

January 12 — Arrival in Waikīkī

This was our first day back in Waikīkī since 1990. It had been almost thirty-five years, and everything felt different.

The day before, or possibly the day before that, Laura had experienced some light vertigo. Because of the vertigo, our preparation felt slightly rushed. She took medication, felt better, and we decided to proceed with the trip as planned.

After landing at **Daniel K. Inouye International Airport**, we drove toward Waikīkī. On the way, we decided to pick up some food. Zengfang recommended a poké place called **Ohana Poké House**. The poké was good—solid, though not exceptional. The restaurant was located in a small plaza and felt like a place locals frequented. The price was reasonable, about fifteen dollars for lunch, which by Hawai'i standards felt like a good deal.

One small detail stood out. Part of the restaurant is owned by a Korean woman. I forgot to order a drink and asked if I could have tap water. She gave me a bottle of water for free, which felt kind and unexpected.

My first impression of the airport itself was that it felt old compared to what I remembered. It might be that the airport hasn't changed much, or it might simply be that I've changed.

We checked into the **Hyatt Regency Waikiki Beach Resort & Spa**. The hotel was fine. From our window, we could see **Diamond Head**, which was a nice view, though the area was noticeably noisy.

Later, we walked along the beach. The beach felt smaller than I remembered. That could easily be memory distortion, but there also seemed to be far more development—condos and apartment buildings packed tightly along the shoreline.

The buildings felt very close to the beach, which made the area feel less scenic than what I remembered from decades ago. It seemed like some of the raw beauty had been replaced by density. Still, the water itself was excellent. I estimated the temperature to be just under eighty degrees, and the sand was clean and comfortable.

Far offshore, I could see people surfing, likely a couple of miles out. Seeing surfers that far from shore felt unusual and impressive.

This was the beginning of the trip. I knew this journey would be documented day by day, and that more details and reflections would come later.

That was January 12.





January 13 — North Shore → Flight to Kauaʻi

We woke up very early, still fully on East Coast time. Hawaiʻi is about five hours behind, so waking early was not difficult.

Breakfast at the hotel didn't start until around 6:30 a.m. I checked repeatedly because we wanted to leave as early as possible. Our goal was to head to the North Shore and see whether snorkeling at Shark's Cove was possible.

We finished breakfast around 6:45, packed quickly, retrieved the car from valet, and drove north.

When we arrived at **Shark's Cove**, there was only one older man sitting near the hut, watching the ocean. The waves were crashing through the coral wall. By around 8:00 a.m., it was already obvious that snorkeling was not going to happen. A yellow ribbon surrounded the area, clearly indicating that entry into the water was prohibited.

We wandered around briefly. A local man confirmed what we already suspected: nobody should enter the water that day. I initially thought tide might be the main factor, but he explained that it was all about **swells**, not tide. The swells were simply too large.

I asked how people predict swells. He said he didn't know anything technical—he just listened to the news. His conclusion was simple: "Today is done."

He suggested we drive about 15 minutes to **The Ritz-Carlton O'ahu, Turtle Bay** to see if we could spot turtles.

Before leaving the North Shore, we drove back and forth along the coast and stopped at **Banzai Pipeline**. Surfers were out, and one thing that caught my attention was seeing a man carrying a broken surfboard. I had never really thought about waves being powerful enough to break boards, but it was very clear there.

At Turtle Bay, the area felt like the backyard of a luxury resort, called Kuilima Cove. Public access technically exists, but the parking is limited and not very welcoming. We eventually found a spot and walked around near one of the restaurants – The Beach House by Roy Yamaguchi. We did see a turtle in the water, but the area was partially cordoned off, and we didn't feel strongly about getting in.

By around 10:30 a.m., it was time to head back. We had a 1:15 p.m. flight to Kaua'i and still needed to return the rental car.

Before heading to the airport, we stopped at **Poke for the People**, recommended by Alex, about 30 minutes from Pipeline. The fish was fresh, but the sauce was heavy. The rice felt old and mushy. Having lived in Japan for a couple of years, we are sensitive to rice quality, especially sushi rice.

Comparing it to Ohana Poké House, Ohana's sauce was lighter and more original, the rice was warmer, and it felt more family-run. The Ohana Poke House was also slightly cheaper.

We fueled the car, returned it, checked in, and flew to Kaua'i.

At **Līhu'e Airport**, when picking up the rental car, the counter agent chatted with me about travel and China, and desire to exchange lodging for future travel. I said that we would follow up. Eventually, he upgraded us from a full-size sedan to a **Jeep Wrangler**, which turned out to be very useful.

We checked into the **Outrigger Kaua'i Beach Resort**. The resort has a great location and scale, but it felt run down. The design suggested it may once have been a five- or six-star resort decades ago, but in its current state, it felt closer to a three-star property.

After we settled down at the resort, we went to Lygate Beach Park for a quick snorkeling, the water was very quiet and clear. We saw schools of fish, very pleasant and relaxing.

Later we went to near the Airport to get some food at a food truck, which is a quite popular way to eat in Hawaii. I don't remember any food trucks when I first visited.

That was the end of the day.





January 14 — Kaua'i (Rain, South Shore, Princeville, Hanalei Bay)

The forecast said it would rain all day. Fortunately, in the morning, our side of the island was relatively dry. We stayed at the Outrigger Kaua'i Beach Resort, not far from Līhu'e, and even saw some sunshine early on.

We originally planned to kayak the **Wailua River** to Secret Falls, but decided to cancel. Instead, we drove to see the **Wailua Falls**. The road was winding but manageable. We viewed the falls from above. I had read that people hike down to the pool below, but we didn't want to do anything risky or potentially illegal.

From there, we drove toward **Po'ipū Beach**. It wasn't raining when we arrived, but the waves were large. Wading in shallow water was possible, but snorkeling wasn't safe. We saw Hawaiian green turtles resting on the beach, protected by signage. I also noticed a monk seal sleeping near the lifeguard tower.

We continued toward the **Māhā'ulepū Heritage Trail**. On the way, we stopped in Kōloa for an early lunch at another poké place, Fish Market. Again, the fish was fine, but the rice wasn't well cooked. Compared to O'ahu, the rice quality consistently felt worse.

At the trailhead near the **Grand Hyatt Kaua'i**, the rain picked up significantly, with strong wind. After waiting about 30 minutes, we decided to skip the hike.

We drove north to **Princeville**, checked into our hotel, and later headed to **Hanalei Bay**. The beach was beautiful. We didn't swim, but we walked along the shore and watched surfers. Some were clearly very skilled, especially those farther out. I noticed a group being coached by someone from the Backdoor surfing team.

On the way back from Hanalei, we stopped at **Foodland** and bought poké to try. The fish was similar to other places—likely from the same supplier. The sauces varied, but once again, the rice was poorly cooked. Unless I'm extremely hungry, I wouldn't buy poké from

Foodland again. That concluded the day.





January 15 – Kalalau Trail & Hanakāpi‘ai Falls

January 15th was planned as a better-weather day compared with the 14th, but in reality, the island had taken a lot of rain. It rained heavily on January 14 and continued through the night until close to midnight. Even so, we had already made reservations to hike the **Kalalau Trail**, so we decided to move forward, knowing the conditions would be wet.

