



Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park

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Visitor Information

Hiking Journals

Mauna Loa Trail

October 30, 2005 by Anne Walker

Flight to Oakland and Arrival on the Big Island:

We start our trip at the Oakland airport and can't wait to get to the Big Island. One really great tip on flying with big backpacks – (thanks to Mike Frick on this one!) – put your fully packed backpack in a big duffel bag! That way all the straps, etc. are in the bag and your backpack doesn't get destroyed on the flight.

We arrived in Kona and headed to Hilo. For our lodging, we had reservations at the cabins just outside of the park (about 3 miles). We checked in at the Restaurant/Lodge within the park and they gave us sheets, pillows and towels in big sack bags – good thing we had a big van to hold all of us, our backpacks and all the bags for the cabins. We couldn't see Mike

in the back of the van because he was covered in luggage! The cabins were nice. They had a picnic table out front and lights for the inside of the cabin and the picnic table area. There was also a grill and a fire pit. The cabin had bed frames with mattresses and was about \$50 a night. There were community bathrooms with shower stalls that were fairly clean (oh and power outlets too if you had to charge a cell phone or battery!) It was a quiet place and gave us a chance to relax (if you can do that with Bob Frick!) The stars at night were amazing.

For dinner we went to one of the best Thai restaurants I have ever been to – Thai Thai. If you are in Volcano, you don't want to miss this place!

Acclimation Day:

Rather than try to hit Mauna Loa right away, we took a day to just get ourselves organized, get any last minute gear we needed (fuel, waterproofing spray and Bob bought a great rain outfit). We had to hit the Big Island Candy Company and the Mehana Brewing Company – yum! The Brewery was not obvious to find – sort of an alleyway entry and a little tasting



Anne Walker, Mike, Barbara, and Bob Frick, with photographer Jim Walker's slipper, at the Kona airport

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room, but worth the trip. The Volcano Red Ale was our favorite. We also visited friends of Bob & Barbara's who run the Alli Ice making place.

Once back at the cabins, Bob had a field day with the waterproofing spray – his motto "If once is enough, more is better!" We got to meet Norrie today too, which was pretty neat. Bob and Norrie had been exchanging emails for quite some time and she had great insight and information. We had dinner at the Volcano House restaurant – food and service were definitely lacking.

We hit the Volcano! Red Hill cabin trail (7.5 miles, 3,400 foot elevation gain)

We were up early (4:30AM) and managed to get checked out and ready to roll by 6AM. And the lodge had coffee :O) Driving to the trailhead was an experience in itself (10.5-mile ride up Mauna Loa strip road to the trailhead (elev. 6,662). We happened upon a daily ritual for local pheasants on the road to the trailhead – they all run the road and parade themselves around. There are loads of them and they don't understand how to turn right or left – just run straight ahead in front of the car.

The start of our hike was clear and full of anticipation. For the first mile and a half anyway... Then the rain hit! We hiked through dense jungle for the first part with the trail being soft reddish dirt. It starts to get sparser pretty quickly and different lava formations begin! Some lava looked smooth and bubbly (very liquid) while other was porous, charred, black and sharp as little bitty pieces of glass all clumped together. As we gained elevation, the trail began to get rough and keeping your balance begins to be something you focus on for the rest of the trip. I'm no expert on the kind of lava that we were hiking through – Google, here I come! So, what I've found on line is that there are three types of lava – and I think we witnessed all three while hiking Mauna Loa.

- Pahoehoe lava is characterized by a smooth, billowy, or ropy surface. A ropy surface develops when a thin skin of cooler lava at the surface of the flow is pushed into folds by the faster moving, fluid lava just below the surface.
- `A`a is characterized by a rough, jagged, spinose, and generally clinkery



*Jim helps Bob and Mike waterproof the gear just in case ...
(click on photo for a larger version)*



*The journey begins!
(click on photo for a larger version)*



*Heading out on the trail
(click on photo for a larger version)*

surface. Aa flows advance much like the tread of a bulldozer. Much of the trail reminded me of this description, so I would guess we walked on and witnessed much `A`a.

