

The Big Island of Hawaii

Our Family's Blooming Adventure at the Orchid

BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

Part two of our Hawaiian escape continued on the Big Island. After spending three nights in Maui, we hopped aboard a small plane and flew to Kona, where the volcanic landscape contrasts with the lush vegetation. At first glimpse, it seems the island is made up of lava flow as far as the eye can see, but there are actually 11 different climactic zones on the Big Island. A few villages were spared from the molten lava, giving rise to palm trees and tropical flowering plants. Michael and I had visited the Big Island last year and knew what to expect. Our daughters, however, were initially surprised by the landscape, but quickly saw the beauty in the black lava contrasted by the white rock graffiti. Locals find white rocks and leave messages strategically placed against the black stone. Typically, it is names of loved ones, or someone professing their love. I'll take this form of "graffiti" any day.

The drive to the Fairmont Orchid is about 30 minutes north of Kona International Airport along the Queen Ka ahumanu highway. The long, winding drive-way to the Orchid leads to an elegant front entrance. Walking through the lobby, the hotel quickly opens to a wide, expansive lawn. The hotel rooms are located in the two wings off the main lobby, forming an inclusive U. Beyond the lawn is a large pool and thatched roof bar. Just past the pool is the wide-open Pacific Ocean, and the hotel's private lagoon.

Where the Kea Lani is more intimate, the Orchid is spread out, and land there is abundant. We left the lava flow behind us, along the Kohala Coast highway, and escaped into the hidden oasis of the Orchid, where waterfalls, lush vegetation, and hidden hammocks await you.

The charming Louis Zanni, manager of the Gold Floor, greeted us at the entrance. The Gold Floor is called a "hotel within a hotel," featuring premiere service, complimentary breakfast, and cocktails and hors d'oeuvres nightly. After a brief tour, Louis showed us to our suite and said our only requirement was to relax.

So Michael headed to the golf course and the girls and I made our way to the lagoon. Two large lava rocks provide a natural barrier separating the ocean from the lagoon. Clear, blue green water with gentle waves beckon swimmers and snorkelers. The "beach boys" (and girls) as they are affectionately referred to, are a group of hosts helmed by the legendary Uncle



photo by Karen Villalpando

A spectacular view of the Fairmont Orchid's private lagoon can be seen from the lanai of the penthouse suite.

Gary, who attend to guests' every need, whether it's a surfing lesson, renting snorkeling equipment, or taking a canoe out with an instructor. Each afternoon, Uncle Gary hosts a craft-making session, weaving baskets from palm leaves, for children and adults. Every guest who visits the Orchid gets to know Uncle Gary and his crew. You remember them, and they remember you.

From the moment we arrived at the Orchid, we felt everyone went out of their way to make us feel at home. Each day, beach boy Umi set up our cabana with a cooler full of water and fresh fruit. He called us Mr. and Mrs. V, and entertained us with stories and his unbelievable surfing abilities. Even on his day off, the surf was up, so he came in to show off his talents to the delight of everyone sitting on the beach.

The girls loved the snorkeling and spent at least an hour every day exploring the world under the sea.

I loved sitting in my cabana – which consisted of two padded lounge chairs with a wind/sun shade that could be pulled forward to protect you from the elements, or pushed back to tan. Beginning every day at noon, the friendly bar servers offered mai tais and other refreshing beverages. We usually opted for a non-alcoholic smoothie or a draft of their local brew.

The Orchid celebrates every sunset with a torch lighting ceremony beginning with the blowing of the conch. Then 140 tiki torches are lit around the 32-acre property.

There are three restaurants on the property, Brown's Beach House, Nori's Sushi Restaurant, and the hotel's elegant Grill. Our first night there, we dined at Brown's outdoor patio, with local, live entertainment. Kevin, a

Kenny Loggins style singer, and Nino, the ukulele player, were accompanied by the most graceful hula dancer I've seen. No fast shaking hips, just gentle beautiful movements and the face of an angel. The trio was delightfully entertaining.

Brown's features local Hawaiian fish and seafood, Kiawe pork, and steaks. My favorite dish here was the Just Tomato: Kekela Farm's tri-colored heirloom beauties with Hawaiian sea salt, and aged Balsamic vinegar. I love how they use local greens from Waimea for their salads, sweet potatoes from Molokai, and lobster from Keahole. Just as the native Hawaiians took only what they needed from the land, the Orchid respects those traditions and attempts to do the same.