Because we could not secure individual entry permits, we booked the shuttle instead, which cost \$40 per person. Early in the morning, we drove to the **Waipā Park and Ride** and took the shuttle to the trailhead. Our reservation time was 6:40 a.m., but we didn't actually arrive until around 8:00. In hindsight, this delay worked out well. The trail was still muddy, but the light was better, and the pace felt more relaxed rather than rushed.

The first section of the trail follows the coastline, with a clear drop-off on one side for much of the route. Under normal conditions, I wouldn't consider it dangerous, but with mud, slipping becomes a real concern. A slide here could easily carry you toward the ocean. That said, moving carefully and deliberately, it felt manageable. We reached Hanakāpī'ai Beach after about two miles.

At the beach, the first major decision point came up. Continuing requires crossing a substantial stream. The water level was roughly knee-high, but the current was fast. Some hikers chose to crawl across large rocks near where the stream meets the ocean, which seemed more stable than walking straight through the water. Laura decided not to continue beyond the beach, which made complete sense given the conditions. I chose to continue on alone toward **Hanakāpī'ai Falls**.

From the beach, the trail turns inland and climbs toward the falls. It is another two miles, with roughly a thousand feet of elevation gain. The climb itself wasn't particularly difficult; the challenge came from the terrain. The trail was muddy and slippery, with exposed tree roots everywhere. I crossed four larger streams and many smaller ones along the way. Near the falls, one stream crossing felt especially sketchy. Some people jumped across on rocks, but I didn't like that option. I took off my shoes, put on my Crocs, and walked through the water instead. The current was fast, but the crossing went smoothly.

Reaching the falls felt satisfying. The waterfall was lush and powerful, set deep in the jungle. Compared with waterfalls I've seen in New Zealand and Iceland, I would say this one is average in scale. Still, standing there in person, surrounded by greenery and mist, it was beautiful and worth the hike. I didn't stay long and turned around fairly quickly.

On the return, the conditions demanded just as much attention. At the same sketchy stream crossing near the falls, I again took off my shoes. While I was in the middle of crossing, a hiker ahead of me jumped from a rock, slipped, and fell into the water—head down, legs up. It was immediately clear he was in trouble. I was stuck mid-crossing and

couldn't reach him, and for a moment I was thinking through what I could do if he didn't recover. Fortunately, he managed to struggle back up on his own, gathered his things, and continued hiking ahead of me.

At another stream crossing, I nearly lost my water bottle when it slipped and started floating away. A young couple nearby reacted immediately, and the woman ran after it and managed to grab it before it disappeared downstream. It was a small moment of kindness that really stood out.

I crossed the larger stream near the beach the same way as before and then picked up my pace to get out efficiently. The entire hike took about six and a half hours.

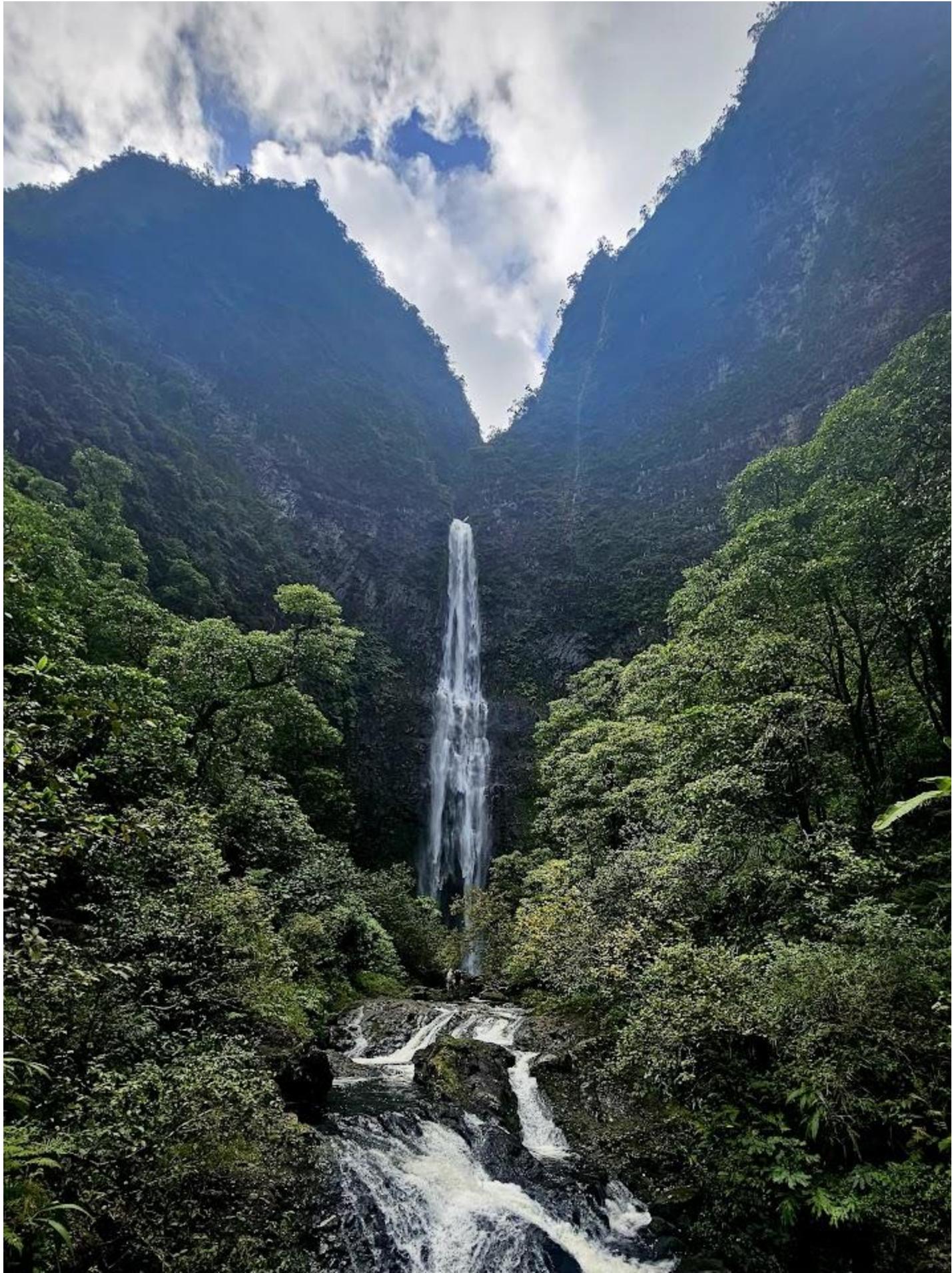
While I was hiking toward the falls, Laura had already headed back. She spoke with the rangers, caught a shuttle to the park-and-ride lot, and then drove our car to the trailhead. When I returned, we didn't need to wait for another shuttle. We spent a little time walking around on the beach to decompress before heading out.

On the drive back, we stopped in **Hanalei**. Laura had a Hawaiian lolo, and I had **Chicken In A Barrel** for a late lunch and early dinner. After that, we drove back to our hotel. Looking back, the day wasn't challenging because of distance or elevation, but because of constant judgment calls—mud, water crossings, and changing conditions. It felt good to have pushed myself, stayed alert, and made it back safely.