- Pillow lavas are bulbous, spherical, or tubular lobes of lava and are formed by a process that starts with the forming of a flexible glassy crust that forms around the newly extruded lava, forming an expanded pillow. Next, pressure builds until the crust breaks and new basalt extrudes like toothpaste, forming another pillow.

Regardless of the scientific "stuff", the lava was a sight to see. The variety of colors, textures and shapes are indescribable. The vegetation was very interesting as well. How plants can survive growing in such harsh conditions is a testament to Mother Nature. Most of the shrubs are black on the base structure of the plant and then would have green or pink bursts on the ends of branches or stalks. I guess the black is some type of mold.



Pahoehoe has a ropy surface
(click on photo for a larger version)

It rained off and on most of our first day and we were happy to have the rain gear (and of course Bob's waterproofing wash was a good thing). We were told the trail was well marked with "cairns" and this was true for the most part. You really have to pay attention and look ahead for each of them to make sure you stay on the trail. At times, the trail is very obvious though.

We hiked past the 8,000-foot marker, and past the last ohia tree and 9,000-foot marker in the afternoon and took a break for lunch. At that point, we're only 2.3 miles from Red Hill and feeling pretty good, but definitely going slower than our usual pace. The landscape was changing as we were getting closer to Red Hill and it's aptly named because of that - the trail and ground change from nasty lava to brilliant red-orange gravel.



Taking a break on the way up to Red Hill cabin.
(click on photo for a larger version)

Seeing Red Hill cabin (elev. 10,035) was one of the best memories I will have for a long time! The cabin is in the bottom of a "bowl" and walking up to the rim of the bowl was incredible. You have 360-degree views that are amazing. Mauna Kea can be seen clearly. I didn't have cell coverage in the cabin, but did at the top of the rim. I think the only living thing that visited the cabin was a bee!

It was great to get the pack off my back and get out of wet clothes. We had the cabin all to ourselves and the tank was full of cold, clear water (needing filtration no doubt, but still!) Can we have a hallelujah! The cabin surprised me. It is larger than I expected - there are 4 bunk beds (8 beds total) with a foam pad (don't expect support or comfort though) and a handful of old heavy army blankets. There is a picnic table and an area for the stove and kitchen type stuff. There are two toilets just



The cabin at last!
(click on photo for a larger version)

outside the cabin with cracked wooden toilet seats. One had a door and one didn't – ok by me for the fresh air. The cabin has a nice big porch (missing some nice rocking chairs though...) and whoever positioned the cabin knew what they were doing. The sun was shining and lying on the porch in the sun was wonderful. We put all of our wet clothes out and let them dry in the sun. Once the sun went down, it got COLD fast! The sunset was amazing. We made ourselves some dinner (freeze dried lasagna and blueberry cheesecake – yum) and were in our sleeping bags by 6PM. During trips to the bathroom, you can't help but be taken in by the night sky and the stars. The Milky Way was bright as day. Alarms were set for 4AM so we could be packed and ready to go at first light.

Mauna Loa Cabin Here We Come (11.3 Miles)

Wow – was the morning cold! We were up as planned, made ourselves breakfast and coffee and were ready to roll early. It was still dark out, so we lay on our bunks just waiting for breaking light. With the time of year we were hiking, we knew we had about 11-12 hours of daylight maximum, so we knew we needed to pace ourselves at about a mile an hour. Bob had not been feeling too well which concerned us so we came up with a game plan. If we couldn't keep the planned pace, we would stop at 4-5 miles out and return back to Red Hill and head down from there the following day.

