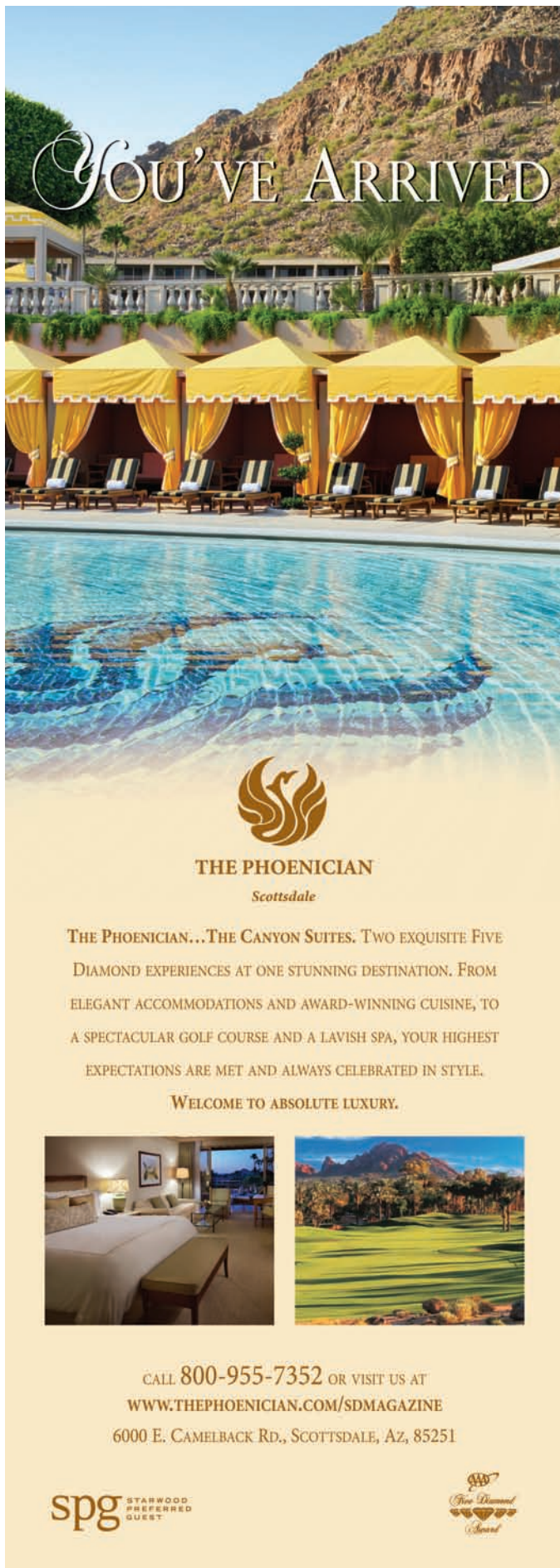


Big Fun On the Big Island

T Landing by airplane at Kona International Airport on the Big Island—the geologically youngest and southernmost island in the Hawaiian island chain—is a lot like landing on the moon. Although I’ve never actually experienced a moon landing, I imagine the scene might be equally as surreal as the one before me: porous black-lava fields as far as the eye can see, surrounded by the multihued blues of the Pacific Ocean—all begging the question: Is civilization anywhere nearby?

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Stepping onto the tarmac and into the tiny thatched-roof airport, the scene remains puzzling. Can a 1,350-acre resort that promises tropical landscaping and emerald golf courses really be within a 30-minute drive?

It's then that I discover the first of many surprises the Big Island has to offer. Just a short drive from Kona, past countless lava fields marked with "Hawaiian graffiti"—stark white coral, fresh from the sea, arranged by residents as legal, natural messages across the landscape—lies Waikoloa Beach Resort, a lush oceanfront development of shops, restaurants, golf courses, condominiums, hotel properties and vacation clubs.