January 16 – Waimea Canyon & Kōkeʻe State Parks

On January 16th, we planned a driving and light hiking day to **Waimea Canyon State Park** and **Kōkeʻe State Park**. We got up early, drove back toward the south side of the island, and then continued inland on Route 50.

Our first stop was the Waimea Canyon Overlook, where we arrived around 10:00 a.m. The view was genuinely impressive. What makes Waimea Canyon stand out is not its scale—it is not comparable to the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone—but its color. The red canyon walls combined with lush green vegetation create a striking contrast. With the sun slanted at that hour, the shadows added depth, making the landscape feel layered and vibrant. If I had to describe it simply, it is smaller than the great continental canyons, but more colorful.

We continued to the next overlook, which also serves as a trailhead into the canyon. Based on a friend's recommendation, we decided to hike down. After close to a mile, it became clear that the trail was extremely muddy. We spoke with a hiker coming back up who showed us a photo of the waterfall at the end. While it looked nice, given the conditions, we decided to turn back.

From there, we drove to the **Kalalau Valley Lookout**, which was one of the highlights of the day. The view into the Kalalau Valley is expansive and dramatic, with deep folds of green stretching toward the coast. Even after hiking part of the Kalalau Trail the day before, seeing the valley from above offered a completely different perspective.

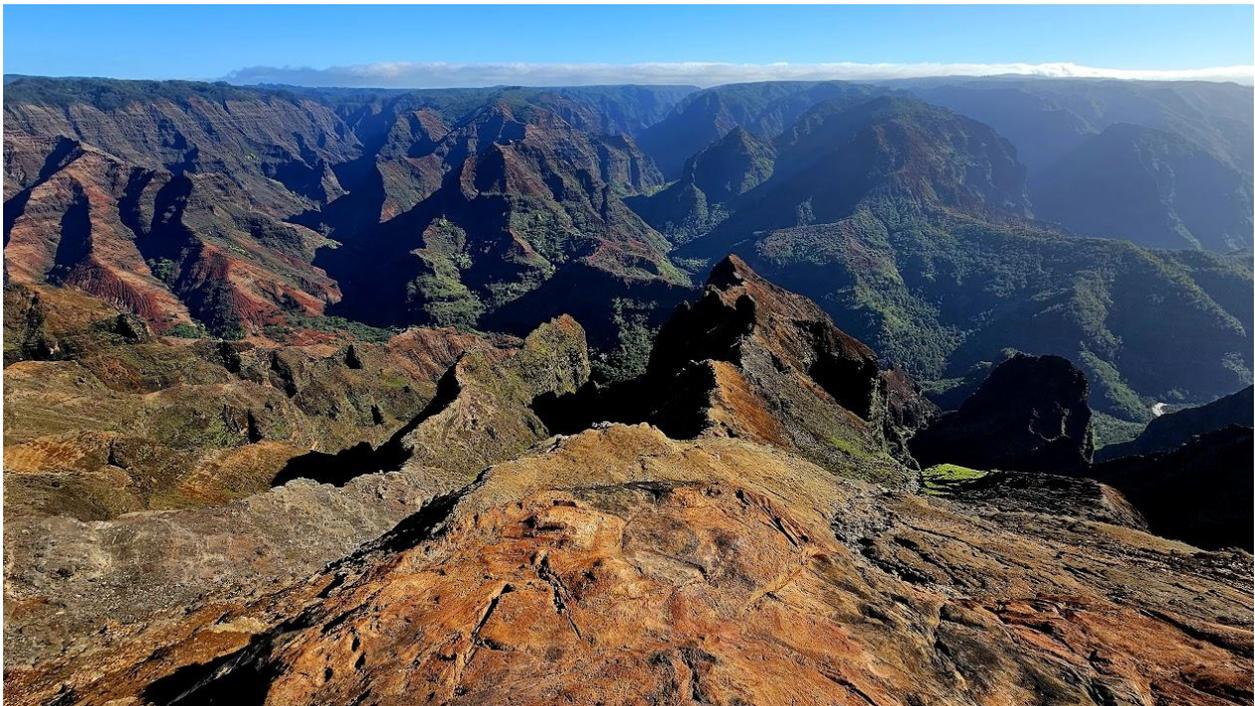
We then continued to the end of the road, where the **Pihea Trail** begins. The trail provides views of the valley from a different angle, and again based on a friend's suggestion, I decided to hike it. I ran into a family with their kids, who told me they had gone all the way to the vista point and returned in about an hour and a half. That sounded reasonable, so I continued.

After about a mile, the trail became increasingly muddy and steep. Checking the map, I saw that the final stretch was only another 0.2 to 0.25 miles. I pushed on, but that last section was very difficult. The grade felt like 60 to 70 percent, and unlike rocky terrain, this was pure mud. I eventually reached the end, where there is an overlook. It does offer a different angle of the valley, but I found it somewhat disappointing. I had expected a wide, 360-degree vista, and it wasn't that.

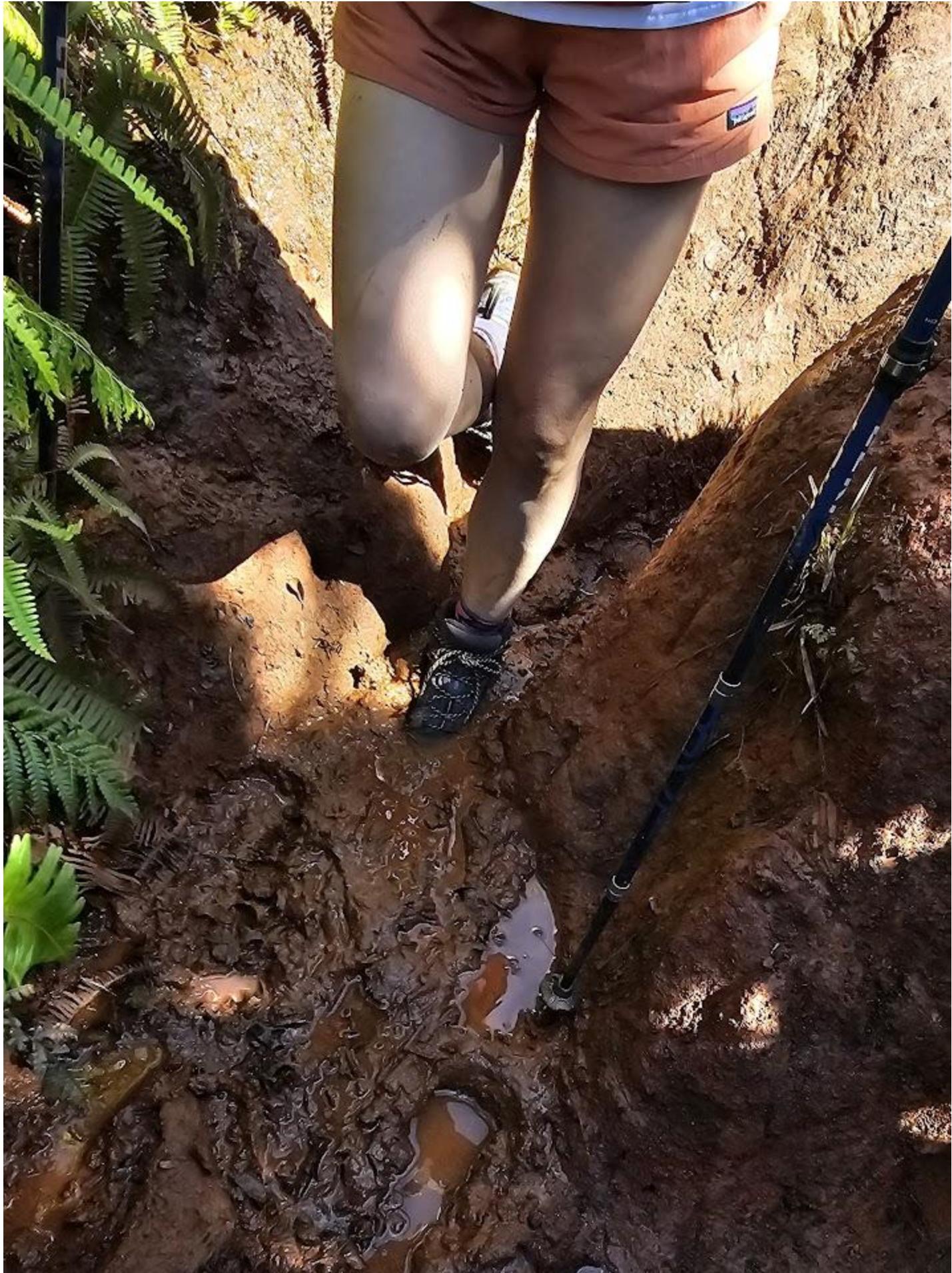
As I was about to head back, I heard Laura calling out to me. She had followed me most of the way but wisely skipped the final steep section after I told her it wasn't worth it. On the way back, we agreed that for views alone, stopping somewhere around half a mile to 0.7 miles into the trail would probably be ideal. At least now we know.

