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The 8-mile hole in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park that no one can explain

'It's very large, and very deep, and I wouldn't go alone'



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Hawaii Volcanoes National Park has an 8-mile-long fissure in the earth. They call it "
Courtesy of Volcano Hideaways



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By **Ashley Harrell**, *National Parks*
Oct 13, 2026



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Listen Now:

Unraveling the mystery of Hawaii's Great Crack

About 13 Minutes

1x

“Have you ever been to the Great Crack?”

The first time I asked this at the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park visitor center, I already suspected that it might be the beginning of a wild adventure. But I never could have imagined how many more times I would need to repeat that absurd-sounding question.

A few weeks prior, SFGATE Hawaii contributing editor Christine Hitt had

... ..

 Great Crack, an 8-mile fissure across a remote region of the Big Island’s upcoming trip to the park, she wanted me to hike there and write a story

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It wasn't hard to confirm the crack's existence. The words "Great Crack" were clearly labeled on the map I was given by a park employee at the entrance. It is within the Kilauea volcano's southwest rift zone not far from a state highway, but no established trail accesses it. I had also read on a park webpage that the crack measures up to 50 feet across and plunges 66 feet down into the earth, although there wasn't much more information.



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Ohia lehua branches appear to rise directly out of the jet-black ground.

Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

At the visitor center, the park volunteer I asked about the crack shook her head. "I'm not familiar with that term," she said, and then handed me off to another volunteer. He had seen pictures, he said, but had never been and "didn't want to advise anybody about it."

"It's very large, and very deep, and I wouldn't go alone," he said, and then suggested asking about it at the backcountry permit office down the road. That didn't help.

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The Great Crack in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is an 8-mile-long fissure in the earth, but other features of the crack extend for 10 more miles.

Map via NPS/Illustration by SFGATE

"None of us have been there," a ranger at the permit office told me.

"I've not heard many people even talk about it," another employee chimed in.
Have you Googled it?"

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The employee then Googled
campsite?" she asked. I said I

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park. "Is this for, like, a

But with every clueless person I spoke with, my curiosity deepened.

How could an 8-mile gash through a national park famous for its geologic features be a mystery to every
employee I spoke with? I was determined to find out — and to find that crack.

What is the Great Crack?

If you are imagining the Great Crack as one clean break in the earth, stop it, because the crack is actually an
extensive network of fractures, fissures and volcanic cones. And while the main fissure measures 8 miles long,
the other features of the crack extend for 10 more. In online photos, some areas of the crack make it appear that
the walls could fit together like pieces in a puzzle, suggesting that the ground was ripped apart by some
unthinkably violent force.

