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View of Cape Kumukahi Lighthouse
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The wild and rugged Big Island of Hawaii is filled with many exciting things to do in incredible landscapes, from exploring Volcanoes National Park to ziplining through rainforests and chasing waterfalls. However, for a truly remote adventure, head to the Hawaiian archipelago's easternmost point, Cape Kumukahi, home to a historic steel lighthouse and black-sand beaches. Kumukahi, which means "source of origin" in the Hawaiian language, is a sacred place to the Hawaiians because it is where the sun first rises on the islands.

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Cape Kumukahi Light was constructed in 1934 as the first beacon of light seen by ships traversing the Pacific Ocean to reach Hawaii. The far-flung point is particularly vulnerable to the natural Hawaiian elements. In 1960, a series of earthquakes resulting in major lava flows nearly destroyed the lighthouse, and a second major flow in 2018 turned the rocky coastline into a sandy beach, now referred to as Lighthouse Beach. Today, this remote, easternmost cape can only be explored on foot. The lighthouse and beach are a 2-mile trek each way, but active travelers will be rewarded with a pristine shoreline and endless ocean views.

Cape Kumukahi is about an hour's drive from the international airport in Hilo, an affordable city that may be Hawaii's most underrated for a crowd-free vacation. From Kona International Airport, on the island's western coast, it is an over two-hour drive on Saddle Road. However, those planning the drive should know that this iconic, gorgeous road trip route is considered one of Hawaii's most dangerous. The best time to make the 4-mile round-trip hike to Cape Kumukahi is during the dry, summer months.

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Visit Cape Kumukahi And Its Historic Lighthouse

View of the trail at Cape Kumukahi along the coast
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While Punaluʻu Black Sand Beach is Hawaii's most famous black sand beach (and a sea turtle sanctuary!), it can also get very crowded. A short drive from the beach is Nāʻālehu, America's southernmost town. From there, active travelers can grab lunch or supplies and then head due east to another extremity, Cape Kumukahi. Where 132 (the road leading from Nāʻālehu) and 137 (the highway to Hilo) meet, there is a small parking area. Since the 2018 lava flow, the vehicle road to the Cape Kumukahi Lighthouse was damaged and is currently under construction. So, from there, you must go on foot for about 2 miles until you reach Cape Kumukahi and the adjacent Lighthouse Beach.

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5 Awesome Beaches on Hawaii’s Big Island

Here, the air is considered special as it has traveled over the ocean to reach this land for the first time. "Make sure you go to Cape Kumukahi & Lighthouse in Puna," wrote a Tripadvisor reviewer. "Air here is considered as pristine as any in the world [...]. We sat and took deep breaths of that air for sure, seeing that we live in Los Angeles!!" While some may have visions of a classic historic lighthouse, Cape Kumukahi Light is a 125-foot-high white skeleton tower with a light atop it. Visitors can only observe it from the ground, and climbing is forbidden. After seeing the lighthouse, keep heading along the coastline to Lighthouse Beach. Make sure to bring sturdy shoes, water, sunblock, and a hat, as there is no shade on this part of the island.

See The Black-Sand Lighthouse Beach And Pahoa

A black-sand beach near Pahoa
© Niko Natsuki/Shutterstock

In the shadow of Cape Kumukahi Lighthouse, Lighthouse Beach sweeps about a third of a mile. This stunning and unspoiled black sand beach was created by the 2018 lava flow and is a unique crescent on this otherwise rocky and jagged coast. The surf here is strong, so swimming in the ocean is not recommended, and there are no lifeguards or public facilities. After the 2018 lava flow, much of this part of the coast was destroyed, and a visit here reminds one of Hawaii's two most powerful elemental forces: lava and ocean.

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After you've finished your hike and returned to your car, drive to the nearby town of Pahoa. This charming community's Victorian-style architecture still reflects Hawaii of bygone days, and the town has a selection of great eateries. Stop for a meal at local favorite Kaleo's Bar and Grill for delicious Hawaiian fare, such as guava-glazed BBQ pork ribs, coconut shrimp, or the fresh catch of the day. Just down the road from Kaleo's, you can learn more about the recent eruption that transformed the entire landscape of Hawaii's southeastern coast at the Pahoa Lava Zone Museum, open from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily.

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