Before leaving the area, we returned once more to Kalalau Valley Lookout. A friend had mentioned the **Kalepa Ridge Trail**, often described as a "secret" trail. It was clearly closed, with iron bars and barriers in place. No one was hiking it, and I didn't feel comfortable ignoring the closure, even though people say the views are impressive. Maybe that is something to consider on a future trip if it officially reopens.

Overall, January 16th was less about hiking long distances and more about perspective—both literally and figuratively. Waimea Canyon stood out for its color, Kalalau Valley for its scale, and the trails reinforced how much conditions, especially mud, change the experience.







January 17 — Kauaʻi (Nā Pali Coast Boat Tour)

The night before, I checked the Windy app and noticed that wind conditions for January 15 looked favorable. Based on that, I made a last-minute reservation with **Captain Andy's Nā Pali Coast snorkel cruise**.

The tour required a 7:15 a.m. check-in and would last about five and a half hours.

Laura and I got up around 6:00 a.m., packed our gear, and drove to Port Allen, where the boat departs. Both of us brought motion sickness medication, just in case. I took one and a half pills, and Laura took one.

The wind itself was calm, but the swell forecast was around 10 feet, which suggested potentially rough seas.

The boat departed around 8:00 a.m. and first headed toward **Salt Pond Beach**, where we snorkeled for about an hour. We used our own snorkels and fins provided by the crew. The water was calm and warm. The captain mentioned that ocean temperatures around Kauaʻi only vary by one or two degrees year-round, and that day the water was about 77°F.

In the water, we saw fish, though not large schools. The fish were noticeably larger than what we had seen elsewhere, and the water was fairly deep. Before entering the water, I spotted dolphins jumping nearby. Some people mentioned seeing a turtle, but I didn't see one myself.

After about 30 minutes, we returned to the boat and continued north toward the Nā Pali Coast.

As expected, conditions became rougher near the coast. Despite the swells, I felt fine. I stayed seated, avoided unnecessary movement, and didn't experience motion sickness. The views were excellent, especially of **Kalalau Valley**, which I hadn't seen from this angle before.

Because we were at sea level, there was a lot of moisture in the air. Morning light is usually ideal, but with the steep valleys and rising mist, the light didn't hit everything evenly. I found myself wondering whether afternoon light might actually work better, even though afternoon sun can sometimes feel harsh. There really isn't a perfect time.

We cruised along the coast for about an hour before turning back. Once we moved about a mile offshore, the sea calmed significantly.

Lunch was served on the return trip. I had a cheeseburger, and Laura had chicken. The food was cooked fresh on the boat, with coleslaw and beans on the side. It was better than expected.

Overall, neither of us experienced significant motion sickness. I even stood for extended periods near the Nā Pali Coast. The trip ended smoothly.

After we left the cruise and headed back to our resort, Laura wanted to stop by a snorkeling spot called Lawa'i Beach. I didn't really want to go because I was exhausted. In the end, she went in by herself while I stayed in the car and took a nap. Every now and then, I'd peek out to check where she was, just to make sure she didn't wander too far.

After about 30 minutes in the water, she got out, took a quick shower, and we drove back to our resort. On the way, we stopped near Lihue Airport—she grabbed something to eat, and I ended up getting Panda Express.





January 18 — Kauaʻi → Maui (Morning Activities & Travel Day)

Our flight from Kauaʻi to Maui was scheduled for 1:15 p.m., so we had the entire morning free.

We decided to drive south and try snorkeling again at **Poʻipū Beach**. We arrived around 9:00 a.m. The water was calm and warm. I asked the lifeguard where the best snorkeling was, and he pointed to an area directly in front of the tower, near a small line of reef and black rocks.

We entered the water and were immediately surprised by how many fish there were. The coral and sand were bright, and the fish density was much higher than expected. This turned out to be one of the better snorkeling experiences of the trip so far.

We stayed in the water until about 10:30 a.m., then cleaned up and changed. She ended up getting a Puka Dog near the Poipu Beach since she'd been talking about it ever since our first day here.

After that, we decided to try the **Māhāʻulepū Heritage Trail** one more time. We parked behind the Grand Hyatt and started hiking along the coast. The trail was rugged, with volcanic rock, coral formations, erosion patterns, and waves crashing against the shore.

We hiked for about 45 minutes before turning back near the golf course, realizing we needed to leave enough time to return the car and get to the airport.

The round trip was about two miles. I found the trail surprisingly good—different from Kalalau and the waterfalls, but in some ways even more interesting.

We returned the car, checked in, and flew to Maui.

Our flight was delayed by about an hour, and we arrived around 4:00 p.m.

We headed northwest toward **Hono KOA**, about 45 minutes from the airport. Since we had rented a car for multiple days and were sharing it with friends, we waited for everyone to arrive.

I went to pick up the **Budget** rental car, which took a long time due to lines. By the time I returned to the terminal, the others had arrived—but Zengfang’s luggage didn’t show up until around 6:00 p.m.

While waiting, Zengfang and I went to **Costco** and **Safeway** to buy groceries for the next few days. By the time we returned, her luggage had arrived.

We then drove to **Hono Koa Vacation Rentals**, where we had rented two oceanfront units—one shared with Zengfang, and another for the rest of the group.

By the time we settled in, it was late. We ate something simple and went to sleep. The next day would be the Road to Hāna.





