



Soaring off the North Coast of Oahu. (Deston Nokes)

Hawaii from the air: Incomparable scenery is a sight for soaring eyes

Last updated October 8, 2008 10:14 a.m. PT

By DESTON NOKES SPECIAL TO THE P-I

There's no other way around it: Without experiencing Hawaii from the air, you're missing out on an incomparable visual feast. Some of the islands' most memorable sights — its emerald cliffs, multicolored canyons, plunging waterfalls and checkerboard fields can only be fully appreciated from the air.

I embarked on two very different aerial journeys: in a whisper-quiet glider over Oahu's North Shore, and in a swooping helicopter over remote portions of Kauai.

Soaring on pillows

In a glider there's a range of sensations: a soothing silence and the exhilaration of being so high in such a small craft. It's just you, the air and the majesty of nearly 360 degrees of scenery. No noisy engines, no blades whirring. It's like soaring on pillows.

I flew with Steve Wood, owner of The Original Glider Rides, about an hour's drive from Honolulu at Dillingham Airfield on Oahu's North Shore. Flights take place along the Waianae Mountain Range, where tradewinds create great updrafts.

There are no age limits for rides: Kids as young as 3 can board and Wood gets plenty of passengers over 70. There are, however, weight limits. Passengers must be below 270 pounds. "Our scenic glider can handle a 500-pound total load," Wood said. "Then if you figure in a parachute weighing 12 pounds ..."

Whoa — what do you mean, parachute?

Wood waved off any concern. "We've never had a single death or serious injury in our 37 years of flying, and all our pilots have Federal Aviation Administration commercial ratings," he said.

"In fact, gliders are safer because there are so few mechanical parts," Wood explained. "They are so safe that a 14-year-old can fly solo after the proper training."



Writer Deston Nokes squeezes into the front of the glider cockpit, with pilot Steve Wood next to him. (Deston Nokes)

I was surprised to get a seat in the *front* of the small glider, a Schweizer SGS 2-32, used for one- and two-passenger scenic rides. After making sure I was buckled up, Wood sat directly behind me where he would pilot the glider. I looked down and saw that I, too, had a steering lever and foot pedals. "Has anyone ever tried to

wrest control?" I asked. "Uh, no, never," he replied.

To become airborne, we were towed into the air by a plane I imagined Snoopy would fly: a Cessna L-19 named "Bad Dog" with painted-on teeth. Wood said the craft had flown reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam during the war. Uh, wasn't that 40 years ago?

Never mind. We skittered along the runway and were pulled aloft by the teeth-baring plane. In no time we were in the air making a long loop out toward the ocean. I didn't even feel it when Wood cut loose the towline, and the Bad Dog

dipped its wing and flew away.

We were left alone and the sensation of floating with the air currents was amazing. Even though the wind was very light, the updrafts by the mountain ridge provided enough oomph to carry us to the 5,000-foot level. Riding the updrafts and trade winds, Wood had full control over our direction and altitude.

First we soared over the beach where they filmed the plane wreckage scenes for the popular television show “Lost.” Then, out over the ocean, we looked for whales in the turquoise and green sea below. Often they can be spotted during the winter months. We couldn’t see any, but it didn’t detract from views of the scenic shoreline and jutting mountain range.

Another benefit to gliders is the free and easy conversation that can take place between the pilot and passenger. In a helicopter, headphones and a microphone are necessary to overcome the noise. In a glider, you can hear your own heartbeat.

Passengers can request flights that are short, long, mellow or wild. Wood also offers a more rigorous aerobatic glider tour, which mixes in loops and flying upside down, but I was just a smidge over the 220-pound weight limit for that adventure. Imagine plummeting in the midst of a maneuver because El Tubbo was too embarrassed to cough up his true weight. No thanks.

After a blissful half hour, we drifted down onto the runway and made a noisy-but-gentle landing — the glider’s small wheels and tail scratching along the asphalt to a comfortable stop. What a thrill. While wheeling our plane to the side, there was a definite lift in my step.



The famous “Fantasy Island” twin waterfalls. (Deston Nokes)

Whirlybirding over Kauai

There are no glider rides on Kauai, but a helicopter’s ability to maneuver in any direction makes it the best way to explore the remote treasures of the Garden Island.

