

# A frugal way to experience the Big Island

## If you don't have a campsite, you can legally park on the ocean's edge and fish for the night

BY SUZANNE MORPHET, FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 25, 2012



As the setting sun drew pink wisps across the evening sky, two surfers played in the waves in front of us. They seemed oblivious to the impending darkness that would soon envelope them and the treacherous shoreline.

My 16-year-old daughter and I watched with trepidation from our picnic table at Isaac Hale Beach Park on the rugged southeast corner of Hawaii's Big Island, while my husband barbecued a fresh ahi tuna that we picked up en route.

The early tropical darkness would also pose a small challenge for us - eating by flashlight - but we weren't concerned about safety. Our "room" for the night - a rented Volkswagen West-falia van - was only a few steps away.

As blackness closed in, the surfers disappeared from sight and just as suddenly a cacophony erupted from the trees overhead. The raucous cries of dozens of birds settling in for the night was deafening, almost drowning out the roaring surf.

It was our first night of a week-long camping trip, but already we felt immersed in the landscape in a way one never does when you stay in a hotel with four walls and air conditioning.

We booked our van from Happy Campers Hawaii in Hilo on the recommendation of my dentist's wife and receptionist, who convinced me during a checkup that this is a fun and affordable way to see the Big Island.

"We spent one evening watching the waves roll into these small tidal pools made from lava," said Linda Anaka of Sidney, B.C.

"The lava was still warm from the day's sun and it was like taking a bath under the stars."

When we arrived in Hilo, the owner of Happy Campers - Teri Fritz - greeted us with fresh leis and pointed to a blue Westfalia she's nicknamed Kila Kila Kei, Hawaiian for Majestic Ocean. It would be ours for the week. The van's immaculate condition and low mileage - a little more than 100,000 kilometres - belied her age.

She was built in 1987, but spent most of the last 20 years in someone's car-port in Honolulu, undriven.

Fritz has 15 VW vans in her fleet, including a red and white "hippie van" from 1971.

Before stashing our gear, Terri showed us how to pop the top to reveal the upper bed and how to pull out the back seat to create a lower bed.

Towels, bedding and cooking utensils were all tucked away in cabinets and included in the price of \$125 US a day.

Our condo-on-wheels was ready and so were we, having researched online extensively before leaving Canada. The Big Island has lots of camp-grounds - 10 county campgrounds, more than a dozen state campgrounds and two national ones. Most of these can be booked online in advance, but we wanted to be as free and fickle as the ocean breeze, stopping when a place grabbed us, moving on when we were ready.

With that in mind, we booked only one campsite - Spencer Beach Park on the northwest coast - before we left home. With its sandy beach, sheltered surf and excellent facilities, it fills up quickly.

We also knew that if we were stuck, we could always pull off to the side of the road. In Hawaii, you can legally park by the ocean's edge at any road pullout and "fish" for the night, free of charge. Tip: bring your fishing rod.

Our decision to play it by ear worked for the best. One day, for instance, we visited two beaches with campgrounds before we felt ready to stop for the night. Punalu'u Beach Park - with its black sand, waving palm trees and dozing sea turtles - was gorgeous, but busy with day-trippers. We enjoyed a swim, then drove on to Miloli'i, a fishing village at the foot of a massive lava field. It was peaceful but a little too quiet for our teenager.

Finally, we arrived at Ho'okena Beach Park, 20 km south of where Captain Cook was killed by Hawaiians in 1779.

It's what you imagine when you think of the tropics, with a wide, sandy beach fringed with palm trees. Tents were tucked in between the palms while van campers parked at one end of the beach.

Spinner dolphins visit Ho'okena Beach regularly and there's good snorkelling as well as kayak rentals. This was a county park, but was handed over to the local Hawaiian community to manage in 2007. They've done such a good job that Ho'okena Beach is now considered a model for other parks.

Campgrounds are relatively inexpensive in Hawaii - sometimes even free. The county campgrounds we visited charged \$5 per person/per night, but at Volcanoes National Park there's no fee other than a park pass, which every visitor must buy. We camped one night in the grassy field at Na-makani Pai'o campground, within a kilometre's walk of Kilauea's steaming Halema'uma'u crater. After dark, the glow from the fiery pit reddened the night sky and was a steady beacon guiding us to its rim.

Even though our van was equipped for cooking, we chose to eat most meals in restaurants or buy takeout food. Grocery store delis offer a variety of salads and the ever-popular "ahi poke" (bite-sized pieces of sashimi-grade yellowfin tuna marinated in soy sauce and eaten raw).

Farmers' markets along the way provided sweet pineapples, juicy mangoes, enormous avocados and homemade banana bread loaded with macadamia nuts.

Just because you're camping doesn't mean you can't enjoy some of the amenities of a hotel. One day we took standup paddle board lessons from the Kona Boys Beach Shack fronting the King Kamehameha Beach Hotel in Kailua-Kona. Another day, my daughter and I took a floating yoga class at the Fairmont Orchid hotel on the Kohala coast.

That evening we camped at Spencer Beach Park where our daughter sat on the soft sandy beach and painted her nails as pink as the setting sun. "I could spend the whole week here," she sighed with contentment; high praise from a teen who usually hates camping.

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