January 19 — Road to Hāna (MLK Day Loop)

January 19 was Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so it was a holiday for everyone. We decided to drive the Road to Hāna from where we were staying at **Hono Koa Vacation Rentals**. It was

already about an hour of driving just to reach the starting point, so we got up very early and left around 6:00 a.m.

Our first stop was at **Hōkipa Beach Lookout**. At the time, I couldn't remember the name right away, but it's the lookout where turtles often rest on the sand. We saw turtles on the beach and looked out over the water. It was interesting, but not spectacular, so we didn't stay long.

We continued driving and stopped at **Twin Falls**. Parking required a fee. In hindsight, this was a stop we wished we had skipped. Since we had already paid, we decided to hike in anyway. We walked to the waterfalls, but nothing about it really stood out, especially given how crowded it felt.

After Twin Falls, we kept driving deeper along the Road to Hāna. We tried to visit **Wai'ānapanapa Black Sand Beach**, but it required a reservation. We couldn't find any available parking and weren't able to get in, so we turned around and moved on.

Instead, we decided to go to the **Red Sand Beach** near Hāna. Parking was difficult, so I parked near a food stand and walked back. The beach itself was beautiful and very unique, with deep red sand and strong contrast against the ocean. We made sandwiches and spent time there.

The hike back up from the beach involved a narrow cliff path. Some people in the group were clearly uncomfortable with the slippery slope with sands. It wasn't dangerous, but it felt uneasy for those who weren't used to that kind of terrain.

After that, we discussed whether to continue farther east toward **Waimoku Falls** via the **Pīpīwai Trail**. A few people decided to move quickly to see how far they could get, while others waited behind. Eventually, all got on the trail and hiked part of the trails; XiaoXie made all the way to the end with impressive speed and passion. They returned,

Along the Pīpīwai Trail, we stopped to take photos of a **large banyan tree**, which stood out among the surrounding vegetation.

We also stopped at **Ke'anae Lookout** to take photos of the coastline and the taro fields below. The view was wide and open, with waves breaking against the rocks far below.

The decision was whether to complete the full Road to Hāna loop by continuing clockwise via the **Pi'ilani Highway**. This section includes roughly ten miles of unpaved, narrow road. I spoke with a ranger, who said it was technically passable but not recommended. I also talked with Yunqing and Huanglei who had driven it before.

After weighing the options, we decided to do the loop. The 10 mile stretch was not that bad except occasional single lanes; there was never any sketchy sections. That was the right decision.

Once we committed, the scenery opened up dramatically. To the right, the landscape turned into expansive lava fields with sparse vegetation. It strongly reminded me of Iceland—dark volcanic rock with low, scattered plant life. We stopped multiple times to take photos and videos. Over this entire stretch, we encountered very few people, maybe around fifteen to twenty in total.

As the day stretched on, we reached **Sun Yat-sen Park** near sunset. At first glance, it didn't look promising, but after walking farther into the park, we found open fields with a clear view of the sky. We stayed there and watched the sunset.

By the time we finished the loop and headed back, it was late. It had been a very long, full day—physically tiring, decision-heavy, but ultimately rewarding.

In hindsight, I would go straight to black sand beach, red sand beach, Hana, the Pīpīwai Trail and loop through the rest of the road. The twin falls, the lookouts could be skipped.

That was January 19.







January 20 — Maui Snorkeling Day (Black Rock and Afternoon Conditions)

This was our third full day on Maui. Maui is well known for its beaches and snorkeling, and that became the focus of the day.

Based on Zengfang's recommendation and my own research, we decided to go snorkeling at **Black Rock**. By this point in the trip, I had started to understand more clearly how snorkeling conditions really work. Reputation alone doesn't mean much. Swells, wind, tide, and timing all matter, and even a famous spot can be bad on the wrong day.

Before we left, I checked the wind conditions and read the Maui snorkel report. Both suggested that Black Rock should be good that morning.

Parking at Black Rock is notoriously difficult, but Zengfang had been there before, and her experience and advanced research helped us find a spot without too much trouble.

Once we got into the water, the snorkeling turned out to be excellent. We saw turtles and a large number of fish. Compared to earlier in the trip, I felt more confident in the water. My swimming skills are better than they used to be, and that made a difference.

Laura and I swam around the tip of the large volcanic rock. That area was deeper, and the fish were noticeably larger. The current and waves were stronger there, but they were manageable, and I felt comfortable.

I encouraged everyone to come, and all did. Xiaoxie and I took turns filming each other with a GoPro as we swam and dove. That was something I hadn't really done before, and it became one of the highlights of the day.

Later, we coordinated with other friends who hadn't been able to come out early in the morning. They wanted to snorkel at Black Rock later in the day. Based on what I had seen, I suspected that fish activity would drop by midday, and that turned out to be correct. When they went later, they didn't see much.

For lunch, we picked up food from Safeway and ate poké bowls. It was simple but convenient.

After lunch, Zengfang, Xiaoxie and friends wanted to walk along a coastal trail. I didn't feel like walking anymore. I dropped them off at the trailhead, and Laura and I drove ahead and waited near **Dragon's Teeth**. Later, we took a short walk and met them there.

In the afternoon, we discussed whether to try snorkeling again. Some wanted to go to **Kā'anapali / Honolua Bay** for a second snorkel, but based on the wind and conditions, I suspected it wouldn't be great. Still, we decided to go take a look.

Getting into the water there was not easy. The entry was rocky, and once in the water, visibility was murky. There were fish, but conditions weren't good. We stayed in for about 45 minutes before getting out.

The experience reinforced an important lesson: even the most well-known snorkeling spots depend entirely on conditions. On the right day, they're excellent. On the wrong day, they're just not worth forcing.

That was January 20.





January 21 — Maui Rest Day, Light Snorkeling, and Logistics

We got up in the morning with no immediate plans. Zengfang talked about going to hike the **Waihe'e Ridge Trail**, but I didn't feel like doing another hike. We had already done quite a

few hikes on Kaua'i island, and there were more hikes coming later in the trip. I decided to let them take the car and go hiking while I stayed back and rested.

Laura and I spent the morning taking it easy. We stayed around the vacation rental and looked out toward the ocean. From our oceanfront unit at Hono Koa, we can see whales up and down, and took a few photos. We told the others about it, and later they came out to look as well.

While Zengfang and Xiaoxie were hiking, we tried to estimate timing. I guessed Zengfang wouldn't be finished until around 1:00 p.m., so we stayed in touch and planned to meet around southern beaches later in the day.

The idea was to regroup and try snorkeling at **Ulua Beach** in the afternoon. That way, people who went hiking could still join. I didn't have particularly high expectations. The snorkeling conditions were rated around 6 out of 10, and from experience, I usually prefer conditions closer to 8 and above before going.

Before heading to the beach, we had lunch sit-in at Kihei Caffe Lahaina near **Lahaina Safeway**. It felt good to eat regular city food again, since we had mostly been eating simple meals or grabbing things quickly.

When we arrived at Ulua Beach around 2pm, parking was easy, and there weren't many people around. Laura and I went into the water first. There were some fish near the coral, but overall it wasn't very impressive. The wind picked up, and the conditions felt marginal.

