

An Unexpected Opulent Stay in the 50th State

FAIRMONT ORCHID- HAWAII

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD







Sometimes life throws us unexpected pleasures. Often, unforeseen and unplanned trips are the best of all. Over the years, I have visited 42 of the 50 United States. I have been to the most southern point on Sunset Island in Florida, the most northern state, Alaska, the sunny state of California, several New England states, and most in between, but never a Hawaiian Island. With only five days' notice, I consented to take a luxury journey to Kona on the big island.

ARRIVING ON THE ISLAND

After a non-stop business-class flight from Portland, Oregon, to Kona, Hawaii, I was relaxed and ready to see the island. A private car with a driver took me from the outdoor airport to the Fairmont Orchid – Hawaii in Waimea, not far from Kona. The scenery was somewhat bewildering. The Hawaiian Islands are known for their tropical flowers and lush beauty. However, the first 25 minutes of my trip were through an old lava flow. Everything was black lava rock on both sides of the road. Some greenery appeared on the mountain in the distance on one side of the road, and the teal-blue ocean came into view on the other side. Otherwise, we were driving through solid fields of black lava peppered with a few patches of dried yellow grass.

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Pulling into the resort, I discovered the lush foliage and colorful flowers representing Hawaii. I don't go on many group press trips anymore, but by the end of this trip, I was planning the next. The Accor Group houses more than 40 hotel brands, and Fairmont is one of their luxury chains. The Fairmont Orchid – Hawaii lived up to its high-end reputation.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

My luggage was taken to my room, and I received a warm greeting at the hotel entrance. Soon, I was led to my sixth-floor room, a section of the hotel that is part of the hotel's Fairmont Gold Experience. The room boasted a 42" LCD HD Flat Screen TV, a gloriously vast marble bathroom with a separate shower and tub, a Nescafe coffee maker, and all the other essential amenities you would find in a luxury resort hotel room. My Partial Ocean View Room offered a stunning view of the golf course and an angled ocean view from my lanai, furnished with a tall table, two chairs, and a lounge.

THE FAIRMONT GOLD EXPERIENCE

It was time to venture out and explore the grounds. It was effortless to find gorgeous photo ops with colorful flowers, waterfalls, a beautiful and inviting pool, the beach, and a wonderful little bay to swim or snorkel in, complete with a coral reef. After meandering around the tranquil grounds, I headed up to the private reception area on my floor in the North Tower for a bite to eat. Guests privileged with the Fairmont Gold Experience will find a daily hot breakfast, a dry snack bar, sunset canapés, complimentary non-alcoholic and espresso beverages, and access to the honor bar service featuring wine and spirits, along with a selection of local and domestic beers. I arrived just in time to try one of their lobster sliders with a decadent mango sauce. The bun was soft, the lobster tender and flavorful, and the mango sauce's sweetness took the dish to a heavenly level.

As much as I wanted to continue tasting the canapés on display, I maintained my willpower and saved my appetite for the Welcome Dinner. Here, Chefs Isabel Chung and Brian Hirata collaborated on a six-course private dining experience that reveals how to preserve Hawaii's food culture and simultaneously serve today's local cuisine.

DELICIOUS DINNERS

At 6:00 pm, I gathered in the banquet space with several representatives from the Accor Group, half a dozen other journalists, and several prominent influencers. Chef Hirata teaches the history of Hawaii's food to culinary students, and he graced our group with tales of foraging for seasonal tree ferns, mushrooms, and treasures from the sea. The bubbles flowed, the cocktails were tasty, and the food was spectacular. After an evening of feasting outdoors, I returned to my room for a good night's rest.

ALL BEYOND LIMITS

Fairmont Hotels are showcasing their All Beyond Limits Program featuring never seen experiences. During my stay, the group paddled into the ocean in traditional outrigger canoes and snorkeled near a float near the shore. While positioned around the float, Kristina Makushenko performed an above and underwater ballet.

Known as the 'Aqua Queen on heels,' Kristina is a world champion of synchronized swimming. She takes her skills to a new level with strong but graceful moves presented on top of and

underneath the water, providing a breathtaking show for viewers. Most of the group paddled back to shore at the performance end, but some, including myself, decided to swim and snorkel to get a better view of the coral reef just off the resort's coast. The day was free for swimming, sunning, kayaking, or paddle boarding.

Dinner was a grand affair on the beach with crafted cocktails and various fresh and delicious sushi that was almost too beautiful to eat.

SO MANY OPTIONS

There is so much to do or not to do on the island. After a tasty breakfast, we were treated to a lei-making class by resident and Hawaiian culture expert Káíulani Blankenfeld, who explained the rich history and significance of leis and how to make them. I consider myself reasonably crafty, but my skills at this artistic endeavor seriously wavered.

Filled with excitement for the afternoon activity, I joined the others for a helicopter excursion with Blue Hawaiian Helicopters. Everyone was split into small groups of four or five and paired with a pilot. We lifted off for the Kohala Coast Adventure and gazed at the stunning Kohala coast of the Big Island's North Shore. We flew over the towering sea cliffs of Waipío Valley and banked and weaved amongst the crevices of the Kohala Mountains in search of waterfalls. This trip was much better than any IMAX movie I have ever seen.

The following day it was time for a little more exertion. We left the resort in four-wheel drive vehicles and headed for the other side of the island for a guided hike to seven waterfalls. The adventure was relatively easy, offering peek-a-boo sea views while seeking out

the next waterfall. Several in the group took the opportunity to swim under one of the cascading falls, but the temperature outside did not dictate a dip for me. I did enjoy watching the others and soon learned that the waters were quite cold. I was happy with my decision.

A SPA WITHOUT WALLS

Upon returning, many of us were scheduled for 50-minute Signature Lomi-Lomi Massages at the Spa Without Walls. Some walked to enclosed beach huts near the resort waterfalls. I headed toward the beach. Here I found several screened places with massage beds inside. My masseuse Lily Barr was quite proficient at her craft. She relaxed my body, mind, and soul in less than an hour. The sound of the crashing waves lulled any stress away, and her perfect pressure loosened all the knots that kept me tense.

A FINAL GOODBYE

Our final dinner was another occasion to remember. Greeted at the beach with a slightly sweet lavender-colored cocktail, I mused at the stunning floral arrangements covering our long table on the beach. Tiny light strings swung in the breeze while the hula dancers prepared for their evening performance. Dinner was again impressive. Honestly, there was not one dish at any meal that did not receive at least an eight on my culinary scale, which maxes out at ten. Everything was delicious, and the presentations were clean, colorful, and imaginative. The culinary program managed by Chef Chung was nothing short of spectacular, and the service was equally impressive.

The evening comprised lively conversation, hula dancing, fire dancing, and delectable food,

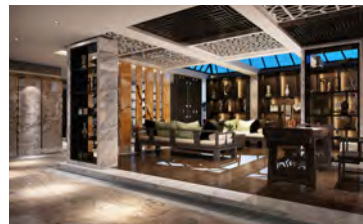


wine, and cocktails—the perfect ending for an ideal trip to the 50th state. The Fairmont Orchid – Hawaii is at the top of my list of places to revisit. ♦

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