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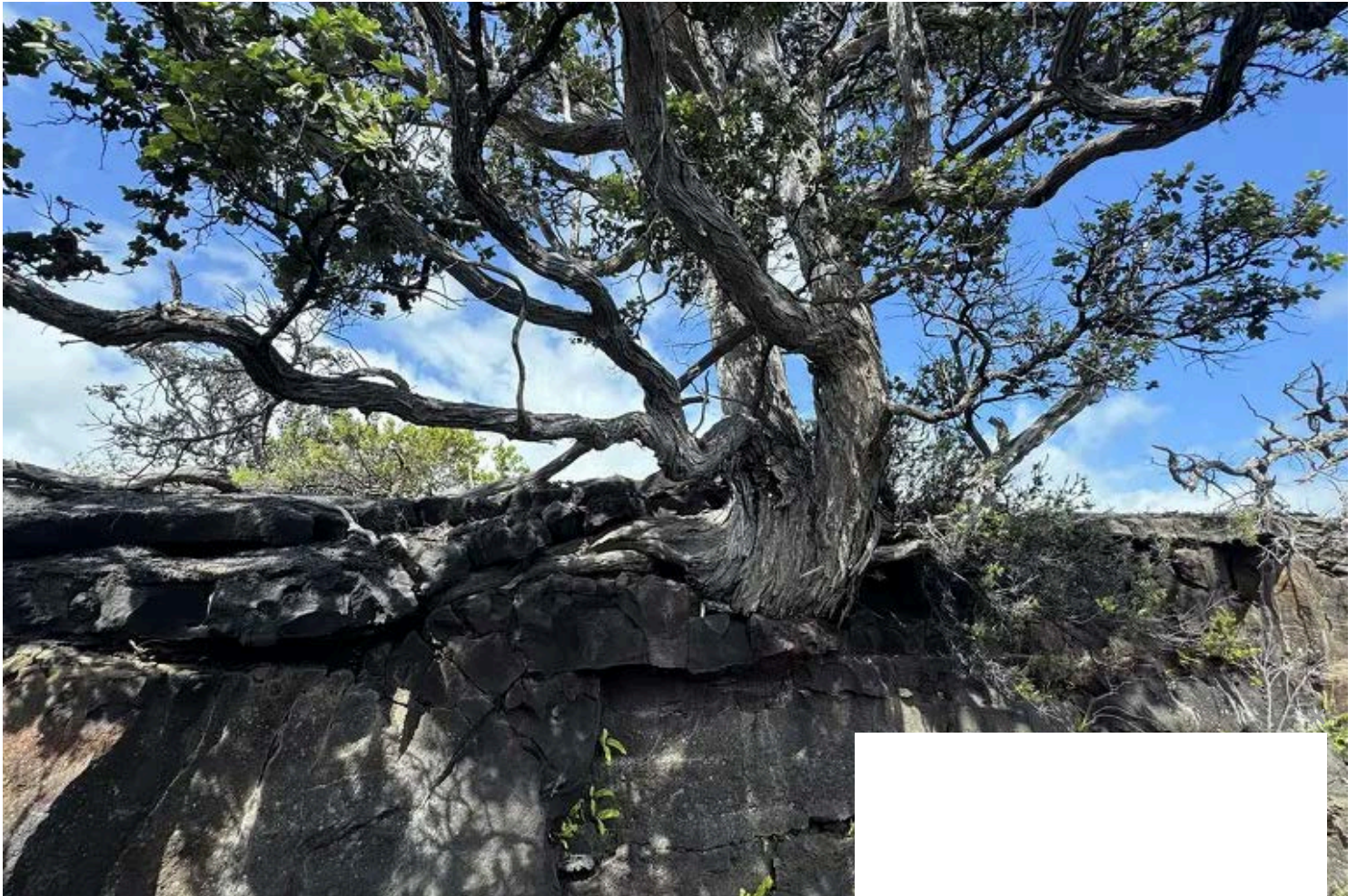


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An oohia lehua tree extends skyward from within Hawaii's Great Crack.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

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Scientists believe volcanic forces created the Great Crack, but nobody knows for sure how or when it formed.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park is home to two of the most active volcanoes on the planet, making the landscape a constant flux of molten magma and freshly created land. And while scientists believe magma moved into the southwest rift zone, causing the ground to pull apart and create the Great Crack, nobody knows for sure when it formed. Nobody knows what lies beneath it. And perhaps most disturbingly, no one knows what prompted it to spew unusually fast-moving lava that destroyed a village during an 1823 eruption — or if it might again.

The 1823 eruption, known as the Keaiwa eruption, released lava at one of the highest discharge rates thought to have ever occurred in Hawaii or anywhere else. That lava surged across the landscape at an estimated 25 mph, traveling 6 miles to the ocean and destroying a small coastal settlement at Mahuka Bay.

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The more I learned about the Great Crack, the more I wondered if it was off the tourist radar because it could be dangerous. But as it turned out, that was only part of the story.

‘An outstanding, amazing place’

The day after my unsuccessful drop-ins at the visitor center and permit office, I had a chance encounter outside the park with a local scientist. He hadn’t been to the Great Crack, he told me, but he knew a former national park employee named Jay Robinson who had repeatedly offered to take him there. As I took down the man’s phone number, the hair on my arms stood up. Finally! Some evidence that getting to the crack was possible.

