, the trail reaches two large cairns marking a collapsed lava tube at 11,805 feet. This point is the last from which you can see the observatory, and the first place you will see it from on your return. A small sign, reading simply “Trail,” points to the left at 2.2 miles, and, less than a quarter of a mile farther, the four-wheel-drive road appears for the second time. Another “Trail” sign directs you to follow the road for about 0.3 mile to a point just before a locked gate across the road, where you turn off the road to the right at a sign and a large cairn. You are now at 12,500 feet.

The trail is now a cinder pathway until it crosses onto a shiny pāhoehoe flow in about half a mile. At 12,860 feet, it crosses the four-wheel-drive road for the last time. You have now hiked 3.3 miles. Half a mile farther are signs pointing to the Cabin Trail, Mauna Loa Trail, and the Summit Trail. Make sure you take the Summit Trail, but before you do, move forward a short distance for a view of North Pit and Moku‘āweoweo, the immense crater of Mauna Loa. Also
look for **Jaggar’s Cave**, sometimes a water source, not far off the trail to the right as you face the crater. This shallow pit, reinforced by rock walls, was used as a shelter by volcanologist Thomas Jaggar during his observation trips to the crater, and by hikers until the summit cabin was built in 1930. You are now at 13,020 feet—2.6 miles and 650 feet to go.

The trail now follows the western rim of North Pit and then the main crater itself, although the crater is not always in view. But when you finally reach the summit cairn, the entire caldera opens before you, 3 miles long, 1.5 miles across, and 600 feet deep. Mauna Loa’s last eruption was in March 1984, which lasted for 21 days. According to its recent activity cycle, the mountain may now erupt at any time, although it normally gives warning of the event. Sign the log book in the cairn, and take time for lunch and a well-earned rest. But be sure to start down early enough not to get caught on the mountain after dark.

**MAUNA KEA SUMMIT**
(8.7 MILES UP, 6.3 MILES [OR LESS] DOWN; STRENUOUS)

*Map: USGS topo quad—Mauna Kea.*

At 13,796 feet, Mauna Kea is the highest mountain in the state, the highest in the Pacific, and the highest in the world if measured from its ocean floor base. For those reasons alone, it is a magnet for “peak baggers.” But the mountain is a worthwhile climb apart from the statistics. The view from its summit is awe-some, and its surreal combination of observatories and cinder cones is unique. For a description of the mountain and its summit, please see *Mauna Kea Summit, Adventuring by Car*, this chapter.

As with the previous hike, you will need long pants, a warm windbreaker, and a hat. Even gloves will be welcome.

The trailhead begins at the Onizuka Center for International Astronomy, a small visitor center at 9,300 feet. See *Adventuring by Car, Mauna Kea Summit* for information about the center. Although a foot trail leads up the mountain a short distance from here, this itinerary uses the road for the climb, and the trail (or a variation) on the way down. The trail, steep and alternately sand and cinders, is more suitable for downhill movement than uphill, and too much time would be spent ascending it to make this a realistic day hike. If you want to make this trip in the winter months, the road is your only option, both up and down, as much of the trail will be obscured by deep snow.

Like Mauna Loa, this hike requires an early start. You should arrive at the Onizuka Center no later than 7 A.M. As with the Mauna Loa Summit day hike, it is a good idea to start this trip by overnighting in the cabins at Mauna Kea State Recreation Area (but note previously mentioned closure). They are only
7.5 miles from the junction at Highway 200, and, more important, sleeping at 6,500 feet will help your body acclimate to the altitude.

To reach the center from Highway 200, follow the instructions for Mauna Loa (see the preceding section). Upon reaching the hunter check-in station, turn off the highway onto the good paved road leading directly toward Mauna Kea. This road is the John A. Burns Memorial Highway, but there is no sign, as casual traffic is not encouraged. It is 6.3 miles to the center, and the road is steep, but paved all the way. Park in the lot in front of the building, which is open 24 hours a day. Rest rooms and drinking water—the last you will find—are available. There are no public facilities of any kind on the summit. Before leaving, walk through the gate at the end of the lot into a sloping field where some small silverswords are growing.

As you begin your trek up the road, you will pass several buildings on the right. They are support facilities for observatory personnel. Note the large, reddish-brown cinder cone across from the center, and the dirt road coming in on the left. You will need to guide on the cone if you return on the trail, and you will be coming out on this road. As you ascend, the trees soon give way to scrub, grasses, and spike-like plants growing along the shoulders of the road. These are not silverswords, but mullein, a biennial weed. Looking back down at the saddle area reveals green meadows, cinder cones, huge lava fields, and an awesome view of Mauna Loa, its massive side filling most of the panorama. As you go higher, you will be able to see the outline of the crater on Mauna Loa’s summit.

