

Snorkel your way through Maui, Kauai

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Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau Molokini Crater, off Maui, sees about 1,000 people a day arriving in tour boats to snorkel and dive due to its abundant coral beds, crystal-clear water and swarms of gorgeous fish.



Sliding into warm, blue water, pattering around amid a kaleidoscope of undersea life, listening to the echo of your own breathing -- snorkeling in Hawaii is a gorgeous immersion into a colorful dimension.

The islands offer hundreds of protected beaches and reefs perfect for exploring.

Fish tease you just out of reach, fan corals wave in time to the surf, and prickly little urchins rest atop the reef, daring you to touch.

You don't have to be buff, a phenomenal swimmer or even adorn yourself with a mass of clattering equipment.

Generally, snorkeling is as easy as grabbing a mask, snorkel and fins, and flip-flopping down to the beach for a nice float.

It's impossible to feel hurried floating on the water's surface, enjoying the scenery below. For fun, you can stick your tongue in your snorkel and dive down to get a better look for as long as you can hold your breath, blowing the water out of the tube like a little whale when you reach the surface.



Finding a beach isn't difficult. All beaches in Hawaii are open to the public, but not all are snorkeling beaches, so it's best to ask a guide at the hotel activities desk or at a shop where you're renting gear for a safe location. Maps are available at hotels and sporting goods stores.

Here are five fun snorkeling sites, three on Maui and two on Kauai, that provide a variety of undersea life:

Maui

Kapalua Bay/Namalu Bay: A beach famous for sunning and swimming near one of the upscale resorts on the island's northwestern side, Kapalua Bay also provides some fine snorkeling. On my most recent visit, we took guided ocean kayaks from Kapalua to the northern side of the bay, riding currents in and out of the jutting reefs and cliffs until we happened upon a protected little nook, Namalu Bay.

Napili Beach: Also on the island's northwestern side, this is where I first encountered Hawaii's zipping schools of needlefish. Creatures at the bottom appeared to be psychedelic graduates of the Jerry Garcia School of Tie-Dye (a species also known as a Christmas wrasse). As we swam into deeper water and around a dome-shaped rock, the head of a white-mouthed moray eel suddenly poked out of a hole. Generally, they won't bother you if you don't go poking around their domain.

Molokini Crater: If crowds don't bother you, herd onto one of the many boats or catamarans for a three-mile sail out to Molokini, an undersea volcanic cinder cone that is a designated Marine Life Conservation District Seabird Sanctuary. It had the largest number and variety of fish of any place I've snorkeled (250 types, according to one source). Of course, some of that was due to snorkelers bringing frozen peas to charm them over our way. I also spotted an eagle ray, one of the most graceful creatures I've ever encountered. Tour rates range from \$60 to \$100 for adults.



Kauai

Poipu Beach: On the southern end of the Garden Island, Poipu Beach is known as one of the island's safest beaches. A section called Baby Beach is a great lagoon for families with small children. To the west, over a sandbar, lies a lagoon teeming with tropical sea life. Beginning snorkelers will find it easy to practice here.

Ke'e Beach: This beach is at the threshold of one of the most beautiful places on Earth: the Na'Pali coast. To get to Ke'e, you have to drive north to the end of the road on Kauai's eastern side. Be ready to have your patience set to high, because the

traffic can bring you to tears -- and honking in Hawaii is a big no-no. But the payoff is a surreal image of towering emerald spires framed against an expanse of blue sea. The surf on the beach can be rough, so stick to the lagoon-protected section. If you're lucky, you'll swim with a Humuhumu-nukunuku-apua'a, a gorgeous reef triggerfish and the national fish of Hawaii.

Fun sea life you might encounter

Moorish idol: These flat, stunning, black-white-and-yellow-striped fish are abundant among Hawaii's reefs.

Moray eel: I've read that morays are shy and secretive, and they only attack humans in self-defense. It's certainly a good reason not to go putting your hands in holes where they don't belong.

Needlefish: Congregating near the surface, a school of these fluorescent, swimming syringes will dart away if you try to follow.

Sea turtle: Few snorkeling thrills are more memorable than seeing a sea turtle (also called a Honu) rise up from behind a reef and glide gently by. Although sea turtles live most of their lives in the ocean, adult females must return to land to lay their eggs, so beachcombers should give them ample room on the beach.



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