Robinson was exactly the right person to call. Upon hearing that I wanted to visit the crack but hadn’t found anyone who could explain how, he perked up with some encouraging advice. “It’s just that people are crazy and don’t use trails to just go exploring,” he told me. “It’s an outstanding, amazing place.”

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Robinson worked for the National Park Service for more than three decades, holding jobs at nine parks, including one as a backcountry ranger in Alaska's Gates of the Arctic. He started at Hawaii Volcanoes in 1992 as a supervisor of front-line rangers and later became the park's media and exhibit specialist, designing trail guides and interpretive displays. Since he left the Park Service in 2018, he's been leading tours for Kilauea EcoGuides.



Some areas of Hawaii's Great Crack have walls that appear to fit together like pieces.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

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National Park Service staff survey the coastline near Hawaii's Great Crack.
NPS/Janice Wei

There were a couple of sections of the Great Crack that he used to visit, Robinson told me, and one looked around 100 feet deep but was partially filled with rubble. He would sometimes reach the crack by traveling along old sugar cane and macadamia farm roads, and then entering the park through a gate that has since been locked. The Park Service bought the 1,951-acre parcel containing the Great Crack in 2018 in part to prevent the development of a resort that would have promoted the fissure as an attraction, Robinson told me, but also to protect the area's archaeological resources.

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Although no cultural resource
traveled through and resided

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Hawaiians are known to have

Soon after the purchase, a fl ssable even in a four-wheel-
drive vehicle. Although the Park Service has long talked about making the Great Crack more accessible to
visitors, Robinson isn't holding his breath for a trail or any other development of the remote geologic wonder.

There is, however, another way to get there. It's a "crazy, wild-haired thing to do," Robinson told me, by beginning
on the Kau Desert Trail and then hiking off-trail toward the crack. It would take six hours each way, he estimated,
and require a backcountry permit for an overnight stay. Robinson had hiked in that area, but he had not
personally gone all the way to the crack.

Although open desert lava fields do not feel especially dangerous to Robinson, he acknowledged the hazards.
The terrain can be disorienting, he said, and visitors must carry adequate water, navigate carefully and watch
where they step. Volcanic fumes are another concern during Kilauea's ongoing summit eruptions, along with
"Pele's hair" — delicate strands of volcanic glass — that can lodge in the eyes or lungs.