After a series of switchbacks, the road becomes relatively straight, curving now and then and ascending steeply over a broad rock and cinder slope. The high, brown hill in the distance, far ahead and slightly to the right, is the peak. The steepest part of the road comes about a mile before a sharp hairpin turn, which begins the final switchback at the base of the summit cone. You will almost certainly feel the altitude here. Go slowly, breathe deeply, and stop as often as you need to. Just before the hairpin turn, look for a trail off to the left, leading around the north (right) side of a large cinder cone. It is an old four-wheel-drive track, blocked off by boulders. This spot is the end of the Mauna Kea Trail, which you may want to use on the way down. You will also pass the first observatories here, at a height of about 13,300 feet.

The final climb up the switchback leads to a plateau with two large observatories. The first building, on the left side of the road, houses the University of Hawai’i’s 88-inch telescope. On the opposite side of the road, separated from the plateau by a small saddle, is Pu’u Wēkiu, the actual summit of the mountain. Climb over the guardrail, descend to the saddle, then climb up a path in the cinders—or make your own path—to “bag the peak.” Even if the ground is
snow-covered, it is usually possible to reach the summit. In fact, you may find a path already existing in the snow. While here, you can enjoy the highest view in the islands. Lunch will have to be in the lee of one of the buildings where you can get out of the wind, which is usually strong. The observatories are not open to visitors, and doors are locked. The university building has a small observation deck that is sometimes open, but there is really not much to see.

**Descending the Mountain.** For the return trip, you have three choices. In descending order of time required, they are retracing your steps on the road, taking the trail, or taking the road and cutting off the switchbacks by cross-country shortcuts. The weather will have a major say in which option you choose. If snow is on the mountain, you will be limited to the road, at least until you get below the snow line. By then it will probably be too late to intersect the trail, but you will be able to shortcut the last series of switchbacks. If there is heavy fog, you will not be able to do the switchback shortcuts, since you cannot see where you are going, and you would also be better off not using the trail.

No matter which route you take, you should swing by **Lake Wai'au**, which, at 13,020 feet, is the highest lake in Hawai‘i and the third-highest in the United States. To reach the lake, take the Mauna Kea Trail, which, as you noted on the way up, begins just past the first hairpin turn after descending the summit cone and is marked by large boulders blocking the way to vehicles. Follow the trail around the right side of **Pu‘u Hau Kea**, the large cinder cone, and in about half a mile you reach an intersection. Take the right fork, and you soon reach the lake, which covers about two acres and has a maximum depth of 10 feet. When you return to the intersection, proceed straight across the trail if you are descending via the road, which you will rejoin in about 0.3 mile. If you are going down the trail, turn right and continue down.

**Descending via the Trail.** The trail soon begins to descend steeply, and a conglomeration of metal poles and rock cairns mark the route at irregular intervals. After about a mile, you reach an ancient adze quarry, Keanakākoʻi‘i, which was in use as early as the 15th century. Many basalt flakes and chips litter the area, including partially finished adzes, but please do not remove anything. This is part of the Mauna Kea Ice Age Natural Area Preserve, and everything is protected by law. Mauna Kea was the only place in Hawai‘i where a glacier existed during the Great Ice Age, perhaps as recently as 8,000 years ago.

The trail continues down a wide, barren valley toward a reddish-brown cone, circles its base, and turns toward a smaller cone with a fairly deep crater. When you pass to the right of that cone, you reach an area where a wide view of the saddle opens up for the first time. Soon, an indistinct junction appears where the main trail curves to the right, toward a white pole. If you wish to re-
join the road, you can do so here by turning left toward a red pole, which marks a less distinct trail leading to the road. On the trail route, there are no more cairns or posts to follow, and you must now guide on the track of the trail itself and the reddish-brown cone near the Onizuka Center, which soon comes into view. After crossing an 'a‘ā field and a rough ridge, the trail meets a dirt road. Follow this road downhill until it meets the main road.

**Descending by Road, Short-cutting the Switchbacks.** This is the fastest way down the mountain, but you must have good visibility to use it, and you must be reasonably sure-footed. This is a “pick and choose” route in which you make several straight cross-country descents between the road switchbacks. Accordingly, you should never leave the road unless you can see the portion of the road below you that you have selected as your next destination. You will be walking steeply downhill, often on loose rock and cinders, and even a routine fall can have nasty consequences on sharp, jagged lava.

