

As the snow begins to melt, the summit of Mauna Kea becomes a land of many contrasts.



out at night for visitors. They also sell warmies (for those who came in shorts) and brake fluid (for brake-riders coming down the mountain), as well as water and some snacks like freeze-dried ice cream (really weird). They have some “interpreters,” but they must spend a lot of time alone, because often when we try to get information out of them it’s like interrogating a Klingon POW. There are restrooms available (the best in this region). About 50 people live up here (tending the ‘scopes) and they have to bring their water in several times a week by truck.

While driving up this part of Mauna Kea Road, watch out for mindless, wayward cows occasionally wandering onto the road.

After the Visitor Center the road is unpaved for 5 miles before it becomes paved again for the last 3/10 miles. You are allowed access to the top of the mountain in any vehicle. 4WD is what astronomers are *hoping* you’re driving because it causes less road wear, but countless regular cars drive it anyway. 4WD is also nice because the unpaved portion of the somewhat steep road coming down can get a bit slippery at times, especially

when wet. 4WD vehicles usually have a gear low enough to obviate this situation. We’ve found, however, that 4WD vehicles seem to fishtail *going up* more than 2WD cars do. The road is a bit washboardy and they’ll often close it for a short time after a snow until they can plow it. (Finding a good snowplow repair-man in Hawai’i must be about as easy as finding a good surfboard shaper in Anchorage, Alaska.)

If you don’t want to drive it, several companies will pick you up on the west side and take you to the summit for sunset, then come down a bit for some stargazing and hot chocolate sipping. They’ll provide warm coats for you, and the total time is 7½ hours. See STARGAZING on page 222 for more.

Those who *really* want a challenge can opt to hike the trail from the Visitor Center to the top. (See map.) It’s 15 miles round trip and a *very* tough day hike, even for the fittest. You need a very early start and should take precautions mentioned in the hiking section. Expect blinding headaches, extreme nausea and bewildered looks from anyone who ever finds out that you did it.

If you drive up, drink *plenty* of water before, during and after, as dehydration is a severe problem at that altitude. Children, pregnant women and those with respiratory problems should avoid the summit. Try to avoid soft drinks and (how do I put this delicately?) foods that produce gas. (You figure it out.) Bring a can of unopened Pringles with you and watch how they explode when you open them up top. And consider chewing gum on the way down to help with your ears. Don’t come up here within 24 hours of a SCUBA dive. As far as your nitrogen is concerned, you’re flying. Altitude sickness can strike anyone, causing weakness, dizziness and nausea. Some claim that ibuprofen *before* the trip will help this, similar to the way aspirin is said to forestall hangovers, but we won’t swear by it. (Well, we’ll swear to the *hangover* part.) Go slow and don’t exert yourself too much. Acclimating for a half hour or so at the 9,200-foot visitor center can help.

Then there’s the cold. Between November and April, snow is not uncommon. Even summertime brings the occasional freak snowstorm. During the rest of the year, it’s often bone-chilling up there. Dress warm. (*Like you packed your parka for your Hawaiian vacation!*) The wind can be exceptionally fierce. It’s often warm and calm up there, but you shouldn’t *count* on it being this way. During the winter, you can snow ski short distances. See SNOW SKIING in ACTIVITIES. When it snows, local residents often rush up the mountain to frolic. We’ve seen people dashing down the hill below the summit on every conceivable mode of transportation: skis, snowboards, sleds, boogie boards, surfboards, tarps—we’ve even seen people sliding down in *ocean kayaks*, complete with paddles!

According to King Kalakaua, the Hawaiians had their own version of the Ironman Triathlon. Here, the objective was to climb Mauna Kea during the winter, grab all the snow you could carry, bolt back down the mountain, and run all the way to the ocean. If you had enough snow for a snowball, you won. (If you didn’t, you probably grabbed the winner’s snowball and stuck it in his pants.) Ironically, this is still done. Only today people bring the snow back in pickup beds and throw a party when they get home. This may be the only place in the world where you can experience snow less than 30 miles from an 85° tropical resort area.

On your way down, a couple of miles below the Visitor Center, you *may* (clouds permitting) see the smoldering Pu’u ‘O’o cone at Kilauea Volcano 30 miles to the southeast. Without question, the best views from Mauna Kea are while coming down, not going up.

MAUNA LOA

Across the saddle from Mauna Kea is the more active Mauna Loa (long mountain). This is the most difficult volcano summit on the island to access. You’ve got two choices, and both are a *buggah*. (See HIKING.) However, off Saddle Road a quarter mile east of the road up Mauna Kea, there is a narrow, paved road leading 17¼ miles up to the **Mauna Loa Weather Observatory**, just above the 11,000-foot level. From there the view across the saddle to Mauna Kea is stunning, especially if there is snow on top. Otherwise, Mauna Loa Observatory Road offers little for you. Created in 1958, the observatory has the longest record of direct measurement of CO₂ in the world, and their findings are universally cited by climatologists to bolster