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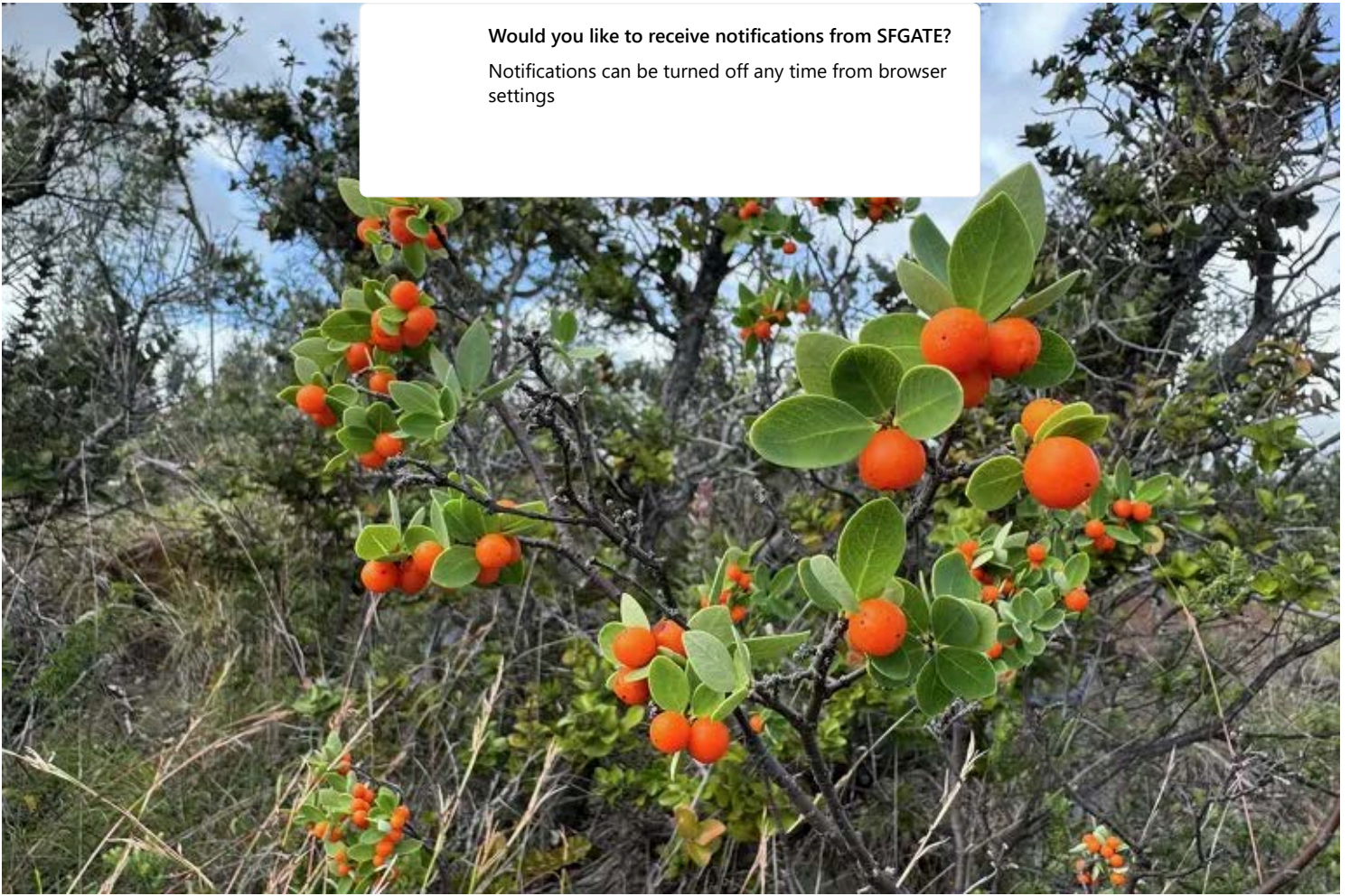
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Tropical flowers line the path to the Great Crack.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

I felt up for those challenges, but other obstacles had arisen: I didn't have the time — or the gear — for an overnight hike. And just like that, the Great Crack again seemed out of reach.

A shortcut to the Great Crack?

When I reported the unfortunate news to my travel partner, he was as disappointed as I was. We had been determined to journey to the Great Crack. But then he suggested something embarrassingly obvious: Why not see what hikes to the crack might exist on AllTrails?

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With no trouble whatsoever, we
deemed it “great” for hiking a

much shorter route. The app
people while exploring.”

The next morning, we drove to the start point, which is not part of an official trail. And because access is complicated, SFGATE is not publishing exact directions. What should be said, though, is that this route is not for everyone. Some parts are overgrown, there’s no actual trail, and it’s very easy to get lost — wayfinding without offline GPS would be nearly impossible.

Within a few minutes of setting out, we were bushwhacking through cane grass that reached above our heads. After battling our way through a couple of thick patches, we noticed passages flattened by previous hikers and opted to follow those instead.

Beyond the tall grass, the landscape opened into eerily quiet lava fields dotted with shrubs and wildflowers. Cairns began to appear here and there, guiding us across sections of potentially unstable volcanic rock, while yellow jackets buzzed overhead and golden strands of Pele’s hair glinted underfoot.