The first opportunity for a shortcut comes almost immediately after you leave the summit, and it will save almost a mile of travel. As the road makes a gradual arc to the right as it drops from the peak, the hairpin turn at the bottom of the summit cone comes into view. This spot is where the Mauna Kea Trail begins, which you noted on the way up. Select a point on the road near the hairpin turn and “launch” yourself off the road. The drop is steep but exhilarating, similar to running on a downhill scree slope. You can go as fast or as slow as you want—the slower, the safer. It is not a good idea to do this if the slope is snow-covered. Once back on the road, you have no reason not to visit Lake Wa‘iau. It is a short detour, and there are no more opportunities for road shortcuts for another 4 miles. Follow the directions above.

After rejoining the road from Lake Wa‘iau, proceed for about 3.5 miles until the road once more becomes a series of switchbacks. You are now on your own. How and when to shortcut the switchbacks is entirely up to you. Just remember, always have another segment of the road below in sight as your goal. And once the support buildings come into view, you can use the principle that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line—usually. You will find enough steep gullies and washes to make you wonder.

**PU‘U ‘Ō‘Ō TRAIL**

12-MILE LOOP, INCLUDING LAVA TUBE; MODERATE

Maps: USGS topo quads—Upper Pi‘ihonua, Kūlani.

*Trails Illustrated, Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park.*

This special hike along the northeastern slope of Mauna Loa at the 6,000-foot level traverses ‘a‘ā and pāhoehoe lava fields, forested kipuka, and an isolated,
mile-long lava tube. It is not to be confused with the trails to the Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō vent of Kīlauea Volcano, which are covered elsewhere in this chapter. Be sure to bring along a good flashlight with extra batteries if you intend to explore the lava tube. As with the two preceding trips, you must use the Saddle Road (Highway 200) to reach the trailhead. The trail remains relatively level for its entire length, with only light ups or downs. It lies in the saddle’s “mist belt,” which means it can be foggy or raining. While the fog can lend an ethereal quality to the landscape, it may also obscure route markings.

The trail gets its name from a nearby large cinder cone on the slopes of Mauna Kea. At one time, the trail extended to the town of Volcano, and from there to Keauhou Landing, now a coastal campground in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park. Cattle were driven from Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō Ranch down the trail to Keauhou, where they were swum out to ships and taken to market. Today, it is possible to follow the trail farther than is described in this book, but the trail is swallowed up in private land before it reaches Volcano. There is some talk by the state of extending trail access at some future date.

The trailhead is on the left side of the Saddle Road (Highway 200), 22.4 miles from Hilo. After you pass the 21-mile marker, slow down and watch for a four-wheel-drive road on the left. This is the Kūlani Powerline Road, named for a power line that no longer exists. You will exit the hike on this road. Continue on the highway for 0.8 mile until you see a wooden sign on the left reading “Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō Horse and Foot Trail.” Pull off the road and park in the small, rough lava lot.

The trip begins on a lichen-covered ‘a‘ā flow, and ‘ōhi‘a, ferns, pūkiawe, and ‘ōhelo are the predominant vegetation. If fog is present, the whole setting seems eerie and mysterious. The trail widens as it passes over a large, wide ‘a‘ā flow, and then it narrows again as it enters a kīpuka. The beaten track, easy to follow in the forested kīpuka, is often hard to pick out when it crosses the intervening lava flows, but the route is well marked by large rock cairns. The kīpuka consists of ‘ōhi‘a and tree ferns, and, depending on rainfall, it may also contain miniature moss-bordered ponds. Look for the ‘âkala, the native raspberry, which grows only in Hawai‘i. Its berry looks exactly like the normal variety, but much larger, and the bush itself generally has no thorns.

About 4 miles into the hike, a lava tube lies just off the trail on the left. While it appears to be worth exploring, a better lava tube is in store. At about 5 miles, the trail intersects the Kūlani Powerline Road, mentioned earlier. A sign with an arrow pointing left reads “Saddle Road 3.5 Miles.” Turn left, leaving the Pu‘u ‘ō‘ō Trail, which continues along the road to the right. After walking nearly a mile, watch closely for a lava tube entrance about 50 feet off the road on the left. What you are looking for is not a typical cave entrance, but rather a circu-
lar depression in the ground, the collapsed roof of the lava tube. Two entrances lie opposite each other at the bottom of the rocky pit. After you climb down from the south side of the pit (the only feasible place), choose the entrance on its east side, the one that goes under the road.

