

The Marathons of Hawaii

Each island's top marathon is unique.

BY DAWNA L. ROBERTSON

More than likely, the first images popping into mind when you hear the word “Hawaii” are swaying palms, turquoise-blue ocean, and golden beaches bathed by gentle waves. All that postcard-perfect scenery aside, the tropical-island state is turning distance runners’ heads these days with its multi-island marathon menu.

If you’ve ever been to Hawaii, you’re well aware that each island is a unique destination. And even each side of individual islands has its own distinctive geography, climate, and personality.

It’s the same with Hawaii’s marathons. Each is a completely different animal, from running in tranquility between the stunning Pacific and deeply etched valleys of West Maui to hoofing it through action-packed Waikiki with legions of spectators cheering you on.

Aside from natural aesthetics, the beauty of running a marathon in Hawaii is that you can bring your support team members and be confident that they will be content. While you’re training or relaxing, they can explore the island, dive into recreation, and tap into cultural venues. And if they are shorter-distance runners, most marathons feature a half-marathon option.

These USATF-certified distance events also draw in elite runners who put some serious plotting power into which races they will enter. So especially with the Honolulu Marathon, don’t expect Hawaii’s remoteness to eliminate elite competition.

When I speak with race directors of Hawaii’s top five marathons, a few rules of the road ring out loud and clear across the board. These guys are gurus on their course layouts, local conditions, and the toll they put on distance athletes.

First and foremost is to respect the tropical weather. Each race director advises that you register early since some fields max out quickly. They also suggest that

you book flights and accommodations as soon as you register and to book in an area where the race actually is. You won't want to stay on Oahu's North Shore when the Honolulu Marathon takes off at 5:00 A.M. on the island's southern coast.

Try to schedule your arrival as early as possible prior to the event to acclimate to the temperature and humidity that are likely much higher than at home. They also recommend that you wear a cap or visor, slather on the sunscreen, refuel with gels, hydrate, hydrate, and hydrate even more.

Having run the Honolulu Marathon for 18 consecutive years, I decided to bolster my running resume by hitting roads less traveled in my personal marathon adventures.

Maui Marathon

Ancient Hawaiian legends tell of the demigod Maui lassoing the sun while standing at Haleakala Crater's summit. It seems that his mother grumbled that she never had enough hours of sunlight to finish her daily chores. So Maui's skillful feat made the sun move a bit slower across the sky, creating longer days.

Seems like the moon moves a bit slower across the island's sky as well. As I finish a short run several days prior to the Maui Marathon, *hina* (moon) is still visible at 8:15 A.M. over the channel between the islands of Lanai and Molokai. Good thing the race begins in darkness at 5:30 A.M. At 8:15, it's already a scorcher.

Recognized as one of the most scenic courses in the world with its point-to-point route starting at Queen Kaahumanu Center in Kahului and ending at Whaler's Village in Kaanapali Beach Resort, the Maui Marathon is celebrated for its 17-mile stretch hugging the spectacular Pacific coastline. Participants staying in Kaanapali catch buses between 3:30 and 4:15 A.M. for transport to the starting line.



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“One of our biggest draws is scenery,” says Rudy Huber, executive director. “Runners have a chance to view dolphins spinning, offshore islands, and beautiful ocean. When you walk away with a great memory, we’ve done our job.”

The 2011 event saw the launch of the Warrior Challenge that provides special recognition for those participating in either the half- or full marathon, Maui Tacos 5K Run/Walk, and Run Forrest Run Front Street Mile Race. Among these is Ada Wong, finalist from NBC’s *The Biggest Loser* in season 11.

Kukini (swift messengers) were an elite class of men selected by *alii* (Hawaiian royalty) to undergo strenuous physical and mental training to become swift foot runners. They carried messages between *alii* living in different locations and competed as athletes in ancient footracing games. The Maui Marathon’s Warrior Challenge was introduced to pay homage to these superb athletes.

Billy Connor, a local resident who tackled his 35th consecutive Maui Marathon in 2011, advises runners not to shoot for a PR. “With the tropical heat, humidity, and sun, that’s tough,” he says. “But definitely learn to *shaka* (do the hang loose hand signal), since spectators do this a lot to encourage runners.”

As is typical of many of Hawaii’s gatherings, the prelude is marked with a fireknife dance and Hawaiian blessing followed by a conch-shell blowing. Then it’s off to the races, with the first 1.5 miles heading out on flat residential streets before turning onto Kuihelani Highway. Through the darkness, the moonlit radiance off the silvery sugarcane fields and the steady stream of runners lead us from Kahului toward the dreaded *pali* (cliff) upgrade.

