

# Hawaii

By Tom Kirvan

## THE 50TH STATE OFFERS A JOURNEY INTO PARADISE

With its lush rainforests, volcanic peaks, golden beaches, and deep cultural roots, Hawaii is unlike any other place in the United States. This Pacific-island chain, located nearly 2,500 miles from the U.S. mainland, is both remote and inviting – a tropical paradise that blends natural wonder with a rich Polynesian heritage. Home to about 1.4 million people, Hawaii welcomes millions of visitors each year who come in search of beauty, adventure, and the spirit of aloha.

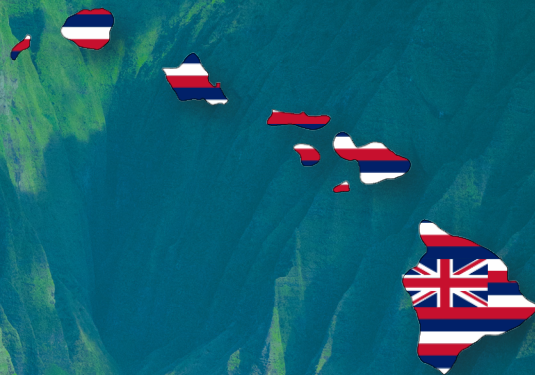
Hawaii is the only U.S. state composed entirely of islands, made up of eight main islands: Hawaii (The Big Island), Maui, Oahu, Kauai, Molokai, Lanai, Niihau, and Kahoolawe. The islands were formed by volcanic activity and still exhibit dramatic geological features, including craters, lava tubes, and black sand beaches. The Pacific Ocean surrounds the state on all sides, and its geography includes everything from snowy peaks and volcanic deserts to coral reefs and rainforests.

The state capital is Honolulu, located on the island of Oahu. As Hawaii's largest city and the cultural, economic, and political center, Honolulu offers an exciting mix of urban energy and tropical charm. Iconic Waikiki Beach, bustling nightlife, and rich historical sites like Pearl Harbor make it a top destination for visitors from around the world.

Rising to 13,796 feet above sea level, Mauna Kea on the Big Island is Hawaii's highest point – and technically the tallest mountain in the world when measured from its base on the ocean floor. A dormant volcano, Mauna Kea is home to world-class astronomical observatories and offers breathtaking stargazing. The summit often sees snow, providing a surreal contrast to the island's tropical climate below.

Hawaii's history is as rich as its landscapes. The islands were first settled around 1,500 years ago by Polynesians who navigated thousands of miles from their homes of origin using only the stars and ocean currents. They established a complex society ruled by chiefs and rooted in traditions like hula, storytelling, and respect for the land.

In 1778, British explorer Captain James Cook became the first European to arrive in Hawaii. By the late 19th century, American influence had grown, culminating in the controversial overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893. Queen Lili'uokalani, Hawaii's last monarch, remains a powerful symbol of resistance and cultural pride.



### Fast Facts

- Capital: Honolulu
- Population: 1.4 million
- Economic engines: Tourism, agriculture, and defense spending
- Highest Point: Mauna Kea (13,796 feet)

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Hawaii became a U.S. territory in 1898 and was admitted as the 50th state in 1959. Today, movements to preserve the Hawaiian language, culture, and sovereignty continue, with many Native Hawaiians advocating for greater recognition and respect for their ancestral heritage.

## Five Must-See Destinations

- **Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (Big Island):** One of the most dramatic landscapes in the world, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park features two of the most active volcanoes on Earth – Kīlauea and Mauna Loa. Visitors can hike through lava fields, explore craters, and, if conditions allow, witness glowing lava flows. The park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a profound reminder of the islands' ever-changing geology.
- **Nā Pali Coast (Kauai):** Accessible by boat, helicopter, or strenuous hike, the Nā Pali Coast is one of Hawaii's most breathtaking natural wonders. Towering emerald cliffs drop straight into the Pacific, hiding secluded beaches and cascading waterfalls. The Kalalau Trail, a challenging 11-mile trek, offers unparalleled views and a journey into the wild beauty of Kauai.
- **Pearl Harbor and USS Arizona Memorial (Oahu):** A somber but essential site, Pearl Harbor is a place of deep historical significance. The USS Arizona Memorial honors the lives lost during the December 7, 1941 attack, which drew the United States into World War II. The site includes museums, historic ships, and guided tours that offer insight into one of the most pivotal moments in American history.
- **Road to Hāna (Maui):** This legendary drive takes you along Maui's rugged northeastern coast through lush rainforests, past waterfalls, black sand beaches, and scenic viewpoints. With more than 600 curves and 50 bridges, the Road to Hāna is as much about the journey as the destination.
- **Waikīkī Beach and Diamond Head (Oahu):** A quintessential Hawaiian experience, Waikīkī Beach offers sun, surf, and city views all in one. Nearby, the volcanic crater, Diamond Head, offers a short but steep hike to panoramic views of Honolulu and the Pacific.