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# 11 best ways to experience Hawaii

By Michele Bigley, Special to CNN  
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Hawaii's natural allure is intoxicating. But resist this level of ocean going unless you really know what you're doing. Respect the ocean's power.

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## Embracing the Aloha Spirit

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### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Take off your watch and leave your cell phone in the hotel

Food is undeniably expensive, so seek out local eats away from the resorts

Accept that there's traffic in paradise, too

**Editor's note:** Michele Bigley has split her time between California and Hawaii since 2006. She is the author of "Backroads and Byways of Hawaii" and "Explorer's Guide to Kauai, A Great Destination."

**(CNN)** -- When visiting Hawaii, who doesn't imagine packing up and relocating to America's tropical wonderland?

The epic sunshine and the rainbows, the afternoons of shave ice on glorious beaches inspire millions to vacation in the Aloha State each year. Before you sell off your belongings and pack your bags, try to experience the islands like a true Hawaiian to see whether you have what it takes to handle all that paradise.

**Leave your cell phone at the hotel, and take off your watch.** You're in Hawaii, and everything moves at a slower pace. Life is measured by the sun, surf and simple pleasures. Make time for a morning stroll through Oahu's greenbelt to swim in Jackass Ginger Pool (a natural swimming hole accessed from the Judd Memorial Trail), a Sunday afternoon serenade at Molokai Coffee Plantation, an impromptu swim in the ocean without so much as a nod in the direction of the sea turtles feeding by the nearby rocks.



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## 29 beach photos that'll make you drool

**Forget the overpriced resort food.** Locals know that the real ono grindz (Hawaiian for yummy food) comes from joints like Maui's Bully's Burgers (on Piilani Highway, the backroad to Hana, 808-878-3272) or Oahu's [Nico's Pier 38](#). And don't bother forking over the big bucks for gourmet poke, a delicacy of raw marinated ahi and onions. Instead, pick up the freshest ahi at local favorites like the Big Isle's [Da Poke Shack](#) and Kauai's Koloa Fish Market (808-742-6199).

**Hula is not mere booty-shaking.** Each movement of this ancient dance tells a multilayered story, rich with meaning. A hand toward the air might mean sky but can speak of a lost love. To really feel like a Hawaiian, sign up for a hula class. Companies like [Hawaii Hula Company](#) teach private hula lessons for both locals and tourists on Oahu and Maui.

**Accept it: Hawaii is expensive.** Locals don't flinch at paying \$10 for a quart of milk. But if you excavate their kitchens, you'll spot heaps of head-sized avocados, grapefruits and lemons taking up space on the counter. The key to shopping like a Hawaiian is making friends with both Costco and the [farmers' markets](#). Oahu's [KCC Farmers' Market](#), [Kapaa's Wednesday afternoon market](#) on Kauai and the Big Island's Saturday morning [Keauhou Farmers Market](#) are some of the best in the state.

## Record-setting natural wonders in the U.S.

**Have a relationship with the ocean, but respect its power.** Surf's up, a swell hit the North Shore, and suddenly shopkeepers lock their doors and head to the beach. You want to join the crowds? Check in with yourself. Be honest about your abilities. Only the most advanced surfers should take on winter north shore swells on any of the islands. Newbies can learn on the more mellow summer waves or the easier waters at beaches like Maui's [Kalama Park](#).

**Party like the ancients.** A real luau is not some big-budget affair held in a resort. Usually, families hold luaus for a first birthday party or major special event. They often take place on the grassy knolls above a beach and feature lots of barbecued meats, a large cooked pig, poi (an acquired taste; even most locals can't stomach the bland pureed taro), Molokai sweet potatoes, lomilomi (a salmon concoction that requires you to massage the fish) and plenty of live music. Rather than forking over the big bucks (up to \$100 a head at most resorts) for a choreographed luau, throw your own party. Beaches like Oahu's [Ala Moana](#), Kauai's [Anini Beach](#) and Maui's [Kamaole Beach Parks](#) offer the perfect setting to celebrate life in the islands.

**(Spike a) Drink like the natives.** Thirsty? Don't bother hoofing it to the store. Instead, scale a palm tree, grab a coconut, return to your condo, machete it open, mix with rum and enjoy a seriously fresh cocktail. If your tree climbing skills need some work, Hawaii has its share of spirit makers. Kauai's [Koloa Rum](#), Maui's [Ocean Vodka](#), the Big Island's [Kona Brewing Company](#) (they also have an outpost on Oahu) and [Maui Brewing Company's](#) outstanding coconut porter all help enliven an evening. Plus, tours and tastings are offered at their facilities.

## 22 can't-miss U.S. beaches

**Traffic is a part of life in paradise, too.** It's unavoidable these days. Most islands (save Molokai and Lanai) are plagued with gridlock



Some roadside attractions have become kitsch institutions. You might even make a trip just to see them.

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## 22 can't-miss U.S. beaches

updated 3:34 PM EDT, Tue August 13, 2013



Beaches along the coasts of the United States call to shoreline explorers year-round.

during the morning and afternoon commutes. And it's not just the tourists lining up to brave the Road to Hana. The worst backups are on Honolulu's highways and on Maui and Kauai's thoroughfares into town. At least if you have to be stuck in the car, you can appreciate the beauty as you listen to local tunes on the public radio broadcasts. Favorites include [Kauai's KKCR](#) and the Big Island's [KAPA radio](#).

**Toss the socks.** It's all about the slippahs, aloha shirts and board shorts on the islands. The casual dress sure is appealing. Getting dressed up in Hawaii means tossing on your aloha shirt (though please don't get matching ones in his and hers) and being adorned by a lei (if it's a special occasion) or a large flower in a woman's hair. Typical island wear consists of shorts and T-shirts for just about everyone.

**Learn at least a few words of the Hawaiian language.** To show respect, learn a few words. If nothing else, know what a haole is (a not-always-nice way to refer to a mainlander) or aloha (which means hello, goodbye and love), makai (the ocean side of the street) and mauka (the mountain side of the street), which are common directional terms worth adding to your vocabulary. However, while on the islands, don't start speaking in pidgin (the Hawaiian dialect). That's the equivalent of going to England and trying to speak in a Cockney accent.

**Incorporate the Aloha Spirit into your day.** Aloha's a state of mind, a series of actions, not merely a word. At its core, it means treating the world and others like they are a part of you. Living the Aloha Spirit involves sharing your kindness and wisdom, your heart and your true self with your community.

Hawaiian people come together to help each other out, whether that means cleaning up your trash or helping rebuild a house upended by a storm. Getting into the community and giving rather than taking is the most rewarding way to be able to call yourself Hawaiian. This can manifest as a smile or supporting a local business. All that matters is that everyone works in tandem to spread the love.

Not a bad way to live, huh?

Do you live in Hawaii? What's the best way to get a true sense of the islands?

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