At mile four, a gradual downhill and light tail winds encourage a quickened stride as dawn unfolds. But be careful not to get sucked into too fast a pace. Then somewhere around mile six—depending on your speed—you will see the sun rise

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slowly over 10,023-foot Haleakala Crater, where the demigod Maui mentioned earlier worked his magic. It's also here that we catch our first glimpse of the Pacific that makes for a pleasant backdrop for most of the balance of our jaunt.

"This is my favorite part of the course," says Matt Holton, a Maui resident and artist who placed third in the 2005 event at 2:48:49. "The section from Maalaea Harbor to Grandma's—the first flat beach section after the tunnel—is the most challenging part of the course with its hills. But views of the sun rising over Haleakala and dramatic coastline of the pali make this part very scenic."

Just past the 10K marker, we make our way onto coastal Honoapiilani Highway for our 17-mile oceanside adventure. It's a good thing this stretch is so scenic since it grows tougher from miles 8.5 to 12.5. That is where we enter the pali and hit rolling hills for four-plus miles, taking us to the race's peak elevation of 250 feet.

Around miles nine through 10.5, a left glance reveals Kihei and as far south as Wailea and Makena resorts. Off the coast is Molokini, an extinct volcanic crater rim that is among the most popular diving and snorkeling destinations in Hawaii. And farther offshore is uninhabited Kahoolawe, a former U.S. Navy bombing target now maintained by the federal government.

At mile 12.5, we hit Maui's only tunnel, where the course begins a downhill stretch to the midway point. We also come across *keiki* (children) hula dancers, one of several locations where they share the aloha spirit.

Continuing along Honoapiilani Highway, the next seven miles are flat as we run at sea level within 10 to 100 feet of the ocean. This stretch offers spectacular views of Lanai and Molokai, with trade winds typically cooling things down a bit. Lively entertainers, breathtaking views of the ocean and West Maui Mountains, and plenty of enthusiastic spectators along this stretch help boost motivation.

"If you're feeling good at this point, you can get into a nice tempo if your legs aren't burned out from the pali," says Holton. "A lot of people make



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the mistake of attacking the course too much in the beginning before they reach the pali. Even if you put a lot of energy into the pali, it's not going to help your time very much." Holton recommends that runners check out the course prior to the race, which happens naturally if you fly into Kahului Airport and are staying in Kaanapali.

Approaching mile 22, we turn onto Lahaina's Front Street, which is home to Maui's largest collection of restaurants, art galleries, and shops. This stretch is one of the warmest since buildings buffer the trades. But aid-station volunteers gladly hose us down.

At mile 24, we return to Honoapiilani Highway and head toward Kaanapali Beach Resort and the finish line at Whalers Village next to The Westin Maui Resort & Spa, the event's host hotel. Though there are other areas for your entourage to cheer you on, this is the place to be. They can snap photos of you finishing and receiving your lei with a finisher's medallion. Aside from grabbing a complimentary massage from volunteer therapists, many of us grab additional therapy by jumping in the ocean.

Breaking the tape first in their respective divisions among the 733 finishers in 2011 were Yutaka Fukuda at 2:51:20 and Nicole Chyr at 2:57:35.

Also check out the Maui Oceanfront Marathon held each January at www.mauioceanfrontmarathon.com.

What: Maui Marathon

When: September 16, 2012

Events: Marathon, half-marathon, Maui Tacos 5K Run/Walk, and Run Forrest Run Front Street Mile Race

Course record: 2:19:50

Website: www.mauimarathonhawaii.com

Race executive director: Rudy Huber

Phone: 808/280-5801

E-mail: info@mauimarathonhawaii.com

The Kauai Marathon

If you have ever been to Hawaii's "Island of Discovery," you know it as an incredibly laid-back escape where the aloha spirit genuinely thrives. So it makes sense that The Kauai Marathon would be an intimate, friendly event that takes in some of the island's most spectacular natural beauty.

Jeff Sacchini, the event's founder, envisioned bringing a world-class 26.2-miler to the island. He has done just that by creating full and half-marathon courses sharing a start and finish line, drawing in a handful of elite runners, and recruiting legendary megaendurance athlete Dean Karnazes and *Runner's World* icon Bart Yasso as the event's hosts.

