

# The Big Island of Hawaii

## Our Family's Blooming Adventure at the Orchid

BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

Part two of our Hawaiian escape continued on the Big Island. After spending three nights in Maui, we hopped aboard a small plane and flew to Kona, where the volcanic landscape contrasts with the lush vegetation. At first glimpse, it seems the island is made up of lava flow as far as the eye can see, but there are actually 11 different climactic zones on the Big Island. A few villages were spared from the molten lava, giving rise to palm trees and tropical flowering plants. Michael and I had visited the Big Island last year and knew what to expect. Our daughters, however, were initially surprised by the landscape, but quickly saw the beauty in the black lava contrasted by the white rock graffiti. Locals find white rocks and leave messages strategically placed against the black stone. Typically, it is names of loved ones, or someone professing their love. I'll take this form of "graffiti" any day.

The drive to the Fairmont Orchid is about 30 minutes north of Kona International Airport along the Queen Ka ahumanu highway. The long, winding drive-way to the Orchid leads to an elegant front entrance. Walking through the lobby, the hotel quickly opens to a wide, expansive lawn. The hotel rooms are located in the two wings off the main lobby, forming an inclusive U. Beyond the lawn is a large pool and thatched roof bar. Just past the pool is the wide-open Pacific Ocean, and the hotel's private lagoon.

Where the Kea Lani is more intimate, the Orchid is spread out, and land there is abundant. We left the lava flow behind us, along the Kohala Coast highway, and escaped into the hidden oasis of the Orchid, where waterfalls, lush vegetation, and hidden hammocks await you.

The charming Louis Zanni, manager of the Gold Floor, greeted us at the entrance. The Gold Floor is called a "hotel within a hotel," featuring premiere service, complimentary breakfast, and cocktails and hors d'oeuvres nightly. After a brief tour, Louis showed us to our suite and said our only requirement was to relax.

So Michael headed to the golf course and the girls and I made our way to the lagoon. Two large lava rocks provide a natural barrier separating the ocean from the lagoon. Clear, blue green water with gentle waves beckon swimmers and snorkelers. The "beach boys" (and girls) as they are affectionately referred to, are a group of hosts helmed by the legendary Uncle



photo by Karen Villalpando

A spectacular view of the Fairmont Orchid's private lagoon can be seen from the lanai of the penthouse suite.

Gary, who attend to guests' every need, whether it's a surfing lesson, renting snorkeling equipment, or taking a canoe out with an instructor. Each afternoon, Uncle Gary hosts a craft-making session, weaving baskets from palm leaves, for children and adults. Every guest who visits the Orchid gets to know Uncle Gary and his crew. You remember them, and they remember you.

From the moment we arrived at the Orchid, we felt everyone went out of their way to make us feel at home. Each day, beach boy Umi set up our cabana with a cooler full of water and fresh fruit. He called us Mr. and Mrs. V, and entertained us with stories and his unbelievable surfing abilities. Even on his day off, the surf was up, so he came in to show off his talents to the delight of everyone sitting on the beach.

The girls loved the snorkeling and spent at least an hour every day exploring the world under the sea.

I loved sitting in my cabana – which consisted of two padded lounge chairs with a wind/sun shade that could be pulled forward to protect you from the elements, or pushed back to tan. Beginning every day at noon, the friendly bar servers offered mai tais and other refreshing beverages. We usually opted for a non-alcoholic smoothie or a draft of their local brew.

The Orchid celebrates every sunset with a torch lighting ceremony beginning with the blowing of the conch. Then 140 tiki torches are lit around the 32-acre property.

There are three restaurants on the property, Brown's Beach House, Nori's Sushi Restaurant, and the hotel's elegant Grill. Our first night there, we dined at Brown's outdoor patio, with local, live entertainment. Kevin, a

Kenny Loggins style singer, and Nino, the ukulele player, were accompanied by the most graceful hula dancer I've seen. No fast shaking hips, just gentle beautiful movements and the face of an angel. The trio was delightfully entertaining.

Brown's features local Hawaiian fish and seafood, Kiawe pork, and steaks. My favorite dish here was the Just Tomato: Kekela Farm's tri-colored heirloom beauties with Hawaiian sea salt, and aged Balsamic vinegar. I love how they use local greens from Waimea for their salads, sweet potatoes from Molokai, and lobster from Keahole. Just as the native Hawaiians took only what they needed from the land, the Orchid respects those traditions and attempts to do the same.

Norio's Sushi Bar and Restaurant is well-known and popular among locals and hotel guests. Sushi master Norio Yamamoto prepares some of the freshest sushi on the island, as well as authentic traditional Japanese cuisine.

Adjacent to Norio's is the Orchid Court restaurant, offering a sumptuous breakfast buffet daily. My suggestion is the salmon eggs Benedict from the menu, a refreshing glass of POG, and a steaming cup of Kona coffee. POG, you ask? It is a delicious concoction of P – pineapple juice, O – orange juice, and G – guava juice. It's also delicious with crushed ice and a splash of rum during cocktail hour!

Our days at the Orchid were busy. Deciding to swim in the pool, lounge at the beach, participate in seaside yoga, or snorkel in the lagoon is a tough choice. Rebecca enjoyed the basket weaving, Michael enjoyed the golf, and Emily enjoyed mingling with the other teenagers on the property. The latter activity caused me a little stress, so there was only one cure... the Spa Without Walls.

Imagine receiving a therapeutic massage in a hale next to a waterfall. Ten waterfall massage haies and five oceanfront cabanas are your windows to relaxation. There are also six indoor treatment rooms if you prefer. Our thatched roof hale was built for two – a couples massage room – where we listened to the exotic birds chirping, the waterfall cascading down, and the quiet serenity. There was no need for a relaxation CD – the music is piped in by nature! The outdoor treatment haies are kept very private by lush



"Celebration of the Kings" is a new Polynesian Feast featuring cuisine and entertainment that boasts of the pride of the Pacific. Traditional Polynesian and modern dance choreography re-tell the story of the settlement of the Pacific. Pictured with our family is one of the lead dancers, center.

