



## **Families Explore the Natural Classroom**

Families who visit Maui should be advised: geographically speaking, the island is one of the Earth's natural wonders. Its shores encompass a national park, a massive dormant volcano, unspoiled forests and canyons, and species not found anywhere else on the planet. And thanks to Maui's growing number of ecology-based activities, more and more visitors are lacing up their walking shoes and getting outdoors to discover this amazing tropical wilderness.

So watch out – a situation like this could seriously cut into a family's time at the beach!

In fact, ecological exploring is its own reason for people to visit the Magic Isle. Maui is, in many ways, a living "classroom" of the natural sciences. And these learning activities can be physically challenging or as easy as sitting in a chair, so families can choose what they do according to the abilities of the members.

Take Haleakalā National Park, for example. Most of the park encompasses a landscape that defies the standard definition of tropical paradise. It centers on sky-high Haleakalā Crater, where the winds can be fierce and the landscape rocky and severe. But the drive from sea level to the mountain top at over 10,000 feet, with informative stops at park headquarters and at the signs and shelters near the summit, is an education in one of the Earth's rarest ecological systems. The entire trip takes a half-day and little more effort than a willingness to ride in the car.

This is the way people meet, for example, an endangered species known as the Haleakalā silversword, an amazing plant that has adapted to thrive in the arid cinder of the volcano's crater. For 5 to 20 years it grows as a brilliant globe of silvery-haired spears; then it shoots up a spectacular purple flower spike and, afterwards, dries up and blows away. The Haleakalā silversword is endemic to the Haleakalā volcano crater, and it's just one illustration of the area's uniqueness.

With a little planning, visitors can increase the learning value of their excursion to the national park. Each day at the summit, for example, naturalists offer talks about the natural forces at work as the audience gazes down into the three-mile by seven-mile volcanic crater. On most weekdays, they also lead two- to three-mile hikes into the wilderness. One hike heads down into the crater itself; the other takes people into a native rain forest at Hosmer Grove, located just before park headquarters.

Children between the ages of five and 12 can take advantage of the park's Junior Ranger program. At headquarters, they can pick up a free booklet of activities



that will teach them about the fragile ecosystem of this unique area and introduce them to Hawaiian words and phrases. After completing the activities, children receive a badge and are sworn in as Junior Rangers.

Physically active families don't have to stop there. They can make a full day of hiking in and out of the 3,000-foot-deep crater (or take a horseback trip), or they can stay in the crater overnight at a cabin or campground. Another way to experience the mountain's natural variation is to go on one of the privately operated biking trips. Starting at the summit, visitors can ride – coast, mostly – through an ever-changing landscape to the palm trees waiting at the sea.

But Haleakalā National Park isn't the only place to learn about Maui's ecology. For a half or full-day experience of Hawai'i's stream-side environments – with waterfalls and natural pools for swimming, lush native trees and fragrant breezes – visitors go to 'Īao Valley, located in Mauna Kahālāwai (West Maui Mountains). Mark Twain called this valley "the Yosemite of the Pacific" because it's monumentally steep and broken up into strange geological features such as the 2,250-foot high 'Īao Needle. The state park here is easily accessible for the whole family. It's a great place for a picnic.

The Hawai'i Nature Center, located right near the entrance to 'Īao State Park, offers hands-on learning experiences especially tailored to children. These include guided hikes and a visit to the Interactive Science Arcade, an innovative museum with games and displays that teach about the plant and animal life of the islands.

In West Maui, the resorts of Kā'anapali and Kapalua are another good resource for families who "nature travel." Various hotels offer ecology focused activities. These include hikes guided by naturalists who take visitors into the mountains toward the summit of Pu'u Kukui, one of the wettest and most remote places on the planet. Star-gazing is another popular activity in various places around the island. Astronomical guides use rooftops to get the best vantage on Maui's pollution-free sky.

The drive around East Maui to Hāna and beyond offers many opportunities, both formal and informal, to discover island ecology. A stop at Ke'anae Arboretum offers a first-hand look at taro cultivation; Kahanu Garden in Hāna provides two-hour walking tours with lesson in ethnobotany of the Pacific (by appointment). The state park at Wai'ānapanapa is a geological wonderland that the whole family can explore on foot. Its sites include sea caves and blowholes, black-sand beaches, and some freshwater grottos that turn red at certain times of the year. This park has fire pits and facilities for camping.



Travelers who continue past Hāna and drive as far as ‘Ohe‘o Gulch (“Pools of ‘Ohe‘o ”) find themselves entering the coastal leg of Haleakalā National Park. Here they can take advantage of free camping right along the coastline and the spectacular two-mile hike up to Waimoku Falls. The hike includes a boardwalk through forests of giant bamboo, footbridges that cross sheer canyons, a couple of heart-pounding waterfalls, and natural swimming holes formed out of solid basalt.

In fact, there are dozens of ways to get out into Maui’s abundant landscape, whether by foot or by hoof, as private vendors offer hiking guides and trail rides on most parts of the island.

But not all family members are suited for such vigorous activity. So it’s good to realize that some of the most inspiring encounters with Maui’s natural splendor can be achieved from a seated position. Aerial tours, particularly narrated flights by helicopter, are very popular activities. Much of Maui is too remote to reach by car or by foot, and helicopters provide access to valleys and sights that not even locals get to see on foot. And choppers leave no footprints and make no disturbance of fragile ecosystems.

In so many ways, Maui offers the opportunity for unforgettable discovery of nature and its marvelous ways. Children return from a Maui vacation with real insights into the processes of the earth; families return with memories of shared adventures that they will talk about for years to come.