At the expo in the Sheraton Kauai Resort, I have the pleasure of meeting both hosts and Tyler McCandless, a 2012 Olympic Marathon Trials qualifier.



McCandless tells me that training in Boulder, Colorado, he prepped for Kauai's heat and humidity by wearing full sweats. McCandless did everything right. He arrived five days prior to acclimatize to the heat and drove the course to scrutinize its demands. He sizes it up as one of the toughest and hilliest runs of his life—especially since there are such intense hills in the open sun.

Since the course is so difficult, race organizers offer \$15,000 prize money for competitors completing the marathon under 2:30:00. McCandless's game plan is to shoot for a negative split for a shot at the race's Speed Challenge.

He is up against a pair of elite runners from East Africa and defending champion Michael Wardian, who missed the Speed Challenge in 2010 by 52 seconds.

A Hawaiian *kahu* (priest) leads us to the starting line and delivers a chant requesting permission for us to visit the *aina* (land). I'm walking with Robbie "Red Hat" Wilson, one of two runners shooting for completion of their 400th lifetime marathon at Kauai's 2011 event.

Coming to Kauai from London, England, the 70-year-old knows the course is considered among the most challenging and beautiful in the world. He is drawing from his experience to help with hills that kick in after half-marathoners head back toward Poipu at mile 11.

From our 6:00 A.M. start, it's not long before we see hints of sunrise. It's slightly uphill for the first six miles and then steady for the next five. We're treated to a pleasant bit of sightseeing in this agriculturally rich region. Between miles two and three sits the old Koloa Sugar Mill, part of the first commercially successful sugar plantation in Hawaii.

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Then, from miles five to 6.5, just before the route becomes steadier, we travel through the 100-year-old Tree Tunnel. After making our way down Highway 50 and Omao Road, half-marathoners head back while full marathoners work through neighborhoods of Lawai and Kalaheo. And that is where the hills kick in.

The most grueling part hits us between miles 14.5 and 19.5, an especially rolling area where we face the infamous Puu Road Loop. For most, the best way to remove our minds from the strain is to let our eyes take in the scenery.

This is the point where those heading out too fast pay the price since the route lulls them into thinking the initial incline during the first half is as tough as it gets. We have to keep elevation changes in mind. Knowing what we're up against is a critical part of the game plan.

McCandless breaks the tape across from the Sheraton Kauai at 2:23:19. Despite the hills, humidity, and heat, he crushes the course record and wins the Speed Challenge. A bonus for half-marathoners is that they can see elite runners like McCandless cross the finish line and avoid those grueling hills.

Wardian comes in second at 2:26:19. With both beating the 2:30 mark, McCandless takes home \$8,750, while Wardian grabs \$6,250 for his efforts. The top female finisher is Rumi Otani of Iwaki City, Japan, with a course record of 3:10:07—25:07 behind the women's Speed Challenge time of 2:45:00.

"I did everything to prepare for this race," McCandless says. "Besides running a ton of miles, I did heat training, practiced hilly long runs without calories, studied the course, and mentally prepared for a challenging race. The feeling when I knew

I had accomplished my goal was unlike anything else—the ultimate runner’s high.”

McCandless adds that although it wasn’t his PR, it was the best racing experience he has ever had. “People I met only once throughout the week came out to cheer me on with homemade signs and their gracious aloha spirit,” he says.

Yasso praises the Kauai event for being well organized. “It’s a tough course,” he says. “They tell people right off that it’s hilly. They don’t try to dupe you. But if you have the right attitude and adjust early, you can have a great race.”

The 2011 races saw the largest numbers yet—some 1,723 participants representing 47 states, Washington, DC, and Guam, as well as 13 countries. Of that field, 424 ran the full marathon, with 345 finishing.

Honolulu Marathon

For anyone familiar with the Hawaiian Islands, it comes as no surprise that the Honolulu Marathon garners the largest field of Hawaii’s 26.2-milers. But what does surprise many is that a marathon on a Pacific island is among the largest globally, ranking with other biggies like New York, Chicago, London, and Boston.

In recent years, the field has hovered around 25,000 finishers. But registration was down to roughly 22,000 for 2011’s event, largely because Japanese entries declined following that country’s natural disasters in March 2011.

