

Relaxing Fall Retreats for Weight Loss, Relat

Spa

Healthy Living,
Travel & Renewal

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Easy ways to bring out
the happiest, healthiest,
most vibrant you

FIND INSTANT
BALANCE

(page 47)



A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding three white plumeria flowers with yellow centers. The hands are positioned in a dark, rippling pool of water. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the skin and the petals of the flowers.

hawaii's **HEALING** touch

With its active volcanoes, sacred sites, and soul-renewing rituals, the Big Island embodies the spirit of transformation. BY ERIC HISS

Pele is restless. Huge, white clouds billow from a vent on the vast volcano known as Kilauea, churning skyward on an otherwise cloudless morning. Truly a spectacle, these aren't cottony puffs but rather moody plumes filled with shadow and otherworldly contrast. I am standing, eyes wide, on the rim of the Halema'uma'u crater in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island, the place Hawaiian legend holds as being the domain of Pele, the goddess of volcanoes. Vast and forbidding, if this caldera is Pele's home, she is someone to respect absolutely.

With me is Dr. Dane Kaohelani Silva, a traditional Hawaiian healer and *kumu* ("teacher"), and Kamaluhia Woolley, who's dressed in the puffed *pā'ū* skirt and red sash of a traditional hula dancer. Silva leads our small group to an isolated spot where *kahuna*, ancient priests of the Hawaiian Islands' traditional religion, once divined the future. We're not sure if Silva's called in a favor, but we are fortunate to have the opportunity to be here: Noxious fumes of sulfur dioxide emanating from the volcano had closed this site the day before, and a wind shift was anticipated to close it again today. In other words, Pele had given us a window of opportunity.

Having studied with masters since he was a child, Silva — or Kumu Kaohe (as his students know him) — begins sharing a little of the vast body of knowledge he has on Hawaiian healing and spirituality. He explains there are things we do or that are done to us in our lifetime that hold us back. "You can leave them here," he says. "That energy will be recycled so you can be renewed." He then instructs us to walk single file toward the crater's edge, forming a line facing the magnificent display of power. We quiet as he plays a spare melody on a flute then chants across the expanse in a powerful voice. On her knees in reverence to Pele, Woolley starts her chant and begins swaying in powerful, fluid movements while playing stones like castanets.

The chanting stops, and Kumu Kaohe approaches each one of us carrying a bundle ornately wrapped in long, green strands of local ti leaves. The traditional offering, called "*ho'okupu*," incorporates medicinal herbs and plants. We're each given a moment to pray, meditate, think about what we want for lunch — whatever is relevant for us. Next, we are asked to exhale deeply on the leafy bundle, adding our breath energy, or "*hā*," which makes the offering our gift, too. The last in line, I close my eyes, retreat inward with my intention, and exhale in an extended *hā* on the bundle before Kumu Kaohe lofts it into the crater below.

If I had been wondering whether I'd be able to find the spirit of Hawaiian healing traditions on this journey, there was no question that both my intentions and I were certainly in deep now.



TOP: An active volcano, Kilauea is located on the southeastern edge of Mauna Loa. ABOVE: Flame torches and a fiery sunset put on their own show at Mauna Lani Resort. OPPOSITE: Native plumeria blooms add tropical fragrance to island treatments.

Big as Its Name

The Big Island is a place of superlatives. The largest of the six main Hawaiian Islands at over 4,000 square miles, it boasts one of the world's most active volcanoes (the very Kilauea I stand before) and the world's tallest and largest mountains (measured in their entirety from the seafloor), Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, respectively. It's also a place where whales breach offshore five months out of the year and golfers wince as golf balls disappear down fathomless lava tubes.