Norio's Sushi Bar and Restaurant is well-known and popular among locals and hotel guests. Sushi master Norio Yamamoto prepares some of the freshest sushi on the island, as well as authentic traditional Japanese cuisine.

Adjacent to Norio's is the Orchid Court restaurant, offering a sumptuous breakfast buffet daily. My suggestion is the salmon eggs Benedict from the menu, a refreshing glass of POG, and a steaming cup of Kona coffee. POG, you ask? It is a delicious concoction of P – pineapple juice, O – orange juice, and G – guava juice. It's also delicious with crushed ice and a splash of rum during cocktail hour!

Our days at the Orchid were busy. Deciding to swim in the pool, lounge at the beach, participate in seaside yoga, or snorkel in the lagoon is a tough choice. Rebecca enjoyed the basket weaving, Michael enjoyed the golf, and Emily enjoyed mingling with the other teenagers on the property. The latter activity caused me a little stress, so there was only one cure... the Spa Without Walls.

Imagine receiving a therapeutic massage in a hale next to a waterfall. Ten waterfall massage haies and five oceanfront cabanas are your windows to relaxation. There are also six indoor treatment rooms if you prefer. Our thatched roof hale was built for two – a couples massage room – where we listened to the exotic birds chirping, the waterfall cascading down, and the quiet serenity. There was no need for a relaxation CD – the music is piped in by nature! The outdoor treatment haies are kept very private by lush



"Celebration of the Kings" is a new Polynesian Feast featuring cuisine and entertainment that boasts of the pride of the Pacific. Traditional Polynesian and modern dance choreography re-tell the story of the settlement of the Pacific. Pictured with our family is one of the lead dancers, center.

tropical gardens and the waterfalls, and the oceanfront cabanas have canvas on three sides only opening towards the ocean. I highly recommend indulging in this luxury!

Fine dining at the Orchid is in the Grill, which features Koa paneled walls and white linens with Hawaiian breezes through the open shutters. A remarkable wine list accompanies the menu, featuring an unforgettable Kobe beef New York steak. Rebecca described it "like biting into a juicy orange, with the flavor exploding in your mouth."

The menu combines the best of Hawaii with the best of an American steak house. Consider the duo of seared foie gras and crème brulee foie gras with macadamia nut toast for a first course. A mushroom and Maui onion tart arrives with a flaky crust and a lightly pungent onion and spinach filling.

Fresh fish, like the walu, is served grilled on a red pepper coulis, with the two textures and flavors complementing each other. A whole poached lobster is presented sans shell floating in a lobster bisque, fennel, potato and spinach broth. Dinner at the Grill is definitely an experience to remember, with top-drawer service from everyone, including the knowledgeable and friendly sommelier.

We actually left the property for a day and explored the city of Kona. I suggest parking and strolling the streets down near the water for the best shopping, lunching, and browsing. I came home with a beautiful Tahitian black pearl pendant, while the girls chose cute souvenirs from the bead shop. There are many restaurants and plenty of night life in Kona for those looking to "hang loose". A favorite spot for locals and tourists is Huggo's at the Beach. The restaurant is perched over the water and lava rock, providing great views for diners. Fish and seafood are a must have here, so we had it three ways - Kona poke, rock shrimp salad, and fish and chips. Everything was very fresh and deliciously seasoned. They have nightly entertainment at Huggo's on the Rocks next door. Go to their website to see lots of pictures and their upcoming calendar of entertainment.

(www.huggos.com)

Ten days in Hawaii and no mention of a luau. Well we saved the best for last. A new production, "Celebration of the Kings", recently premiered at the Orchid. This Polynesian feast highlights both traditional and modern dance choreography, while telling the story of the settlement of the Pacific. The chiefs who led the settlers and warriors are celebrated in this amazing production. The feast features dining treasures from Hawaii, Samoa, New Zealand and Tahiti with dishes like coconut and papaya chicken, New Zealand lamb chops, fresh seafood and grilled fish. Unlike other luaus, the incredible buffet dinner was more like a 5 star restaurant. The obligatory poi was served, but this was not your rubber-stamp luau found in some places. The mai tais were not watered down, the POG for the kids was free flowing and the service was top notch. All of the dancers were gorgeous and very talented. For \$99 for adults, both the food and the entertainment were sensational. You can reserve the show through the concierge at the Orchid.