What: The Kauai Marathon

When: September 2, 2012

Events: Marathon, half-marathon, four-person marathon relay, and 3K fun run

Course record: 2:23:19

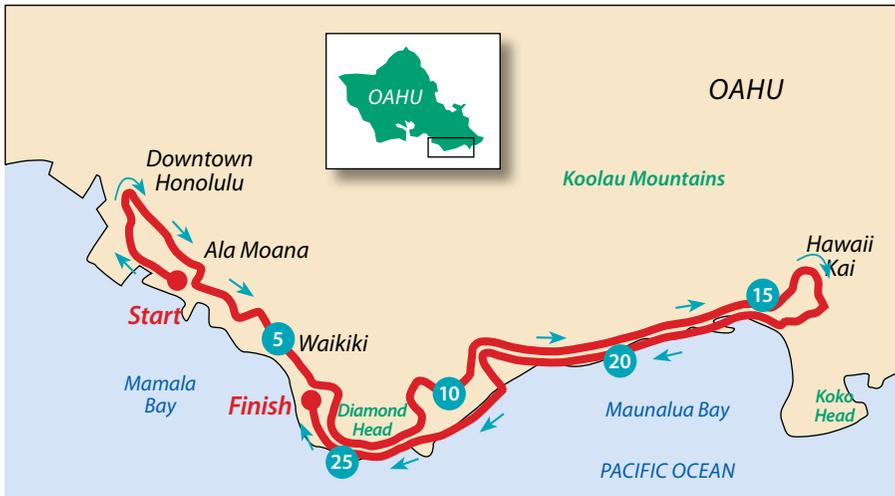
Website: www.thekauaimarathon.com

Race director: Bob Craver

E-mail: infothekauaimarathon@yahoo.com



© Honolulu Marathon



Unlike marathons of similar size and stature, Honolulu has no qualifying times, no registration limits, and no time restrictions for finishing. “What’s also unique is that it starts at 5:00 A.M.,” says Dr. Jim Barahal, race president. “So it’s like a night marathon part of the time. And with fireworks going off at the start, it’s almost like a Hollywood filming with the light in the pitch-black sky.”

Jonathan Lyau, the top *kamaaina* (local) division finisher 15 of 16 years between 1993 and 2009, advises to avoid going out too fast since it doesn’t feel so hot and humid at the early start. “That especially plays out here when you go onto Kalaniana’ole Highway just past mile 12 since you hit a head wind,” he says. “A lot of runners try to hold the pace and have nothing left when they’re coming back.”

By pacing ourselves through the Hawaii Kai Loop just past mile 15, we have the wind at our backs and can push more once we hit Kalaniana’ole again for the return, just as Lyau says.

This is one of those courses that is packed with eye candy as it meanders through cool Honolulu neighborhoods. From the start on Ala Moana Boulevard across from 100-acre Ala Moana Beach Park, we hear the boom of fireworks and watch the sky spectacle while shuffling toward downtown Honolulu. The pack is especially thick in the beginning. So unless you are near the front, it’s about patience and caution.

From mile one to two, the course runs along Honolulu Harbor past Aloha Tower, the landmark 10-story clock tower that was the tallest building in Hawaii when erected in 1926. We turn right into Chinatown, where spectators at Murphy’s Bar & Grill religiously cheer on runners who likely skipped out on pub action the previous night.

One of my favorite stretches is from mile three along downtown's South King Street that is ablaze with Christmas lights decorating the various city buildings. Intense gawking takes over, with the stretch passing stately Iolani Palace, the gilded statue of King Kamehameha, Kawaiahao Church, Honolulu City Hall, and Mission Houses Museum. The race forks right onto Kapiolani Boulevard and then turns right around mile 3.5 to hit Ala Moana near our starting line.

Hanging a left, we pass Ala Moana Center with its massive Santa Claus, the Waikiki Yacht Club, and Hilton Hawaiian Village before turning right on Kalakaua Avenue, where rambunctious fans cheer, wave signs, and take photos. What is exciting about this portion is how crowds provide such an energy rush, although I'm not overly tired since the route has been flat and the sun hasn't risen yet.

Mile 4.5 to 5.5 is much the same, with high-rise hotels and plenty of street action serving as diversions as we pass such iconic hotels as the Royal Hawaiian and Sheraton Moana Surfrider. At mile six, the course forks to the left onto Monsarrat Avenue and travels between the Honolulu Zoo and Kapiolani Park. This spot can be a bit of a letdown since I realize that I will be right back here for the finish, but it won't be for 20 miles.

Circling around the backside of the park, we approach Oahu's famous Diamond Head. If you are tight in a pack at this point, it's another time to be patient since the road becomes one lane out with one lane reserved for athletes heading back to the Kapiolani Park finish. The view from the peak of this Diamond Head Road uphill grade is absolutely stunning, spanning the Pacific and Oahu's eastern coastline.