My destination, the Hilton Waikoloa Village, houses 1,240 rooms on 62 oceanfront acres along this Kohala Coast. Arriving at the property, it's easy to embrace the happy, peaceful Hawaiian spirit of aloha as a hotel employee places a fresh-flower lei around my neck. I admire the breezy lobby and the interesting transportation scene before me: An open-air boat shuttles guests via waterway throughout the expansive resort. I opt to walk to my room and take in some of the large collection of art representing Asian, Western and Oceanic cultures—all of which make up the Hawaiian melting pot. I also pass the resort's offering of shops, one of the large pool areas—complete with suspension bridge, water slide and pool bar—and the luxurious Kohala Spa. Arriving in

my room in the Lagoon Tower, one of the property's three towers, I'm thrilled to discover a bird's-eye view of the resort's salt-water lagoon, the dolphins of the Dolphin Quest program and a peek at the Pacific.

Among the various dining options—which range from resort-casual poolside grills to Chinese and Japanese offerings—the clear standout is Kamuela Provision Company, or KPC, an indoor-outdoor restaurant that offers the postcard-perfect Hawaiian sunset view, an abundance of fresh Big Island fish prepared with tropical and Asian-inspired influences, and meat offerings that utilize local, sustainable and organic products.

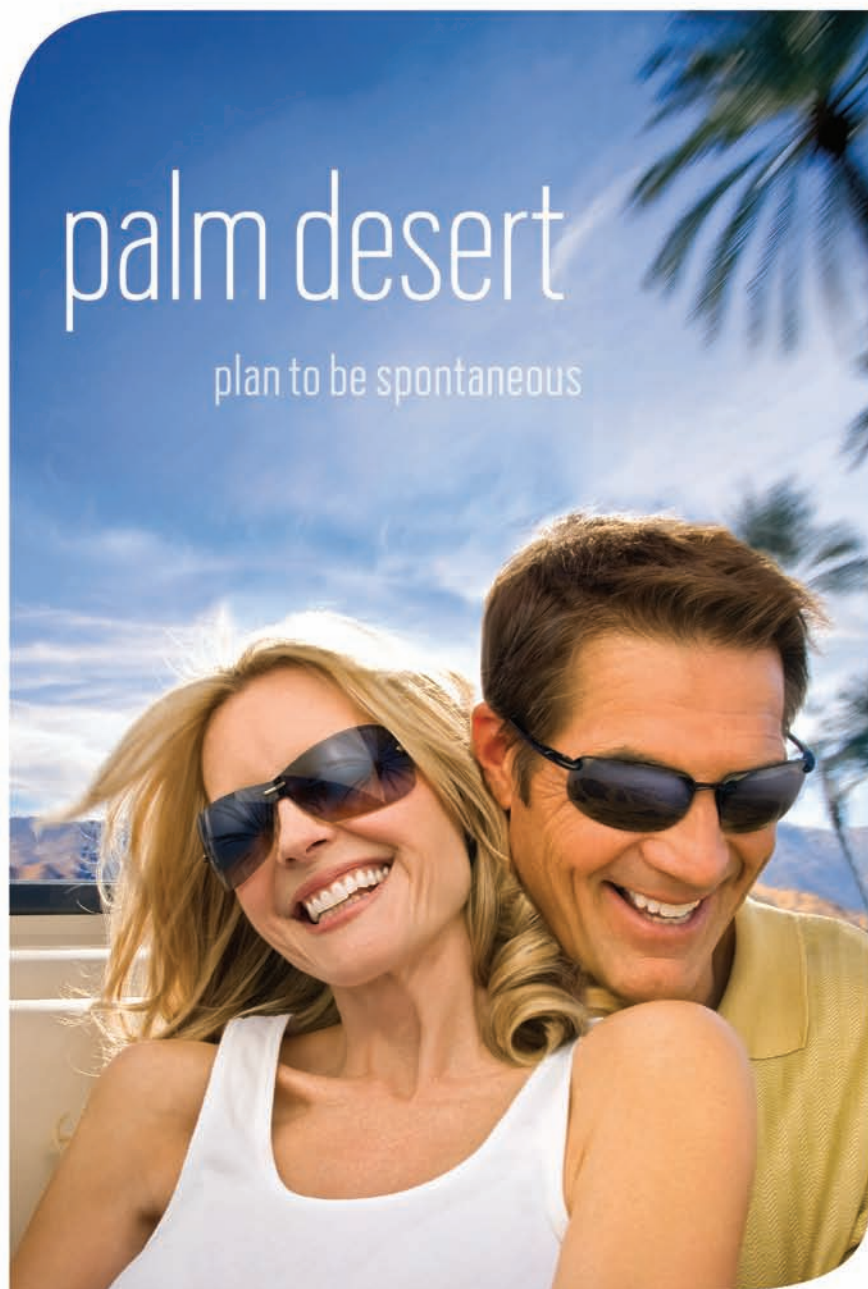
After a delicious dinner with samplings of the best KPC and the resort's other dining options have to offer, I spend my first night with my balcony door open, lulled to sleep by warm Hawaiian breezes and the happy chatter of dolphins.