Our fabulous Hawaiian retreat was quickly coming to a close. We all took mental pictures of the blue green ocean, the friendly sea turtles swimming in the lagoon, and the magnificent vistas of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea. With the trade winds gently blowing our hair, we sat one last time on the veranda and watched the glorious sunset mark the end of our vacation.

Our Hawaiian experience in Maui and the Big Island was truly remarkable, thanks to the hospitality of the Fairmont hotel. Pairing the wonderful islands with a first class resort made Hawaii home for our Ohana, our family.



photo by Michael Villalpando

Every sunset at the Orchid was majestic. We took mental photographs of our final evening at twilight and replay them often in our minds. From left, Karen, Emily and Rebecca Villalpando.



photo by Michael Villalpando

The Francis I'i Brown Golf Course, adjacent to the Orchid, offers magnificent ocean views like this one from the lanai of our Gold Floor suite.

My Hawaiian Golfing Adventures

BY MICHAEL VILLALPANDO

Golf in Hawaii is unlike anywhere in the world. While I've golfed everywhere from Havana, Cuba to Bangkok, Thailand, nothing compares to the beauty and challenges of Hawaiian golf.

I was able to play just three courses recently on Maui and the Big Island. (It was a family vacation.) Each had its own unique signature in layout, terrain and even weather.

First Tee, Maui.

The Wailea Golf Club Gold Course plays host to the Champions Skins Game. Designed by Robert Trent Jones II, this par 72 course is adjacent to the Fairmont Kea Lani Resort. The course's head pro, Rusty Hathaway, has done a great job of making the golf club not only visually stunning, but also a comfortable yet challenging golf destination as well.

What struck me first was the lushness of the course. The air was fairly still and parts of the course felt rain-forest like. Throughout the course, remnants of stone structures built by ancient Hawaiians can be seen. Coupled with stunning panoramic ocean views, this course is a visual delight. The layout rewards accuracy, but is not too challenging for a recreational golfer. As a 15 handicapper, I shot an 82. Not bad; that will definitely bring me back for more.

Wailea Gold Club,
100 Wailea Golf Club Drive, Wailea, Maui.
www.golfbc.com 1-

888-328-MAUI.

Tee Two, the Big Island. Francis I'i Brown Golf Club South Course

The golf club is adjacent to the Fairmont Orchid Resort, on the Kohala Coast. Beware: Lava – Hot Lava!

The South Course can eat golf balls up or miraculously spit them back out of the ominous lava hazards. It just depends on how the volcano goddess Pele feels that day. Built in 1981, the Francis I'i Brown course is rated by Golf Vacations Magazine as one of the finest golf clubs in the world for breathtaking ocean views, challenging terrain and overall excellence. The par 72 South Course has a 68.3 rating from the white tees, which makes it friendly to recreational golfers. You may find it hard to concentrate however with the scenery beckoning you to just sit down and take it all in. This golf club is a must play.

Francis I'i Brown Golf Club, 68-1310 Mauna Lani Drive?, Kohala Coast, HI 96743?(808) 885-6655.

Tee III. Waikoloa Beach and Golf Resort, Kings' Course

I saved the best for last.

I had the pleasure of meeting the

head pro, Ross Birch, who greeted me warmly when I arrived for my tee time.

"Are you ready for some fun?" he asked. Sure, I said.

"Let's go," replied Ross.

I don't often get invited to play with a head pro of a highly honored golf club, so I was going to take full advantage. Ross gave me a short tour of the club and then we proceeded to the Tom Weiskopf - Jay Morrish-designed Kings' Course.

Built in 1990, it is a par 72, Scottish links style course with rolling fairways and deep bunkers that must be avoided. Ross gave me the 411 of the first tee and coached me through the rest of the day. He even gave me some great advice of hitting "knock down" shots in a cross wind that was moving about 25mph that day.

Overall the course was in perfect condition and in spite of the wind, the day was the most fun for me.

The golf resort features a restaurant and bar, practice facility, lessons, shuttle service and of course Ross Birch, head pro. For a good time call (808) 886-5524, 600 Waikoloa Beach Dr., Waikoloa, Hawaii.



photo courtesy of Waikoloa Golf Club

Hole 16 on Waikoloa's Kings' Course features lava rock hazards and a lake.