

Golf

Golfing Hawaii: The Best Courses on Kauai

By Thomas Dunne on September 13, 2017

Don't let the sand and surf overshadow golf on this Hawaiian island. There are four courses worth making a beach detour for.



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Kauai, the northernmost of the major Hawaiian Islands, has a chilled-out, almost rural pace of life. During the past 30 years, development on the Garden Isle has moved more slowly compared with its neighbors, in part because of the devastation of 1992's Hurricane Iniki and the bursting of speculative bubbles in both Japan and the United States, but also because of the efforts of residents. Given what the island has to offer—beaches, awe-inspiring mountain hikes, and sunsets—it's hard to argue the locals' point.

Golf is part of the appeal too, but because it's commonly understood that visitors are likely to simply mix a round or two into a romantic getaway or an all-around family vacation, the game is presented in a gauzy, soft-focus light. There's lots of eye candy—one would expect nothing less from a tropical paradise—and not much that's too quirky or shamelessly punishing. Courses have gotten creative to attract golfers away from the ocean, whether it's by providing motorized GolfBoards to "surf the earth" (Kukui'ula) or "breakaway specials" (as at Poipu Bay) that sell rounds of fewer than 18 holes as a way to highlight oceanfront sections. Indeed, if there is a unifying thread to Kauai's courses, it's an eagerness to please. Here within, some of our favorites.



Courtesy Hokuala Resort

Hokuala

The newest entrant on the Kauai resort scene is Hokuala on Kalapaki Beach on the southeastern part of the island. In Hawaiian, its name means “rising star,” which is apt—this development by Colorado-based Timbers Resorts is still a work in progress, but it has potential. Hokuala, housed in the defunct Westin Kauai, plans to open its Timbers Kauai Ocean Club & Residences in spring 2018, with the premier oceanfront homes in its real estate portfolio running in the \$300,000 - \$7.5 million range. (Hokuala's 180-room hotel is slated to open in 2021.) In 2014, Kauai County passed an ordinance requiring a 500-foot coastal setback, but Timbers' land was approved before this zoning was enacted.

Timbers' strong play is in line with the property's colorfully luxurious past. Back in the go-go 1980s, legendary impresario Chris Hemmeter spent some \$350 million on the Westin, creating a sybaritic hotel with over-the-top statuary and, as the *Los Angeles Times* put it in 1988, more Georgian columns “than shore up the Acropolis in Athens.” The celebrities who flocked to the resort would ride in mahogany gondolas out to man-made islands stocked with rare and exotic wildlife and tee it up on a pair of Jack Nicklaus golf courses known collectively as Kauai Lagoons.

One of the two courses has since closed—it's now part of an appealing network of hiking and biking trails. But a host of refinements were made to the surviving layout, the Ocean Course. During an interregnum in which Kauai Lagoons flew the Marriott flag, slack maintenance encouraged the jungle to attempt to reclaim parts of the course. This has been corrected, and Timbers has invested in improving course conditioning. With Nicklaus's blessing a number of fairway bunkers were removed, making for a quicker, more player-friendly round. Still, the Ocean Course is far from toothless. The cove-crossing, 220-yard, par-3 14th is a showstopping challenge with or without the trade winds, and the 16th, a drivable par-4 that tumbles blindly down to Nawiliwili Bay, remains an entertainingly reliable producer of birdies and lost balls alike.



Aidan Bradley / Courtesy St Regis Princeville

St. Regis Princeville

To many, the name that jumps to mind when it comes to golf on Kauai is Princeville, on the island's rugged northern coast. This resort community is anchored by the [St. Regis Princeville](#) (*rooms from \$500*), the 251 rooms of which sprawl across three tiers of land from clifftop to beach.

The game at Princeville is built around a pair of Robert Trent Jones Jr. courses, the Prince and the Makai. Unfortunately, the Prince, one of the top-ranked courses in the state, closed for renovations in 2015, as its ownership, the Honolulu-based Resort Group, had stated its intention to convert it into an exclusive private club. Clear information is hard to come by as to when this jungly, notoriously difficult design might reopen. Scottsdale's Discovery Land Company, an influential player in ultra-high-end golf, came and went from the project, leaving the developer in need of a partner.

The course that remains, Princeville Makai, is less famous but no poor sister. Jones's first-ever solo design after leaving his father's practice, this 1971 course predates the Prince by 20 years, but, thanks to a full renovation in 2010, its strategies and conditioning feel fresh. Both nines boast runs of oceanfront golf, with 12 through 14—a long par-3 bracketed by the course's toughest and easiest par-4s—standing as perhaps the most memorable stretch. There are a few average holes in the mix, but only one real clunker—the dead uphill 4th, shoehorned into an awkward corner of the property. Makai's management has made an effort to attract kids and new golfers to the game, partly through its clinics and partly through its sunset golf cart tours, which take in striking scenery.



Brian G. Oar - Fairways Photography / Courtesy Poipu Bay

Poipu Bay Golf Course

On the island's southern shore, Poipu Bay Golf Course is another Robert Trent Jones Jr. design. Poipu hosted the now-defunct PGA Grand Slam of Golf for a dozen years in the '90s and aughts, with its most famous moment coming in 2004, when Phil Mickelson posted the brilliant score of 59. Since that exhibition left town the clubhouse has gotten a bit tired, but the golf course is still in tip-top shape. Like Makai, it received a renovation at the beginning of this decade. Also like Princeville, it starts and finishes strong, with a midround lull. Playing either is essential, but it's not necessary to do both, and the decision should hinge on where on the island one chooses to stay.



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Kukui'ula

With that in mind, a case could be made for Kukui'ula (*cottages from \$1,000 per night, villas from \$1,800 per night*), ten minutes from Poipu Bay, as the best base in Kauai. The property was developed by Alexander & Baldwin, the 148-year-old former sugarcane titan, with DMB, which is perhaps best known for Martis Camp, the successful club near Lake Tahoe. It's a private residential community that nevertheless allows visitors access to club amenities, including the golf course, through its cottage and villa rentals.

Kukui'ula likely matches what many have in mind when they picture "classic Hawaii." The club's immaculately manicured lawns sprawl across a broad, gentle slope dotted with palm trees. The Pacific is almost always in view, and from the clubhouse patio Spouting Horn, a geyser-like lava blowhole, provides a reminder of the island's dynamic environment. Kukui'ula's atmosphere is more in keeping with that of a club than a resort. The clubhouse feels like a tropical extension of one's living room at home, and service is warm and personal but never showy.

The golf course is a Tom Weiskopf design that opened in 2011. It doesn't traffic in ocean views to the same extent as other Kauai layouts, but the strategies of its pleasantly rolling inland holes, which play through broad corridors lined with monkey pod and tropical fruit trees, are often more interesting. The Pacific still makes several prominent appearances, though, most notably on the highly enjoyable run from 13 through 15. The first of these holes, a midlength par-5, features a dramatic fairway bunker complex guarding the beeline to the ocean-backed green. The routing continues tracking south to a similar edge-of-the-earth green site on the 14th, one of Weiskopf's trademark tricky drivable par-4s. Indeed, more than many Hawaiian courses, Kukui'ula has the substance and subtlety to sustain a player's interest over multiple rounds.