The next morning, I get the chance to meet those happy dolphins up close during a Dolphin Quest experience. Under the guidance of the program's animal trainers, I get in the water with the dolphins for a hands-on adventure. Our group learns training signals, watches tricks and gets to experience a bit of life as a dolphin trainer.

With such a comprehensive offering of amenities and the spectacular location, there's never really a need to venture out of the Waikoloa Beach Resort. But that would be a mistake. A catamaran sail-and-snorkel experience into the crystal blue waters off nearby Anaeho'omalu Bay introduces snorkelers to Hawaii's famous sea turtles, a host of tropical fish in their home on the coral reef, and a black-sand beach that continues to remind us all that Hawaii is, indeed, an active volcanic island. With four volcanoes perched around the island, there's an ever-present feeling that you're standing on shifting ground—but that only adds to the island's exciting element of surprise.

Traveling farther outside Waikoloa Village, I'm excited to experience the rain forest—from more than 100 feet off the ground, on a zip-line tour from Big Island Eco Adventures. I learn about the vastly different landscapes that exist on the Big Island, where you can literally go from tropical beach to snowcapped mountain in a matter of hours, passing through desert, plains and rain forest along the way.

The tour is an exhilarating journey through the deep forest, starting in an off-road vehicle, bumping along through fields filled with guava trees and, according to our guides, the occasional wild boar. The adven-



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ture really gets off the ground when we reach the zip lines—heavy cables suspended at various heights above gullies, tree life and spectacular waterfalls. Our guides, outgoing locals who are childhood friends, play off each other with tales of their rambunctious boyhood in these very fields, jokes that include sprinklings of Hawaiian slang, and zip-line tricks that make our scaredy-cat group of first-timers feel a little silly for our fears. The four-hour excursion is a trip highlight, offering tree-level views direct to the ocean, snacks of homemade banana bread and tropical juices, and the entertainment of two guides who truly love what they do and enjoy sharing it with others.



After the zip-lining, it's time to check in at the Hilton's new Waikoloa accommodations: King's Land, Hilton Grand Vacations Club. I'm the first guest to stay in my timeshare room, a two-bedroom, two-bath suite—larger than my downtown San Diego condo—that overlooks the complex's golf course. The plantation-style resort, now in its initial phase of construction, will be built out over the next decade to appeal to guests who can't get enough of the Kohala Coast.

My final day in paradise is filled by an excursion to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, directly across the island from Waikoloa Beach Resort, near Hilo. The drive takes several hours, but it's more than worth it to view the smoldering Kilauea Volcano from above the crater rim. A drive through the massive park demonstrates the volatility of life on an active volcano, where lava flows continuously toward the sea, leaving in its wake black fields and fascinating lava rock formations.

As we return to the resort after a 12-hour day touring the island and its volcanic sleeping giants, it's the perfect time to reflect on the adventures I've had, the people I've met and the amazing landscape I've witnessed. While it's no secret the Big Island embodies Hawaii's aloha spirit of harmony, there are so many surprises around every corner, just begging for discovery on repeat visits. I know I'll soon be back to happily oblige. ■

If You Go

Hawaiian Airlines (hawaiianair.com or 800-367-5320) offers flight service to Kona with a short layover in Honolulu. For information on the Hilton Waikoloa Village, visit hiltonwaikoloavillage.com or call 800-886-1234. Visit bigislandecoadventures.com for more information on the zip-line tours.