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Cairns help hikers find their way to the Great Crack in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

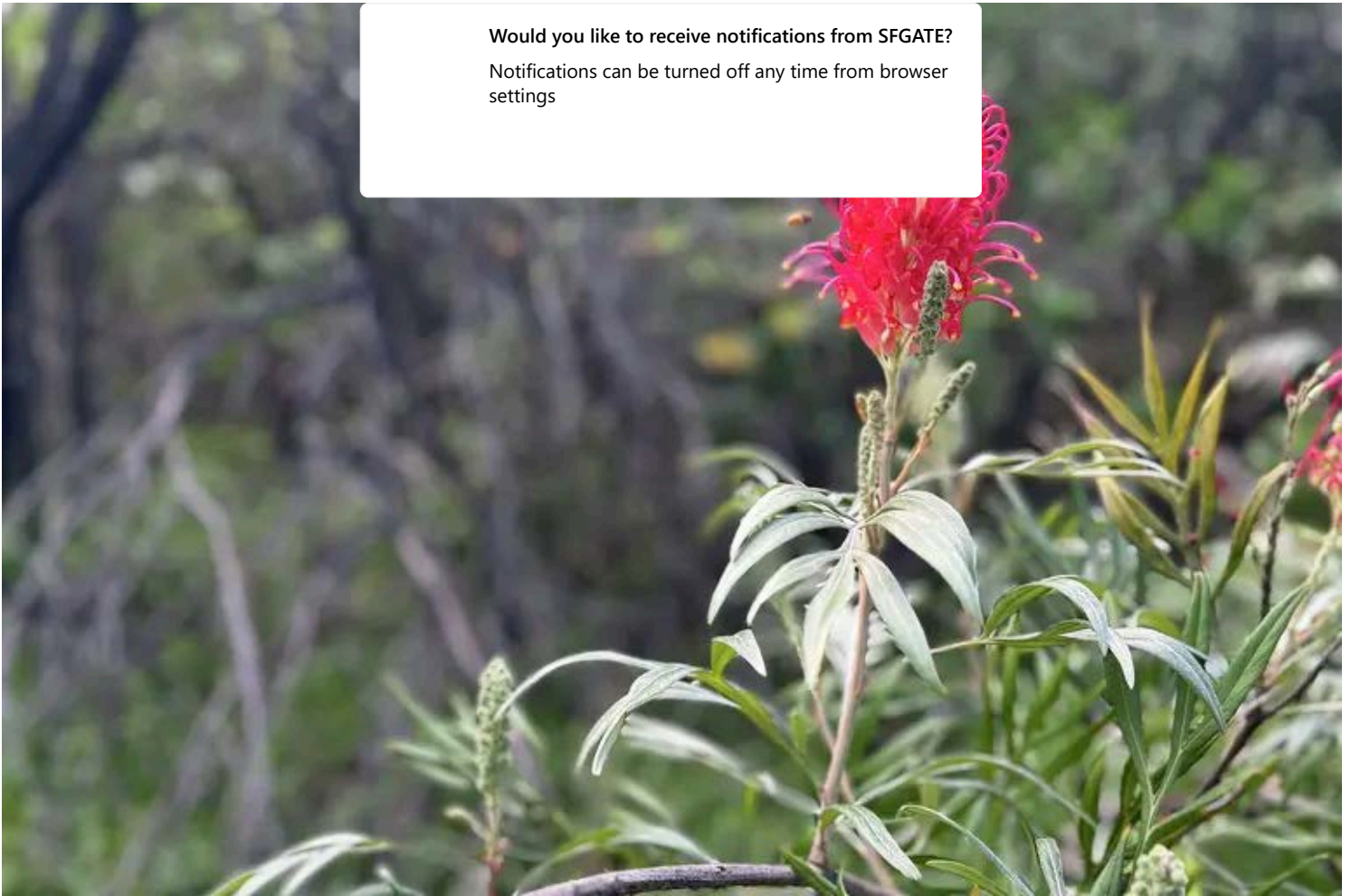
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Tropical flowers line the path to the Great Crack.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

The jagged coastline became visible to the south, and Mauna Loa, the most massive active volcano on Earth, towered behind us. After just over an hour of walking, I looked down at my phone's offline map and saw that the Great Crack should be directly ahead. Looking back up, I noticed a curious row of electric green ohia lehua branches appearing to rise directly out of the jet-black ground.

I couldn't contain my excitement. I broke into a run. And as the void beneath the branches came into view, I felt like a real-life Indiana Jones closing in on the Holy Grail. Our prize, however, would be an opening to hell. The closer we got, the farther we could see into the abyss.