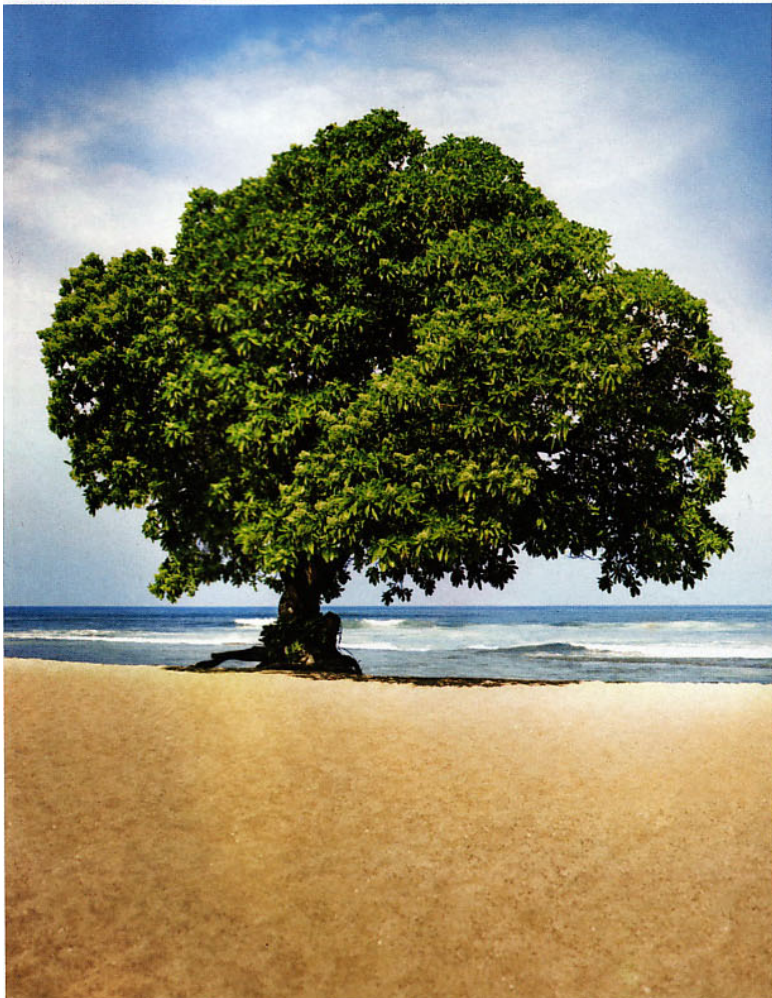
I had arrived here a few days earlier from California with a body clock scrambled and nerves frayed from recent international trips and a busy work schedule. In other words, I was suffering from the typical modern malaise of too much, too often. On this visit, I was determined to not only experience some spa therapies to soothe my synapses but also dive beneath the surface of the treatments and learn about the roots and meaning of Hawaiian-style healing and renewal.

Originally obscured by staunch Yankee missionaries, Hawaiian traditions had been suppressed for generations. (Even hula was outlawed at one point.) But like the ceremony I experienced at the volcano, which has been quietly continued throughout the years and only recently been shared with outsiders, these traditions have become more openly honored and practiced. "The elders decided it was time to share these things," Kumu Kaohe explained, noting outsiders have only been allowed to experience the ceremony in the last 20 years or so. Today, indigenous botanicals, therapies, and rituals connecting participants to what Hawaiians refer to as "*mana*" (spiritual power infusing the islands) are available everywhere from small local healers to five-star spas. And no matter where you stand on this stuff, at the very least it leaves you feeling very, very good.

One of the places on Hawaii that does an excellent job of integrating ancient tradition with modern aesthetics is the Four Seasons Resort Hualalai. Sited along a mile-and-a-half stretch of beachfront on the northwest Kohala Coast, the property summons an island ambience with luxe, low-slung bungalows ensconced amidst traditional lava rock walls, towering palms, blooming plumeria, and thick stands of bamboo. Island traditions of the therapeutic nature are revealed at the Hualalai Sports Club & Spa, which features an extensive menu of treatments, with many relying on Hawaiian modalities.

I continue my healing journey early one morning by a quiet lagoon at the north end of the manicured property. I've been invited with a small group to listen to Danny Akaka — a Hawaiian historian and the director of cultural affairs at nearby Mauna Lani Resort — chant a blessing to the rising sun. As the surf pulses gently behind us, Akaka explains that each morning offers all of us a chance for renewal. To illustrate the concept, he shares a Hawaiian teaching that says we are each born with a radiant bowl of light. Our task in life is to follow our own true path and arrive at the summit of the creator and present this radiant bowl intact. "But during life's trials, light can be

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Hula dancer Kamaluhia Woolley sways in honor of the goddess Pele; the ocean view from Ahu Pohaku Ho'omaluhia; new life bursts forth in the blossom of the lehua — the first tree to appear on fresh lava flows; a natural umbrella on the beach at Four Seasons Resort Hualalai.





replaced by cold, hard stones,” he explains. Akaka counsels that all we need do is, with intent, turn the bowl over, empty the stones, and begin again — our light restored. “Going into the seawater is the act of overturning this bowl so we can be reborn for the day,” he says. He then invites us to dive into the water. I swim out to where the white manes of the waves break on the outer rocks; I stay a very long time.

My next stop gives me the opportunity to take a more focused look at the indigenous botanicals Kumu Kaohe introduced me to earlier on top of Kilauea. Located north of the Four Seasons in an area once reserved for Hawaiian royalty, the Kohala Coast’s Mauna Lani Spa has earned multiple accolades for its treatments and facilities. Dark koa wood accents, walls adorned with richly toned tapa cloth, and an environment infused with island essences such as vanilla and ginger create a calming tableau that immediately transports any of my senses still lingering on the mainland.

I later wander the lush, expansive grounds with staffer and cultural historian Pi’i Laeha, who guides me past thatched outdoor treatment rooms (called “*hale*”), flowering hibiscus bushes, spiky pandanus trees, and abundant ginger plants. He explains the uses of the plants that have been passed down for generations and are now applied in updated treatments for guests. Ginger, a natural detoxifier, is used in Mauna Lani body treatments and signature bath products; sugar cane is used to create hydrating skin scrubs; and lemongrass, which is considered valuable for detoxifying organs, is also used here in facials to cleanse and purify skin. And just in case, I learn that ti tree root mixed with kava is a relaxant and is also good for hangovers.

