

Hawaii's Big Island showcases its riveting history

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Kamehameha was told that if he built this temple, he would be able to conquer all of the islands.

Story and photos by [Deston Nokes](#)

One of the more striking artifacts from King Kamehameha I's reign is the [Pu'ukohola Heiau](#), which sits ominously on Whale Hill, just a short drive from Hawaii's Kona International Airport. This great, stone temple played an important role in the ascension of King Kamehameha and the unification of the Hawaiian Islands.

[Pu'ukohola Heiau](#), one of the last major temples built in the Hawaiian Islands, is a National Historic Site run by the [National Park Service](#). Just two years ago, a spanking-new [visitors center](#) was built featuring engaging displays and video presentations that illustrate the fascinating history of the heiau's construction, and the reign of Kamehameha the Great.

[The visitors center](#) is a spectacular upgrade from its former confines as a trailer located on the park grounds. The park provides a self-guided cell phone tour and there are park rangers onsite to conduct guided tours. Touring the site is easy and accessible: The walk is less than a half-mile and it takes just 20-30 minutes.

Fulfilling prophecy

Kamehameha built the temple because a *kahuna*, or priest, told Kamehameha that if he were to build a *heiau* on the hill, and dedicate it to his family's war god Kuka'ilimoku, war

would end and he would be able to conquer all of the islands.

What's most inspiring is how the temple was built. "The Pu'ukohola Heiau was built by hand in just one year," explained Greg Cunningham, park ranger. "However, the stones used were carried by hand from the Pololu Valley on the other side of the island."

With walls 224-feet long and 16-feet high, accomplishing this feat would have required passing boulders along a 25-mile human chain numbering between 10,000-20,000 people, according to the [Pu'ukohola Heiau website](#).

"The human chain extended up and over the Kohala Mountain to the site," Cunningham said. "The workers had to fit the stones in exact locations because they didn't use either mortar or cement." He said that the temple has undergone repairs throughout the years – but the heiau that stands today is essentially the same that King Kamehameha finished in 1791.



Sami Ewers, writer for Wend Magazine, lifts a boulder similar to those used in the heiau's construction.

[The visitor center](#) has a display allowing guests to try their hand and hoisting a boulder. While lifting it is doable, it's hard to imagine the strain of passing them along that human chain, one after another, for hours and days on end for a year. I don't suppose calling in sick was an option.

Upon the temple's completion, Kamehameha invited his cousin (and rival) Keoua Kuahu'ula to the dedication ceremonies. After his arrival, there was a scuffle and Keoua was slain along with almost all of his companions. The body of Keoua was carried up to the heiau and offered as the principal sacrifice to Ku, the war god. According to prophecy, the event led to the conquest and consolidation of the islands under the rule of Kamehameha I.

Learn more about the history of the Pu'ukohola Heiau on the [National Historic Site's website](#).

Today, access to the temple itself is forbidden to the general public. Some Hawaiians leave offerings to their ancestors on the wooden, multitiered platform outside of the temple.

There are three temples at Pu'ukohola Heiau National Historic Site: Pu'ukohola Heiau, which was built by Kamehameha; Mailekini Heiau, an older temple that was converted into a fort (including cannons to guard the king's residence and temple); and Hale o Kapuni Heiau, which is a submerged temple dedicated to the worship of sharks.

Black-tipped reef sharks are often spotted circling around the submerged heiau area, as well as turtles and whales.

Located less than 10 miles from the [Fairmont Orchid Resort](#) on the Kohala Coast, the Pu'ukohola Heiau National Historic Site is a terrific way to gain a greater appreciation for the great island's history.

If you go:

Pu'ukohola Heiau National Historic Site is open daily 7:45 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (including Federal Holidays). Its entrance gate closes by 4:30 p.m. daily.

The Park is located at 62-3601 Kawaihae Road, Kawaihae, on the Island of Hawai'i. For more information or to schedule a group, contact the Park Visitor Center at (808) 882-7218, ext. 1011.



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