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TURTLES, SWIMMING AND SNORKELING AT PUNALU'U BLACK SAND BEACH

By Love Big Island | updated December 1, 2021



Punalu'u beach is the most famous black sand beach of Hawaii. Two reasons for the popularity of this beach are the gorgeous black sand beach *and* the fact that you can often see endangered Hawksbill turtles and green turtles basking in the sun on the beach.

Our guide to visiting Punalu'u beach spans the following topics:

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Punalu'u is an expansive and easily accessible black sand beach on the Big Island. It is a great place to go for a quick swim, snorkel, a (short) coastal hike, camping (with permit), or to stop for a picnic.



□ Turtle on Punalu'u Beach | Photo credits: [Steve Cadman](#) on Flickr under a [CC BY-SA 2.0](#) license.

PUNALU'U BLACK SAND BEACH: SWIMMING, TURTLES, SNORKELING AND FACILITIES

The sand at the beach is made of small pitch-black fragments of lava. Try picking up a handful when you are at the beach to see if you can still recognize some of the larger parts as coming from an old lava flow!

The beach itself is lined by rows of coconut palms. The shade under the palms is a good place to hang out because the black sand can get very hot in the sunlight.

You can get a good impression of Punalu'u from the following video made by the good people of droneandslr.com:



| SWIMMING AT PUNALU'U

Swimming at Punalu'u is possible but be careful when going into the water because there can be strong currents at times. Bring water shoes if you have them because the black sand on the beach gets hot quickly in the sun and there are many rocks in the water that can be painful when stepped on. The easiest place to enter the water is from the small boat ramp on the left (facing the water) of the beach.

There are underwater freshwater springs in Punalu'u bay. The water from these springs is colder than the seawater and drifts on top of the salt water because salt water is denser than fresh water. This can sometimes give you the strange sensation of swimming in water of two temperatures (cold and warmer) at the same time.

These freshwater springs are very likely the name givers of this bay. Punalu'u means "coral dived for" or "spring dived for" in the Hawaiian language.

Stay out of the water if the surf is high.



□ The best place for swimming is at the protected cove at the north-eastern side of the beach

SEEING TURTLES AT PUNALU'U BLACK SAND BEACH

One of the reasons why Punalu'u is such a popular stop are the turtles that you can often find foraging (feeding) in the water or basking in the sun on the beach .

The turtles basking in the sun are Hawaiian green sea turtles (Honu). You can sometimes also encounter the more rare Hawksbill Turtle (Honu'ea) in the water but not basking on the beach.

Fun turtle trivia: sea turtles almost never bask on the beach. Several species of green sea

turtles do this but *only* at a few locations worldwide. Hawaii is one of those! (source).

How to behave around turtles: Did you know that sea turtles in Hawai'i are protected by federal and state law? They are also protected under the Endangered Species Act (source) and their well-being is highly valued by the locals. Please take the following rules to heart if you are close to a turtle:

1. Never try to **touch** a turtle.
2. Do not **feed** the turtles.
3. NOAA and DLNR recommend that everyone **stay at least 10 feet (3 meters) from all sea turtles.**
4. If maintaining 10 feet distance isn't possible, **keep safety in mind** and move away from the animal as carefully as possible.
5. And, most importantly, **enjoy** seeing these beautiful creatures!

More turtles? Check out our list of **8 best places to see turtles in Hawai'i** if you are into turtles and want to take a shell-fie with them (from a respectful distance of course).

| SNORKELING AT PUNALU'U

The visibility in the water at Punalu'u beach park is moderate but if you get here on a calm day you should certainly bring some snorkel gear. Getting into the water at the main beach area isn't very easy due to the many lava rocks but once you get through you can start looking for the frequent visitors to this beach: the turtles!

If you are an experienced snorkeler and the ocean is calm (**no big waves or strong currents!**) you can also check out the snorkeling at Ninole Cove. This cove is a short walk to the south / west of the main beach and offers a sheltered bay with sand channels that provide decent entry into the ocean. There are also some very interesting sheltered tide pools here that are interesting to explore with kids.

You can either drive to Ninole Cove (park below the clubhouse of the sea mountain golf course) or take a short but rewarding hike to the cove from the black sand beach parking lot. Follow the unmarked grassy trail southwards (going right if you face *Ma Kai*/the ocean) for ~5

minutes.

FACILITIES AT PUNALU'U BEACH

Lifeguards are present at the beach every day of the week between between 08:30 am and 5:00 pm. You can find space for parking, a picnic area and restroom facilities at the beach, as well as an outdoor shower in the beach area.



□ Punalu'u is a good place for swimming, taking in the sun and snorkeling (turtles!)

DIRECTIONS TO PUNALU'U BEACH:

Punalu'u beach is just off highway 11 between Volcano Village (31 miles) and the town of Naalehu (10 miles).

The beach is easily accessible from the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, and is one of our recommended activities while spending time in Volcano. To get to Punalu'u from Volcano Village, take Hwy 11 towards Kona, and turn *Ma Kai* (towards to ocean) between mile marker 56 and 57 on Alanui Road. If you pass Whittington Beach Park, you have driven to far.

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