By 6AM there was enough light (with headlamps too) that we could hit the trail. There was frost on the lava! It was a crystal clear day and we were all looking forward to moving on. We kept track of our pace and progress with the mile markers and were doing good for the first two miles. Bob and Barbara were really feeling the effects of the elevation and the going became slower and slower. Mike and I tried to set a faster pace, but the farther we went, the more distance grew between us and Bob and Barbara.

At about 2.5 miles we stopped and decided to do the smart and safe thing (looking back, I am more and more convinced we did the right thing). We knew getting to Mauna Loa Cabin would be a hard push and with energy drained, we were afraid someone would get hurt. We ended up deciding on a day hike and left the bulk of our packs there and headed towards Dewey Cone (elev. 11,405) covering 4.5 miles from Red Hill. We had a nice lunch and it was a very pleasant day once we made the decision and didn't have to stress out about making it within daylight. Hiking at night on this landscape would be asking for trouble.

The scenery throughout the day continued to be amazing and the lava always surprised me with something new. Huge lava tubes, big hills of lava, amazing colors, etc. Leaning on some of the lava hurt and left bruises on my skin (leaning helps when you have to pee!) We could see Mauna Kea and the telescopes most of the day (in between fog rolling by). It is also amazing how easy it is to lose the trail. I lost count how many times we said, "Are we on the trail?" and we'd stop, look around and realize we weren't on it. By the time we were headed back to the cabin, one of my knees started acting up. It was a mental tough spot for me and I

didn't mind going slow by that time. I hoped my knee would recover before our climb down tomorrow. I can understand why you don't find too many people who have done this hike!

Seeing the cabin a second time might have been better than the first time. That was all it took for me to get re-energized and before I knew it, we were all back, enjoying the sunshine and having a good half day to just relax, snooze and enjoy the tranquility of the place. I did A LOT of stretching and it felt great. We had beef stroganoff for dinner and raspberry crumble for dessert – very good. Bob and Barbara also brought Grand Avenue chocolates and we had those for treat. They may not have been in the best shape, but it didn't affect the taste!

Headed Down!

We were up and ready to go by 6AM again and we all headed out together after consuming a good hot oatmeal breakfast and coffee. Love the single coffee packets. Going down is no fun for someone with bad knees and I wasn't looking forward to it. Through much hiking, I've learned going slow isn't necessarily better and with the knee trouble the day before, I was a bit concerned. To my surprise, the knee trouble was gone (must have been the stretching) and I found I could keep pace with Mike and on we went. Bob and Barbara stuck together and were feeling better too. The sun was on our face the whole way down (good thing we had plenty of sunscreen!) and the weather wasn't bad. We hit some misty fog, but nothing too bad. I wore gloves all day to protect my hands from the sun and was glad I did.

For the last 2 miles, we had a tail wind and that was nice. Mike and I were back at the gazebo/trail head in 3 and ½ hours. I don't think I took one photo on the way down. Must be like when a horse knows it's going back to the barn! It was chilly at the base of the trailhead, so we got our sleeping bags out and just rested. Jim was picking us up around noon, so we had plenty of time to relax. Bob and Barbara appeared - was she a sight. She had fallen on the last mile and hit the one piece of crusty lava that was near her. She had a small cut above her lips and a cut on the side of her head (fortunately!) The blood made it look much worse. Barbara is a great hiker and a fall could happen to anyone. We were all just very thankful her cuts were minor and her humor was of course still in tact.

Jim arrived and we all piled in the van, stinky, tired and ready for a hot shower, a good meal and a beer! We headed to Kona and our luxury accommodations (can't remember the name of the place we stayed, but it was just past the main Kona area and within walking distance to Huggo's – isn't that all that matters?) The drive was long, but staying in Hilo another night just didn't sound appealing to me.

We had dinner at Huggo's on the Rocks and it was soooo good, we went to the Huggo's restaurant the next night and indulged!!!! There is nothing like ending a big, tough, strenuous hike, with good food, great accommodations, and the beaches of the Big Island and good friends. This was a great trip even though we didn't summit Mauna Loa!

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