

## The Story Of Honolulu Airport's Reef Runway

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PUBLISHED DEC 1, 2022

The Reef Runway allowed Honolulu International Airport to expand substantially.

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Honolulu International Airport (also known as Daniel K. Inouye International Airport) is the main airport serving the state of Hawaii. It is located on the island of Oahu and is served by many American and international airlines. Its unique geographical location has meant that this airport has been the site for many revolutionary innovations. One of which is its famous reef runway.

## Runways at HNL

The Reef Runway is one of six runways at Honolulu International (HNL). There are four asphalt runways, including the shorter runways of 04L/22R and 04R/22L, as well as the 12,000-foot or 3,600-m asphalt runways designated as 08L/26R and 08R/26L. The other two runways are used exclusively for seaplanes as they are water runways designated as 04W/22W and 08W/26W.

## History of the Reef Runway

By the mid-century, Hawaii experienced a huge increase in the number of tourists due to airlines increasing their frequencies and route network to the state. By 1969, most major airlines served the state of Hawaii, including American Airlines, United Airlines, Pan Am, Braniff, TWA and Continental.

As a result, Honolulu International Airport began planning for a new Reef Runway in the 1960s to cope with this increase in demand. However, it took nearly a decade before the runway was completed in 1977. This project cost about \$35 million, of which half came from the Federal Government under the 1970 Airport and Airway Development Act.



Photo: Glenn Cando via Wikimedia Commons.

The Reef Runway was the world's first major runway to be constructed entirely offshore. During NASA's Space Shuttle operations, the runway was designated as a backup alternate landing strip for the Space Shuttle.

Why was the Reef Runway built?

The Reef Runway was built for two main reasons. The first of which was predominantly economical - an increase in airport capacity would lead to more tourists. In addition to tourists coming from the mainland, Hawaii also saw a tourism boom from Japan and other countries in the region. This effort was certainly a significant investment initially, but it gave Hawaii the resources to expand its tourism sector, which is still its largest industry, representing a quarter of the economy.



The second reason was to reduce the amount of noise pollution. While the government wanted to increase the number of visitors, it was also concerned about the local population. Building the runway entirely offshore had the advantage of the aircraft descending almost completely away from a major population center.

While noise pollution is certainly a major consideration for governments from around the world, the environmental impact of the reef runway would be too immense nowadays that no government would truly be able to approve such a project. Thanks to technological innovation, modern aircraft tend to be much quieter, therefore reducing the need for an offshore runway. Nevertheless, some major airports, such as Kansai International Airport (KIX) serving Osaka and Kobe, have been built on manmade islands due to insufficient space.

The bottom line

The construction of this revolutionary runway project paved the way for the expansion of tourism in Hawaii. Without such a runway, it would have been much more difficult to visit Hawaii, given the lower airport capacity.

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(62 Articles Published)