Later, Kevin and a few others came around 3pm and went in as well. It was clear that the snorkeling just wasn't great that day. The wind and water conditions made it disappointing.

By late afternoon, we needed to shift focus to logistics. That evening, we had to pick up Huang Lei and Yunqing at the airport. Before heading that way, we stopped at the **Kihei food truck area** and ate Thai food. After dinner, we walked along the beach and watched the sunset. It was relaxed and unplanned, which felt appropriate for the day.

After sunset, we drove to the airport to pick them up. Once everyone was together, we headed back.

It wasn't an ambitious day, but it served its purpose. We rested, reset, and quietly prepared for the more complicated days ahead.

That was January 21.



January 22 — Haleakalā Decision Day and Hike into the Crater

By January 22, there were many moving parts, and none of them were simple.

One major factor was the strong interest in going to the Big Island to see a volcanic eruption. Based on USGS predictions, it could happen anytime between January 23 and January 25. But volcanic forecasts are inherently uncertain—it could happen earlier, later, or not at all.

Another factor was the weather forecast for Haleakalā National Park. The forecast called for steady rain. Backpacking for multiple days in the rain would be miserable, and if it was cloudy or raining, there would be no sunrise or sunset to see from the summit anyway.

A third factor was a major winter storm developing over the eastern United States. Forecasts showed heavy snowfall across the Washington, DC area—potentially one to two feet. That raised the possibility of flight disruptions, but also the possibility that airlines might allow free changes, which could open up more options.

Originally, the plan had been to camp at the summit area on the night of January 22, hike to Palikū on the 23rd, continue to Holua on the 24th, exit on the 25th, and then fly home. Given the weather forecast and all the uncertainty, that plan started to feel increasingly uncertain. Also, there were enough camping spots on the night of January 22 with the

current desire to see sunrises. Zengfang agonized a little bit how to fit all the puzzle pieces together.

Looking at the forecasts more closely, it seemed that January 23 might be the only day with a chance of decent weather inside the crater. Based on that, I suggested a different approach: instead of committing to multiple nights, we would hike directly into the crater on January 22, go straight to the Holua backcountry campsite, spend one night there, and hike out the next day. That way, even if the weather deteriorated afterward, we would still experience the crater. More importantly, this approach opened up opportunity to allow everyone has a place to stay because we only had one campsite reserved at Hosmer Grove Campground.

Initially, the plan was for Laura, Zengfang, Xiaoxie, and me to do the backpacking. Others were undecided and hesitant. As the morning progressed, more people gradually decided to come, which made logistics more complicated, but we adjusted and decided to leave at 10:00am sharp in order to make to the trailhead, and more importantly make to the Holua campsite before dark. Meanwhile, I also made reservations of two campsite at Hosmer Grove campsite for the night of 23rd.

We left Hono Koa Vacation Rentals around 10:00 a.m. Between packing, driving, and organizing permits, it took time. In-between all the actions, Kevin had to take Laochen to rent another car at the airport, and arranged Jeff to pick up on the 2nd day – really complicated. We arrived near the Haleakalā Visitor Center around 12:30 p.m. and started hiking around 1:00 p.m.

Not long after we started, it began to rain. This wasn't a surprise. Everyone put on rain jackets or ponchos. Despite the rain, spirits were high. We all understood that this was part of the deal.

We started at the Sliding Sands Trailhead from near the summit area, descending toward Palikū before turning toward Holua. The hike was long—roughly seven to eight miles—but gradually the conditions improved. The rain eased, visibility increased, and the landscape opened up. We took a small detour to visit Kawilinau Gulch(65 feet deep).

The crater scenery was striking. Wide, barren, and quiet, it felt almost moon-like. The colors were muted—reds, browns, and grays—and at elevation, it reminded me of Iceland, though not in a directly comparable way. It was its own kind of landscape.

As it got darker, finding the Holua campsite became challenging. There were no obvious signs marking the group site. I pulled out a small flashlight and started searching. Eventually, we found it after a few circling around.

Everyone was tired. We set up tents in the dark, cooked quickly, and tried to get organized. Water was another challenge. We had brought multiple stoves and two water filters, but one stove wasn't efficient enough, so we only used one stove and I ended up boiling water till 10pm. The water source was farther than expected—about a quarter mile from the campsite—near the cabins; actually, we found out there was another next to the Hut during daytime in the morning.

Despite everything, the night was warmer than I had anticipated. I had seriously considered bringing a zero-degree sleeping bag, but in hindsight, that would have been unnecessary.

By the time we settled in, it was quiet inside the crater. We went to sleep knowing that the next day would depend entirely on the weather.

That was January 22.





January 23 — Haleakalā Crater Exit, Summit, and Sunset

We had a surprisingly good night at the **Holua backcountry campsite**. There was no rain overnight, and the temperature was warmer than expected. When we woke up in the morning, everything was dry; no rain.

We filtered water, cooked breakfast, packed up our gear, and prepared for the hike out. The plan for the day was to hike from the Holua campsite back up to the Halemau'u Trailhead near the summit.

The hike out was about four and a half miles with roughly 1,500 feet of elevation gain. The first two miles were relatively flat and easy. The second half involved steady switchbacks, but the grade was reasonable. Compared to some previous hikes I've done, it wasn't particularly difficult, though it still required effort.

What stood out most was the weather. Despite gloomy forecasts and warnings from the ranger the day before, there was no rain. Visibility was good, and the crater scenery looked completely different in daylight. The colors, textures, and scale of the landscape were impressive—wide, barren, and almost lunar. In some ways it reminded me of Iceland, though not in a way that felt directly comparable. It was its own kind of landscape.

By the time we reached the trailhead, everyone was in good spirits. Jeff was already waiting there. He drove part of the group back to retrieve cars and then returned to pick everyone up.

Instead of leaving immediately, we decided to take advantage of the unusually good weather. We regrouped near the summit visitor area again, refilled water, and rested briefly. Because conditions were so clear, we decided to walk back down into the crater again, this time without packs, just to see it under full sunlight.

Around midday, we hiked down roughly over three miles round trip. The light was completely different from the day before—brighter, clearer, and more revealing. It was worth repeating part of the walk just to see how the landscape changed.

After that, we returned to the trailhead area and began setting up for the evening. We wanted to stay near the summit to see sunset, so we set up tents again at the campground near the summit. The timing mattered—we wanted enough daylight to set everything up before heading back up.

As sunset approached, we headed toward the summit again. We had been advised by Xiaoxie to wear everything we had, and that advice turned out to be accurate. It was cold and windy, much colder than it had been inside the crater.

The sunset itself was beautiful, especially with the observatories silhouetted against the sky. The sun dropped slowly, lighting up the clouds and crater rim. It wasn't just about the sun—it was the combination of altitude, wind, landscape, and isolation that made it feel special.

After sunset, we returned to the campground. Dinner was simple. The conversation turned to what to do next. There were growing discussions about flying to the Big Island to see the volcano. Some people were strongly interested. Others were hesitant. There were logistical questions about flights, rental cars, and timing.

I talked with Laura about it. She was okay with the idea. I was more conflicted—not because I didn't want to go, but because everything felt uncertain and rushed. At the same time, we want to be company with friends.

By the time we went to sleep, a general direction had formed. Nothing was fully decided yet, but it was clear that the next day would be another dynamic transition.

