

Mauna Kea Beach, Hawaii

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The burly Polynesian man at Mauna Kea Beach Resort's entrance turns us away. "Sorry, no public parking places left." Undaunted, we follow our guidebook's advice, drive to Hapuna, the next beach south of us. We park our car and find an angel who gives us directions to the dirt path to Mauna Kea, the most beautiful white sand beach on the Big Island.

Wearing sandals and armed with beach umbrellas, snorkel masks, flippers, towels, and hope, we find the path going up a hillside. Soon the trail becomes rough and uneven, surrounded by scrub brush. We sidestep down sunny steep hillsides, sliding on pebbles. Our cumbersome baggage slows us. We're on our own *El Camino Primitivo*, a private pilgrimage.

My partner holds out his hand to help me down a vertical drop. A half hour later, two hikers approach us. I ask, "How much farther?" One smiles and says, "You're almost there, and the going gets easier." A sense of relief shoots through me. A small flock of chattering birds begins to guide us, flying just ahead, landing in small trees. Soon we are out of the hot sun's glare.

The path levels out. Around a bend, the top curve of the crescent beach appears like a mirage. The trail gently drops down, and we arrive. Our feet sink into the gritty, warm white sand. We find a place on the gorgeous beach to plant our pink, yellow, and blue-striped umbrellas. My partner plops down on a towel in circular shadows.

I sprint to the ocean, fling myself into the embrace of gentle waves, am baptized by soft water's balm. It's like lotion. The hard journey has slipped away. One with the ocean, I swim with sea turtles.