Circling around the backside of Diamond Head near mile 8.5, we hit another gradual uphill stretch before weaving through the neighborhoods of Kaimuki and Kahala around mile 11. This area also draws ample spectators, so energy revs again. For me, it's a high before heading onto Kalaniana'ole Highway and into the head wind that is especially strong in 2011's race.

What diverts attention here is how the route splits, with outbound runners gaining inspiration from watching faster runners heading back toward the finish. And when you are returning, it's nice to see how many runners you are beating.

But again, this isn't a portion to push on the outbound. Just enjoy running through the bedroom communities of Wai'alae Iki, Aina Haina, and Niu Valley, where residents reliably come out to cheer.

Around mile 15.5, we take a left onto the Hawaii Kai Loop into a valley community created by and named for billionaire industrialist Henry J. Kaiser. "This is where I start thinking

What: Honolulu Marathon

When: December 9, 2012

Events: Marathon, wheelchair marathon, and 10K race-day walk

Course record: 2:11:12

Website: www.honolulumarathon.org

Marathon president: Dr. Jim Barahal

Phone: 808/734-7200

E-mail: info@honolulumarathon.org



about picking it up when I get out of the loop,” says Lyau. “I know the wind will be at my back and I can run stronger when I get back on Kalanianaʻole.”

Coming out of the loop around mile 17.5 is another mental rush since I know I’m returning as the course doubles back along the same highway stretch that takes us out to Hawaii Kai. As we pass Kawaikui and Wailupe beach parks, I look at the outbound runners and am extremely thankful that I’m where I am in my race.

We have that tail wind until around mile 22, where the course turns left onto Kealaolu Avenue and travels along Waialae Country Club that hosts the PGA’s Sony Open Hawaii golf tournament each January. At Kealaolu’s end, we turn right onto Kahala Avenue, a neighborhood of luxury homes fronting Kahala Beach and Black Point. Kahala Avenue becomes Diamond Head Road at mile 24. One of the things to avoid in this stretch is becoming overwhelmed by seeing the long, gentle uphill stretch to Triangle Park.

From the park, there is still a bit of a climb to a second 25-mph-speed-limit sign where I always literally say to myself, “It’s all downhill from here.” And it is, leveling off at sea level.

At the tip of Kapiolani Park, we fork onto Kalakaua Avenue for that home stretch, passing San Souci Beach and the Waikiki Aquarium. Both sides of Kalakaua are lined with fans all the way to the finish line at the Kapiolani Park Bandstand.

“This is my favorite part of the course,” says Lyau. “Coming down Kalakaua Avenue, the crowds get bigger and cheering gets louder. And you can actually finally see the finish line. I remember the first time I ran the Honolulu Marathon and how I felt at that point. And I still get the same feeling every time.”

I have to agree. It's such a rush to see the park packed with finishers and their supporters, and to have the Pacific right across the street for a quick splash is just icing on the cake.

Defending his title from 2010 was Kenya's Nicholas Chelimo at 2:14:55, with Ethiopia's Woynishet Girme taking top women's honors at 2:31:41. While the state is under a flash-flood warning, the rain holds off, and Chelimo trims 23 seconds off his 2010 time.

Dr. Barahal adds, "While other big-city marathons are great, there's the issue of what to do once you finish. In Honolulu, you can go across the street and jump into the ocean. It's very different than finishing on a street in a big city."

Also check out the North Shore Marathon-Hawaii held in April at <http://808racehawaii.com>.

Big Island International Marathon

With historic small-town charm, Hilo walks to a beat that is a contrast of culture and funk. In a time warp of sorts, Hawaii Island's capital feels like an old familiar friend—especially the quaint downtown area where repeat visitors expect things to be pretty much the same each time they come. And in Hilo's case, that is much of the charm.



Courtesy of Big Island International Marathon

One of the first things you notice about Hilo is how green it is. Let that be an indication that you are likely to run at least a portion of the Big Island International Marathon (BIIM) with precipitation. After all, the course travels through a rain forest.