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Like a massive unstitched wall in two directions, with twisted trees

it was astonishing to stand on the edge, peering down into this dark chasm.

ing lava fields in both directions. I learned a lot about the Great Crack,

We explored the crack for what felt like both an eternity and no time at all. In some areas that seemed stable enough, we descended over basalt formations and peered through holes between them, trying unsuccessfully to glimpse a bottom. I also had an eye out for animal bones, which I knew were sometimes discovered within the crack, but instead found only copious ferns and shrubs poking through the crevices.

We rock-hopped across the crack at a narrow point and climbed up to trace the contours of the opposite side. Just beyond it, a mysterious fence extended in either direction, parallel to the crack. We tried photographing the most dramatic spots but agreed that the scale was impossible to capture: By far the most impressive images would be from above.



The author stands before Hawaii's Great Crack.
Jonah Page/Special to SFGATE

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A hiker approaches the Great Crack in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

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A mysterious fence stands near the Great Crack in Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

As we started back, I reflected on the strange dichotomy of the Great Crack. It is massive, otherworldly and awe-inspiring, and yet, unlike most other national park sites of its caliber, there is no official trail, no sign announcing its existence, no infrastructure framing the experience.

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I didn't know this at the time, but upon looking more closely at a map we route did not appear legitimate, either.

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The trail vanishes

The path had seemingly taken me to a dead-end. I saw a no trespassing sign or anything to indicate that the trail was private. I was alone, and I was an individual.

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tional park, and while I never saw a no trespassing sign or anything to indicate that the trail was private, it is leased by a private

“The park does not recommend using that route because it crosses private property and is not an official park access point,” park spokesperson Jessica Ferracane later told me by email. “Visitors should respect property boundaries and use only authorized routes.”

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By authorized routes, she meant the long way through the Kau Desert that Robinson had mentioned. But she didn’t really recommend that either.

“The park does not actively encourage hiking to the Great Crack because of the difficult conditions,” she said, later adding: “The route follows a rough, unmaintained former four wheel drive road rather than an established trail. Visitors should understand that there is no shade, no drinking water, no restrooms, and no other services in the area.”

When I contacted AllTrails with questions about the route, the company removed it from the app. (And it wasn’t the first time it has deleted an illegitimate trail flagged by SFGATE.)

