

Kidding around in Maui

The second largest of the Hawaiian Islands has a reputation for romance, but it's a family affair, too

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BY ANUPY SINGLA

MAUI, Hawaii — We were about half way into our eight-hour plane ride from Chicago to Maui and my 5-year-old had already exhausted her iPod, devoured all of her snacks and wasn't interested in the four books I'd stuffed into her Dora backpack. My 7-year-old was nearing meltdown mode, too.

I mouthed to my husband, "Is this worth it?"

After all, swaying palm trees and hula dancers, luaus and romantic strolls on the beach are synonymous with honeymooners, not screaming, demanding little ones, right?

Turns out Hawaii is actually very keiki-friendly (the Hawaiian word for child is pronounced 'kay-key') — depending on where you go and how well you plan. I've been maneuvering the jaunt for nearly two decades since getting my graduate degree at the University of Hawaii and East West Center, most recently with my two young girls. This past August we decided to head to Maui.

I'd always viewed Maui as a couples' destination, with bustling restaurants in Lahaina and the winding, romantic road to Hana. After talking to locals, I learned that the second-largest island in the Hawaiian chain has a reputation as one of the most family-friendly, offering island tranquility and enough kid-oriented activities to keep everyone happy.

Maui's larger resorts are located to the west on the Kaanapali coastline. Though a little pricier than other hotels, they're well worth it for a family, offering expansive swimming pools with water slides and daily keiki activities like candy lei making and gecko hunting — all in one spot.

The area has five major hotels and six condominium resorts, including the Sheraton, Hilton and Marriott — all connected by sandy beaches and boasting some of the better snorkeling on the island. Our spot of choice: the Westin Maui Resort and Spa.

Getting from the main airport of Kahului to the western area of the island takes about an hour. Rent a car. Most hotels have free self-parking, and a set of wheels will give you the flexibility to explore the island at your own pace. Remember that mainland road rules apply, so don't do what we did and forget the car seats. Renting will cost you about \$17 a seat each day. We opted to save money by making a trip to the Super K-Mart near the airport and buying a couple of boosters. We also loaded up on bottled water, chips, sunscreen and beach toys.

The key to appreciating Maui with the munchkins is to look at the island through their eyes. The long, winding road to Hana might be a dream road trip for adults but could be a long, grueling one for the kids. One mom said her 4-year-old was carsick the whole way. And driving 10,000 feet up Mt. Haleakala for the sunrise — a world-famous experience — is worth the trip, but good luck trying to rouse a toddler at 2 a.m.

We nixed Hana and decided to take the advice of a local and see Haleakala, well, backwards. Instead of going there for the sunrise we chose to time our visit with the sunset. Along the way, we packed the journey with kid-friendly attractions that included a horse ranch, the island's only goat dairy and a lavender farm. Be sure to fill up the tank as gas stations can be hard to find. And take jackets; temperatures at the summit can be 30degrees cooler.

Maui's Upcountry is as deserving a visit as its beaches. After about 90 minutes of driving (take a packed lunch and snacks) toward the center of the island, you'll be met with red dirt, cactus and even ranches. This part of the island is home to the paniolo, the traditional Hawaiian cowboy that stems from a unique history of cattle ranches — two of which still exist on the island. This where most of the island's produce comes from, including sweet onions, lettuce, tomatoes and strawberries.

Kids generally have to be at least 8 years old to go horseback riding, so I was ecstatic to find Ohana Ranch, a 19-acre property that sits on the slopes of the Mt. Haleakala crater in the town of Kula. Owner Toni Martin has been riding her whole life and says it's her mission to cater to the under-10 set with her 20-plus miniature horses.

Martin started off my girls with a hairbrush session on her dwarf mini, named Bubba. She gave both girls a lesson on riding and maneuvering a full-sized horse in a pen where she watched and instructed them every step of the way. We had to bribe the girls to leave with a promise of getting to feed some goats. A few minutes by car and you arrive at the 42-acre Surfing Goat Dairy, owned by German couple Eva and Thomas Kafsack. Call ahead and you'll get a tour that shows how they operate the farm, milk the goats and create award-winning cheese featured on many local restaurant menus. It even was served during inauguration dinners for President Obama in Washington, D.C.

"Can I grab some more hay?" Aria asked, already fishing in the large cooler filled with goat feed. The kids (yours) will love feeding the other 'kids' and hanging out with the farm's 170 goats. Most are safely tucked away in pens, but the last born of the season traditionally gets to run around and wreak havoc with visitors by climbing onto unsuspecting laps and chasing the resident dogs.

You should still have time to fit in a visit to Alii Kula Lavender farm, a tranquil and refreshing spot that gets you closer to Mt. Haleakala. With stunning views of the south shore and the West Maui Mountains, this is a perfect spot to eat a packed lunch, sample some lavender scones and tea in the gift shop and let the kids run around. They not only grow over 45 varieties of lavender here, they also love kids. Each little one gets a map and is given clues to find various stamps located around the farm for a small prize.

By now, it was about 5 p.m. — perfect for our drive into Haleakala National Park, home to the largest dormant volcano in the world. Mt. Haleakala, which means house of the sun, last erupted in 1790. The crater itself measures 7 miles across.

As we began our slow climb over 10,000 feet along a winding, sometimes excruciatingly narrow two-lane path, it was as if we left earth behind for a moon-like landscape.

"Look, Mom, look ... we're actually driving through the rainbow," Neha and Aria screamed from the backseat, as they both started to look for the proverbial pot of gold and marveled at the clouds swirling past our car windows. There are several lookout points along the way, but we decided not to test the girls' patience and head straight for the top.

At the summit, wind whipped around us as we took a moment to peer over the edge of the crater, taking in the swirling masses of the sunset's colors settling over shades of red and orange earth.

And then came that age-old kiddie battle cry, "Mommy...I have to go to the bathroom."

The moment was gone ... but I take comfort in knowing that we had it — and that I've got the pictures to prove it.

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Maui's Mount Haleakala

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