Most of Kauai is unspoiled and breathtaking. Consider that most of the population resides along the coast, and only 3 percent of the island is commercially developed. Much of Kauai’s 550 square miles are privately owned and inaccessible to the public.

A helicopter is the perfect vehicle for sweeping into Waimea Canyon, stopping up against the face of sheer cliffs and plummeting waterfalls, and for leaping over the brilliant green spires of the Na Pali Coast. A chopper will poke and prod the island's magnificent sites, giving tourists the versatility for taking snapshots or letting their jaws hit the floor.

“My favorite was how the helicopter came up over the canyon, went right up to the cliffs and then rose above it,” said Edward Kelley, vacationing with his family from Sacramento, Calif. “You get to see the coast and the whole island. It's the most amazing thing one can see in an hour.”

There are a half-dozen companies offering copter tours of varying durations around the island. Different helicopters have different seating arrangements, but all I cared about was getting a window seat.

The choppers depart from the Lihue heliport and passengers are asked to dress comfortably and not wear a hat (so it won't blow off into the blades). There's no need to duck entering the cockpit — the blades are high enough — but do avoid going anywhere near the tail.

Once inside, passengers are given headphones and share a microphone used to ask the pilot questions. We took off straight up and then flew clockwise around the island. Music pumped into the headphones, ranging from Van Halen to majestic symphonic thunder, set the mood and boosted our adrenaline. First we passed over the popular resort beaches of Poipu, while the pilot described the island's natural history.

We flew over defunct cane fields that now operate as cattle ranches. We watched our copter's shadow pass across eucalyptus forests, coffee plantations and the Norfolk pines brought by Capt. Cook.

Soon the adventure really began. Our chopper launched into Hanapepe Valley, where we hovered in front of Manawaiopuna Falls, featured in “Jurassic Park.” Next we zoomed into the amazing 2,400-foot deep Waimea Canyon, aptly known as “the Grand Canyon of the Pacific.” If you can't take a helicopter tour, be sure and drive to the canyon lookout along Highway 550 on the southwest side of Kauai. The term majestic doesn't begin to capture the enormity of the scenery.

Emerging from the canyon, we veered above sparsely populated Polihale Beach and then by a military installation so secret nobody knows what it is they do. In fact, forget I even mentioned it.

Next we approached what I regard as the most beautiful natural site in the world: the Na Pali Coast. The chopper came right up to the green-fingered peaks, vaulted

over their tops and spun around out over the ocean for an awesome view of the pristine beaches and imposing cliffs. In Honopu Canyon, where the recent “King Kong” remake was filmed, the mixture of fiery red rock, lush plants, white sand and a sapphire ocean was a sensory feast.

The only way to see the Na Pali Coast is by boat, helicopter or foot. If you’re in decent physical shape, I highly recommend the two-mile hike along the trailhead at Ke’e Beach to Hanakapiai Beach. Bring lots of water. Serious hikers — well, maybe survivalists — might enjoy hiking the 11-mile Kalalau Trail, where they can join the clothing-optional, herb-inspired bongo people. (I’m joking, sort of, but you get the general idea.)

Along the North Shore we cruised over Tunnels Beach, where the cheapest homes go for \$45 million. Just east of Hanalei Bay was a patchwork quilt of taro root fields, and farther inland was the famous “Fantasy Island” waterfall.

The chopper even took the time to nudge close to Mount Waialeale, one of wettest spots on Earth. Naturally, it was shrouded in clouds.

How does a helicopter compare with a glider in terms of ride? While chopper rides most often are smooth, the frequent changes in direction might affect those who are prone to motion sickness.

My son was glad his Dramamine kicked in.

IF YOU GO

Glider rides — 808-637-0207; honolulusoaring.com. Honolulu Soaring (“The Original Glider Rides”) offers daily flights, 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m., including holidays — weather permitting. Cost for a 30-minute scenic ride for one person is \$129, or \$199 for an aerobatic ride. There are other options — shorter or longer time, second passenger, hands-on lesson, etc.

Helicopter rides — Blue Hawaiian Helicopters. On Kauai: 808-245-5800; general Web site: bluehawaiian.com. Cost for a 55-minute tour is \$239.90 per person (for online booking only, saving nearly \$34 over regular price). Blue Hawaiian also conducts helicopter tours on Oahu, Maui and the Big Island.

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