That was January 23.





January 24 — Haleakalā Sunrise → Big Island → Kīlauea Eruption

We got up very early in the morning. We had stayed at Hosmer Grove Campground near Haleakalā, and before sunrise we drove up toward the summit to watch the sunrise.

Winter weather on Haleakalā is always unpredictable. Even if it's raining below 8,000 or 10,000 feet, conditions at the summit can be completely different. That uncertainty is exactly why we still wanted to go. Sometimes the only way to know is to take the chance.

The sunrise was not a clear, postcard-style sunrise, but it was still very dramatic. The sun rose above the cloud layer, backlighting the crater rim. The crater itself appeared almost

like a sketch or silhouette—soft, layered, and quiet—with clouds slowly moving below us. It wasn't bright or spectacular in the usual sense, but it felt subtle and unique.

Because we had a campground reservation, the sunrise permit was automatically included, so there was nothing extra to worry about.

After spending some time at the summit, we drove back down, packed up quickly, and prepared to head to the airport. The day was already shaping up to be complicated. We had originally planned to catch a 10:00 a.m. flight out of LIH, but that plan quickly unraveled. Kevin had driven all the way down to the gate and needed one of us to bring the park pass back to him. In hindsight, the plan likely would not have worked anyway, even without the mistake of driving past our campground.

Our Southwest flight from Maui to the Big Island was scheduled to depart around 1:50 p.m., flying into Kona. At the same time, we were dealing with severe winter weather back home. A strong storm system had dumped significant snow across the Washington, DC area—several inches in some places and up to one or two feet in others.

Because of the weather impact, we all had to change our return flight plans on the fly. We rebooked our return to fly from OGG to IAD on January 27 instead of earlier, which unexpectedly gave us extra days on the Big Island. At the time, it felt unsettling and chaotic, but in hindsight, it turned out to be a very good decision.

We landed in Kona, which was already a compromise. Initially, we had booked a round-trip rental car, but then realized that flying out of Hilo would make far more sense since it is much closer to the volcano.

While we were on the rental car shuttle, Zeng Fang called us to switch car rentals. At the last possible moment, we switched to a one-way rental—picking up the car in Kona and returning it in Hilo. It was chaotic, but we managed to make it work.

From Kona, it's about a two-and-a-half-hour drive to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. I drove the entire way.

Earlier that morning, Kīlauea had started erupting around 10:00 a.m. Based on previous eruption "episodes," which often last eight to twelve hours, we felt optimistic that we might still catch it. Later, we found out that the peak eruption was around 12:30 – 1pm.

As we approached the park in the late afternoon, traffic slowed noticeably. When we reached the entrance around 5:00 p.m., we saw signs indicating closures in parts of Volcano Village. Volcanic ash had fallen across the area, with some pieces reportedly as large as eggs, creating potential hazards.

Our goal was to get to Volcano House directly, which offers one of the best distant viewpoints. Access was restricted and the park closed due to the volcano ashes when we approached to the park entrance. The disappointment suddenly occupied everyone's minds. Zeng Fang called and told us how to get in; therefore, we told the ranger that we needed to pick up a friend at Volcano House. It wasn't exactly honest, but we were able to drive to the Volcano House and saw the eruption. Some of us felt bad about this incident.

From the Volcano House area, the eruption was about 4.5 miles away. Even at that distance, it was clearly massive. Lava fountains were visible, glowing intensely against the darkening sky. Friends who had arrived earlier told us the eruption had peaked around 12:30 p.m., so we missed the absolute maximum height, but what we saw was still dramatic.

We decided to walk down a trail to get a different perspective seeing the lava flow below. Xiaoxie went to higher ground, while we chose to go lower hiking down Crater Rim Trail, Kilauea Trail and Byron Ledge Trail. In hindsight, neither view was strictly better—the Volcano House overlook itself is just as good as anywhere else—but the experience of moving through the park while an eruption was actively happening mattered.

It started raining. We hiked about a mile and a half, taking roughly forty minutes, through wet trails and mist. We met up with friends, took photos for each other, and watched the lava fountains pulse and glow in the distance.

Around 7:00 p.m., the eruption suddenly stopped.

We were the last couple who hadn't taken a photo together. As we hurried to do so, there was a loud final burst—a brief, dramatic finale—before everything went quiet. The lava was still glowing, but the active eruption was clearly over.

After walking back toward Volcano House, our group debated what to do next and where to stay over the night. Options included staying at a campground or finding lodging nearby.

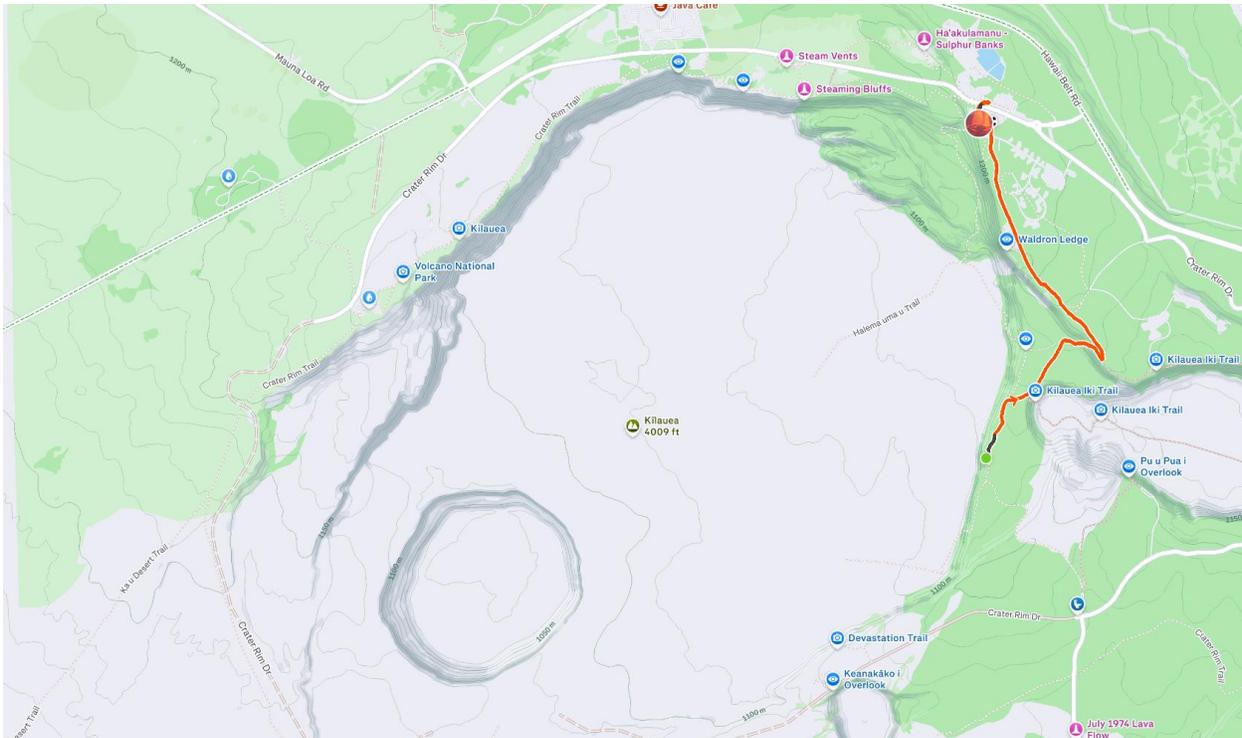
There are no real hotels in Volcano Village, mostly just Airbnb-style houses. The only available option nearby was a large two-bedroom house that had just opened up. We decided to take it.