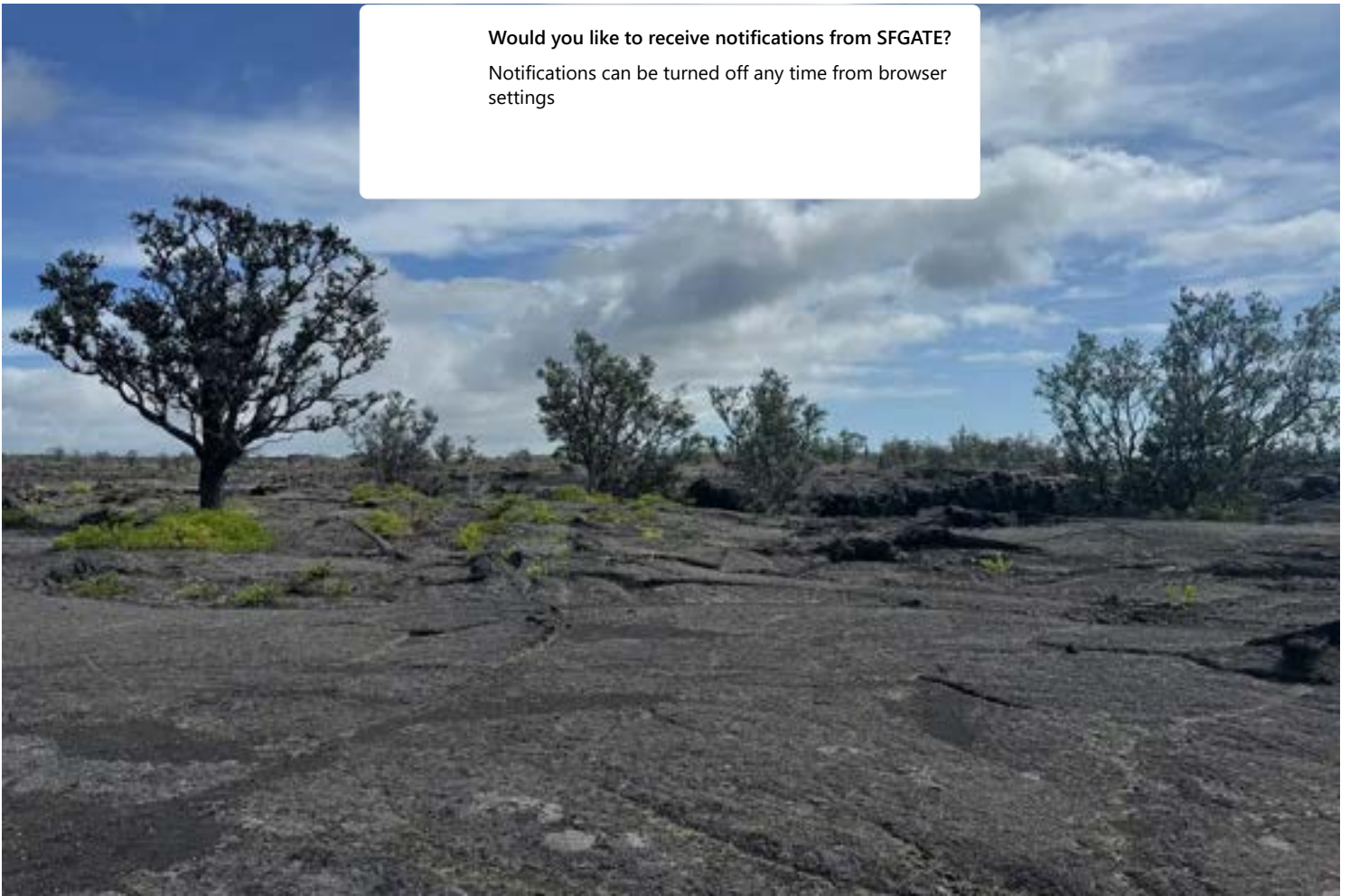
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Trees emerge from Hawaii's Great Crack.
Ashley Harrell/SFGATE

"Our review indicates that this route enters state-owned land that is currently leased to an individual," Juliana Ead, AllTrails director of communications, wrote in an email. "While the exact legal designation is nuanced, we have not been able to confirm that this is an authorized public access route, so we're treating the area as off-limits for now."

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AllTrails would continue review as AllTrails partners with the tools to review and update tr

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rk land managers, Ead added, that gives land managers

Curious to know how often AllTrails hikers had been trespassing via the shorter trail, I called the man who leases the land and told him about this story. He declined to comment, making yet another person who didn't want to talk about the geologic wonder.

Got a tip? Send us the scoop.

DO IT NOW

Looking back on my convoluted quest to reach the crack, I decided that its true greatness isn't really about how it looked. It was the mysteries humans had created around it — and the spirit of adventure that a visit had required — that made it irresistible.

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Leaving the crack, I turned around for one last look, and all I could see were trees and lava fields. The 8-mile gash in the earth had disappeared once again and looked like nothing at all.

Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.

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Oct 13, 2026



Ashley Harrell
NATIONAL PARKS BUREAU CHIEF



Ashley Harrell is the national parks bureau chief at SFGATE, where she's worked since 2020. She recently co-authored the National Geographic book "[100 Beaches of a Lifetime: The World's Ultimate Shorelines](#)," and has reported from 17 countries, working on [more than 50 travel guidebooks](#). Her [story](#) about human-turtle conflict on Hawaii's Poipu Beach won gold in the environmental and sustainable tourism category of the Lowell Thomas Awards in 2024. Send story tips or comments to ashley.harrell@sfgate.com.

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