After you scramble over the rocks at the entrance, the floor of the tube becomes remarkably smooth, and it is then a stand-up trip the entire way, except for occasional low spots where you will need to duck. Roots send their long tendrils down, and stalactites drip slowly from the ceiling. About 10 minutes into the tube, a skylight appears—another collapse, choked with ferns, moss, and other plants. The tube continues, plunging once more into a world of total darkness, until a thick, precariously balanced slab of lava partly blocks the way. By crouching, it is possible to continue either atop or under the slab, but we, content with our mile-long exploration, did not do so.

After you return to the entrance, it is possible to explore the opposite section, but the distance is shorter, and some crouching and crawling is required. When you return to the road, continue along for another 2.5 miles. At the Saddle Road, turn left, and proceed about 0.75 mile to your car.

**Variation.** Upon reaching the point where the trail intersects the Kūlani Powerline Road (at the sign pointing to the Saddle Road, about 5 miles into the hike), turn right, and follow the road, which is also the continuation of the Puʻu ʻōʻō Trail. Proceed about a mile to where the road is cut by a huge, rough ʻaʻā flow. This flow is from the Mauna Loa eruption of 1984. Although the road ends here, the trail has been reconstituted as a rough path over the flow, marked by pink-and-blue ribbons on narrow poles. After about a mile on this flow, the trail once more enters an ʻōhiʻa forest. This is probably as far as you should go on a day hike. If visibility is deteriorating, the Kūlani Powerline Road is the best return option.

**CAPTAIN COOK MONUMENT**
*(4 MILES ROUND-TRIP; MODERATE)*

Map: USGS topo quad—Hōnaunau.

This white obelisk stands on the north shore of Kealakekua Bay, south of Kailua-Kona, near the spot where Captain James Cook was killed by the Hawaiians in 1779 in a dispute over a stolen boat. There is an extra benefit to this hike. If you carry a mask and snorkel in your day pack, you will enjoy one of the best underwater views anywhere in the islands in addition to a hike with a sweeping coastal panorama.

From Kailua-Kona, take Highway 11 south about 12 miles to the turnout for Kealakekua Bay. About 50 yards or so from the highway, a rocky dirt road turns off to the right. Make the turn, then pull off and park on the edge of this road. A
good spot is on the left under an avocado tree. Walk straight down this road for about 50 yards, watching for a four-wheel-drive track to the left. Do not enter the gate to your front because the track is just before it. Once you identify the four-wheel-drive track, you will either be in luck or you won’t. If you are in luck, the track will have been recently cleared and will be easy to see. You can then follow it easily downhill, a descent that features sweeping vistas of the coast all the way to the monument. If you are not in luck, the track will be overgrown with grass and weeds as high or higher than your head. In this case, it will be necessary to push or fight your way through the growth, hoping it doesn’t get bad enough to turn you back, which it sometimes does.

For about a mile the trail is wooded, giving way to koa haole and then to low grasses and shrubs as the trail passes over old ‘a‘ā flows. You will find a great view of the coast and the sea, and, as you descend, you begin to see into the headwall area of Kealakekua Bay on the left. About halfway down, the remains of a heiau appear on the right, which is believed to be where Cook’s body was dismembered after his death.

At the bottom of the slope, another four-wheel-drive trail joins in from the right, and the route now travels between rock walls on both sides of the road until reaching the shoreline, where it ends. From here, a path heads left through the woods. Before taking it, however, walk out on the smooth, flat rocks in front of you and look for a bronze plaque, sometimes high and dry, sometimes covered with about six inches of water. The plaque states that this is the spot where Cook met his death, a monument that few people see or know about. Return to the path, keeping the water in view on your right. You soon reach the white obelisk, the official Cook Monument. This spot is good for lunch and time to break out the mask and snorkel.

You can jump in the water directly from the jetty in front of the monument, and you may have the company of one or two large tour boats from the town of Kailua-Kona, whose snorkelers will join you in the water. The underwater scenery is wonderful (see Snorkeling and Diving, this chapter). Many kinds of fish, coral, and urchins crowd the water, which is from three-feet-deep to a sheer dropoff. Remove nothing from the water, as this is a protected underwater preserve.

Afterward, poke around in trees near the shoreline mauka of the monument to find a small, spring-fed pool. Relax and enjoy yourself, but allow enough time for the return. It is a long, hot hike, ascending 1,400 feet in two miles.