The house was crowded but functional. There was hot water, which mattered a lot after hiking in the rain. Nobody wants to sleep in the room even though it would be more comfortable and quieter. I slept on the floor, which was completely fine given the situation context.

It had been a long, chaotic, dramatic, and unforgettable day—one that felt much bigger than anything we could have planned.







January 25 — Big Island (Volcano Daylight, Black Sand Beach, Captain Cook, New Lodging)

We woke up after a cramped night at a small Airbnb near Volcano Village. It was a two-bedroom house, and everyone was squeezed into a small space. Still, everyone had a bed and a shower, which mattered after the long day before.

I got up early while everyone was sleeping, and with Laura went back to Volcanoes National Park around the Volcano House to see the vents again, and see a mushroom cloud in the morning sunshine. On the way back to the Airbnb, we went to a nearby general store. I looked around and found some basic breakfast items—eggs, bread, and simple food. Huang Lei cooked the breakfast for everyone.

After breakfast, we drove back into **Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park** again. Even though the eruption had stopped, some people wanted to see the vents and the craters in daylight. This time, we drove to higher ground and looked down into the volcanic landscape. The perspective was completely different from what we had seen the night before. Without the glow of lava, the scale, texture, and structure of the craters stood out much more clearly.

After leaving the park, we drove south toward the coast to visit a **black sand beach** (Punalu'u Beach). When we arrived, I walked along the beach and saw turtles resting and surfacing near the shoreline. You typically don't see turtles this easily in many places, but

here they were visible, poking their heads out of the water. We stayed for about 45 minutes and took photos. It was a calm and enjoyable stop. We were here 30 years ago with Laura.

From there, we continued driving south. We stopped at a food truck area to pick up food. Some friends talked about doing night snorkeling to see manta rays, but I had no interest in that. If I were to see manta rays, I would prefer to do it during the daytime, and by then it was already getting late.

Later, we went to the trailhead that leads to the Captain Cook Monument. I remembered there being only one or two parking spots, but this time I noticed there was actually a small parking lot across from the trailhead, along with a large sign explaining the trail. Access requires hiking down roughly two miles, with about 1,500 feet of elevation loss. The descent was steady but manageable.

Once we reached the water near the monument, the snorkeling was exceptional. We entered from the steps near the monument and immediately saw a wide variety of fish. There was both shallow and deep water, large fish and small fish, and many colorful species. This turned out to be one of the best snorkeling experiences of the entire trip—better even than Black Rock at Maui.

We stayed in the water for over two hours, and took some photos near the Cook Monument. Later, only Laura and I are left in the area; a cruise ship with a lot of people come from the water and they all waved their hands to us.

The hike back up was strenuous. I was the first one to reach the top, sweating heavily. The four-mile round trip with significant elevation gain took me about an hour on the ascent. By the time we reached the top, it was around 6:00 p.m., and it began to rain lightly.

From there, we drove north. On the way, we stopped in **Hilo** and picked up Thai food for dinner.

That night, we stayed at a **much larger Airbnb**, about 20 minutes north of Hilo, Honouliuli. It was a five-bedroom, two-bathrooms house—far more comfortable than the previous night. Everyone had space, and it immediately felt like a relief after the cramped conditions earlier.

Even though we initially thought this would be a lighter day, it turned out to be busy and physically demanding.

That was January 25th.





January 26 — Big Island (Snorkeling, Rest, Mauna Loa Sunset Attempt)

Last night was a much nicer stay at Honomu. We were in a large Airbnb about 20 minutes north of Hilo. It was a five-bedroom, two-bathrooms house—much bigger and more comfortable than the previous night. Each family had a large room. Even though we still only had one bathroom for four people at each floor, everyone was able to shower, and the space made a big difference.

In the morning, we walked around the property and noticed how many fruit trees surrounded the house. There were avocado trees, orange trees, coconut trees, and several other kinds of fruit trees. It felt very tropical and relaxed.

I went out to look for breakfast supplies. Around town, I saw a small store with some avocados and other limited local produce, but in the end, I didn't buy anything.

Our plan for the day was to go snorkeling again. We first considered a spot near Coconut Island, specifically **Carlsmith Beach Park**, where we had heard there was a chance to see turtles.

When we arrived, we didn't see any turtles. We hesitated and asked the lifeguard for advice. He told us that **Richardson Ocean Park** would likely be a better place to see turtles that day.

So we did not get into the water at Carlsmith and instead drove to Richardson directly.

At Richardson Ocean Park, everyone had time to get into the water. At first, we saw some fish, but the better snorkeling was farther out, near the coral ridge where the current flows. Once we reached that area, there were suddenly many colorful fish. The visibility was good, and the marine life was abundant.

I wouldn't say this snorkeling was better than Captain Cook, but it was very good in a different way. There were still many fish, colorful coral a little further out and we also saw turtles moving through the water. There was noticeable current and wave action.

Some people in the group felt a bit nervous, but I encouraged everyone to go together. Eventually, we all went out, and I took photos of turtles and underwater scenes.

After snorkeling, we noticed ripe mangoes on the ground near the beach, likely fallen from nearby trees. People seemed to leave them for anyone who wanted to eat them. We took some and really enjoyed the ripe mangoes.

Later, we went to a Vietnamese restaurant for lunch afterward. After that, I really wanted to return to the house and rest.

Some friends wanted to visit waterfalls, including **Akaka Falls**, while others were interested in going to Mauna Loa again for sunset. I honestly didn't feel like going anywhere. I knew the sunset would likely be beautiful, but I was tired and wanted a break.

We returned to the house to rest. A few people went out to see waterfalls and came back later.

Originally, we planned to leave around 3:30 p.m., but we ended up leaving closer to 4:00 pm. I initially didn't want to go, but Laura encouraged me, so I went.

We drove toward **Mauna Loa Observatory**. Everyone is allowed to go to the visitor center, which is around 10,000 feet. To reach the summit at about 12,000 feet, a four-wheel-drive vehicle with low gearing is required. We didn't have the right vehicle, and I had no desire to push it.

Some friends went higher with other people and eventually saw a beautiful sunset.

For us, we walked about a quarter to half a mile to a higher viewpoint near the visitor center. We saw clouds below us, and the sun began to set, but then the clouds rose and blocked the view. Later, we learned that those who reached 12,000 feet had a clear and spectacular sunset.

Afterward, we drove back. It was late, and there were very few food options available. We ended up eating pizza before returning to the house.

It was a long day, and we came back late. That marked the end of January 26.



January 27 — Travel Home

Our flight departed early. We flew from Hilo to Maui via Honolulu, then onward with a connect at Los Angeles, eventually reaching Washington, DC the following evening.

Snow covered the ground when we arrived at Dulles Airport. We shared a ride with Yuqing and Huang Lei.

That marked the end of the trip.