The Road Less Traveled

Driving north out of Kohala as the road winds past landmarks like Lapakahi State Park, the vegetation gets noticeably more dense and verdant, with tall Norfolk pine and ironwood trees creating bucolic vistas. About 40 minutes later, as I approach the town of Hawi, I turn off onto a gravel road and a few moments and bumps later find myself in front of Ahu Pohaku Ho’omaluhia. Unquestionably a mouthful and most certainly not the idea of a mainstream commercial developer, the name of this intimate retreat underlies its inherent connection to the land.

Translating roughly as “gathering place of sacred peace-giving stones,” the name of the wellness retreat came about in an auspicious manner: while the owner, Jeanne Sunderland, was meditating amidst a stand of ancient stones on the property. And not just any stones, mind you. Legend holds that these massive boulders were the place where Kamehameha the Great gathered his senior advisors. And it was at a stone located in the heart of the property where, Sunderland notes, a “grandmother energy” that oversees the stones told her plainly what to name this healing enclave.

Created eco-consciously with solar power, waste composting, and pools for catching and recycling rainwater, Ahu Pohaku Ho’omaluhia has a main building



TOP: Children on an organic noni farm in Kalapana find plenty to smile about. ABOVE: The noni fruit is considered very important in Hawaiian medicine. OPPOSITE: A place of power — the stones where Kamehameha the Great took counsel.

Stay & Spa

Ahu Pohaku Ho'omaluhia,
North Kohala, Hawaii, (808)
889-6336, hawaii-island-retreat
.com; from \$275 per night

Four Seasons Resort Hualalai,
Hualalai Sports Club & Spa,
Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, (800)
819-5053, fourseasons.com;
from \$725 per night

Mauna Lani Resort, Mauna
Lani Spa, Kohala Coast, Hawaii,
(800) 367-2323, maunalani.com;
from \$355 per night

Bring the Big Island to You

H. Maloha Hawaiian skincare
company with a passion for
protecting the planet and fight-
ing against children's cancer.
(hmaloha.com)

Ola Hawaii Spa and body
products made from organic
island botanicals. (hawaiian
bodyproducts.com)

Warren Botanicals Aroma-
therapy and body oils with
the spirit of the islands.
(warrenbotanicals.com)

(designed to emulate a 19th-century Hawaiian royal palace) with eight suites that, having no TVs, internet access, or phones, allow guests to really unplug. Eight individual hale are also under construction. Scheduled to open this fall is an on-site, open-air spa — one that's reminiscent of the Spa Without Walls concept Sunderland developed in the 1990s for The Fairmont Orchid (also on the Big Island). Treatments will include inspiration from around the world but will have a particular focus on Hawaiian botanicals and therapies, such as lomilomi. Found all over Hawaii, lomilomi was brought to the islands by its Polynesian settlers and was used as a healing staple by everyone from warriors to pregnant women. Today, it's a favorite of both visitors and locals alike because of the restorative balance brought on by the rhythmic kneading motions. I can think of no better place to experience this Hawaiian therapy than on a massage table overlooking 60 acres of rolling grassland alongside a rugged, tree-lined escarpment towering over a boulder-strewn beach.

Before leaving, I tour the grounds with Sunderland while she recounts the types of stories one only hears in Hawaii: I learn of encounters with personal spirit guides, of ancient mythical dragons, and of powerful healing energies that drew Sunderland and her husband, a local emergency room doctor, to buy this land and build their dream. Surrounded by ironwood trees filled with butterflies as the booming surf syncopates with her colorful descriptions, it's easy to see how legend, myth, and healing truths would all be comfortably at home here.

End of the Path

Leaving Hawi, I am reminded of the "big" in Big Island as I drive south along the Hamakua Coast through Hilo and then head east through the lush Puna area, passing small towns like funky, weathered Pahoa before finally coming to the end of my sojourn in sun-drenched Kalapana, 100 miles later. Not that I had much choice in stopping; lava flows in the early 1990s not only ran across and smothered Highway 137 (making it impossible to drive beyond Kalapana) but also created an entirely new shelf of solid land that extends out one-quarter mile over what had previously been ocean and reef. Here, I rejoin Kumu Kaohe, who had offered to take me around Kalapana.

After we finish our tour, I say my good-byes to Hawaii as Kumu Kaohe and I walk over the new land — an undulating, jet-black moonscape of smooth and jagged contrasts of lava formations. Underscoring my new understanding of the transformative nature of the Big Island, all around there is life and renewal — such as tender green shoots sprouting defiantly from the harsh lava. I think about the ceremony at the crater a few days before, and it strikes me that what had seemed such destructive power when I first saw Pele's fiery plumes on Kilauea has here on the coast become a creative life force. I wonder if that ancient goddess Pele has somehow conspired to open my eyes to Hawaii's alchemy when I happen to look up, and — directly in my field of view — her towering plume dances in the distance, beckoning. □



The spiral rosette of the bromeliad (a plant in the pineapple family) springs forth in a fiery array.