



Maui's Marine Environments are an "Adventure"

What makes a great family vacation? For many people, it's the experience of a shared adventure – learning together, "oohing and aahing" together, and then forever after having that shared experience as a bond of memory.

But where can you find an adventure that will satisfy everything a family needs? An adventure that's healthy, fun, inspiring, educational, and most of all, one that will suit the whole clan? One that will enchant a sixteen-year-old and a sixty-year-old equally? One that's accessible to old and young alike?

These are hard questions. But there's one easy answer: the adventure of discovering the amazing marine environment along the shores of the island of Maui.

Maui is blessed by nature with a protected channel along its south and west shores, a strip of sea that it shares with the small neighboring islands of Moloka'i, Lāna'i, and Kaho'olawe. The Maui shores are sunny and dry, and they feature two small boat harbors (Lāhaina and Mā'alaea), and the four major resort areas of Kā'anapali, Kapalua, Mākena and Wailea. The whaling captains used to call this semi-private bathtub of pristine sea the "Lāhaina Roadstead." The humpback whales know this channel. They swim there from the Arctic Zone every year, arriving by the hundreds beginning in November and drifting away with their newborn calves by early May.

This channel is the perfect centerpiece for a family vacation, not just because it has lovely beaches, excellent waves, reefs filled with glittering marine life, and sunsets that you remember for months. It's also a great place to learn from direct experience – to encounter whales, sea turtles, dolphins, all types of marine life, to discover the sea. Maui makes the marine world accessible to every member of the family.

The Maui Ocean Center, an aquarium complex dedicated to sea life of the north Pacific, is designed to create the sensation of walking into Hawai'i's ocean, level by level. In time, you find yourself traveling through the middle of a 600,000 gallon open-ocean tank, in an acrylic tunnel with a wrap-around view. Other exhibits include a turtle pool, a manta ray pool, live shark tank, whale displays, and a touch pool. An experience like this tends to awaken one's interest in the theoretical subject of marine ecology.

After that, the family can actually go into the channel – without getting wet – on the submarine Nautilus, which cruises the reefs along Lāhaina's shores.



In fact, there are any number of ways to get nautical on Maui, from sunset-cocktail-party cruise ships to rented snorkel, mask, and fins. Families can go on personalized kayak tours of wild coastline. They can learn to scuba dive together. They can sail to Molokini and snorkel inside a submerged volcanic crater. They can ride across the channel to Moloka'i and Lāna'i.

In the winter months, nearly everything that floats spends its time hoping to get near the humpback whales – but not near enough to disturb them. This area is a National Marine Sanctuary. Whale watching conduct is strictly regulated. The non-profit Pacific Whale Foundation monitors the big cetaceans, as well as the boats that observe them, and offer lectures and extremely informative whale watching excursions. Many privately owned boats also include lectures or some kind of educational program.

No matter which boat, though, it's always an education just to see a humpback whale burst from the water. In peak season (December to early March), it's rare to come back without a sighting. And though the boats must stay at a discreet distance, the whales will often come close for the same reason you've gone to them – curiosity.

Families can get close to whales even if they never leave shore. The Whale Center of the Pacific in Kā'anapali Resort's Whalers Village shopping complex tells the story of these gentle giants. Whaler's Village Museum depicts the human history of the whaling trade by means of actual artifacts from the days of Moby Dick.

In short, Maui is a hands-on classroom for marine biology. For many parents, this is one of Maui's best attributes. It gives their family vacation lasting value. And besides that, it's a lot of fun.