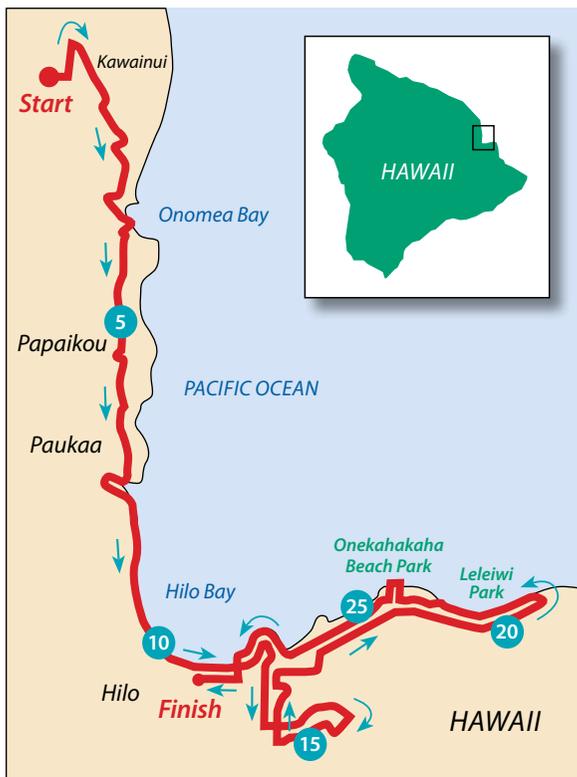
Billed as “A Run Along Old Hawaii,” this route cruises through rural communities and past sites you wouldn’t normally find if just visiting Hilo to sight-see. “My friend and I designed the course so people would say ‘wow,’” says Wayne “Big Dog” Joseph, executive director. “This race features some of the most beautiful natural scenery runners are likely to encounter at any major race anywhere in the world.”

Justin Gillette, who set the course record in 2011 with a 2:34:39, agrees. The pro warns that with the first half being so beautiful, the second half is tougher since you have been spoiled by earlier scenery. “Because Hilo is really humid and the course travels up and down past gulches and waterfalls through a rain forest, it can be really hard,” he says.

“A lot of people might not understand the humidity,” adds Joseph. “You really need to drink every two miles whether you’re thirsty or not. When you look at the course map, you may think it’s downhill for the first 10 miles, but it’s a very different downhill because it’s a roller coaster. So don’t go out too hard since the hills are really deceptive. Save it for the second half that’s relatively flat.”

Gillette knows this from his first BIIM. “No matter what marathon you run, you have to do homework on conditions and the course,” he says. “For Hilo, I tried to run as many hills as I could. And I had to try to acclimate to the island’s March heat and humidity. When it’s in the 30s in Indiana, going to 75 to 80 degrees can be a shock.”

Gillette repeats Joseph’s advice. If I push too hard too early, I could



have big problems with the flatter part of the course since my legs will likely already be wasted. He also reminds that the first 10 miles are in a rain forest and we will naturally stay cooler since we will be getting a bit wet, so we still have to remember to hydrate properly because the course won't be this way the entire time.

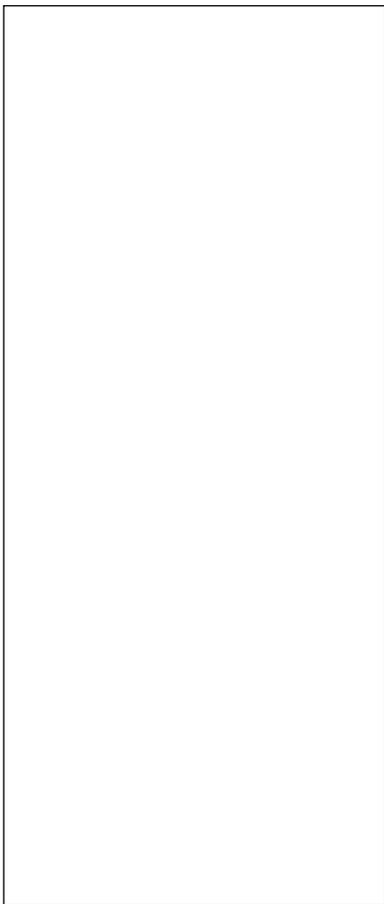
The point-to-point route goes exactly as Gillette explains. We are bused 10 miles north of Hilo to the starting line in Pepekeo on the lush coast fringing Onomea Bay. After a gentle downhill for the first few miles, it becomes a dramatic series of ups and downs traveling across old bridges, past beautiful waterfalls, and near lava beaches as the elevation drops 500 feet up to mile 10. Heading south through the small communities of Papaikou, Paukaa, and Wainaku, we are swept into lush, verdant, tree-lined hills and brilliant blue waters along the coastline.

Hitting Hilo, we cross Wailuku River over Singing Bridge, a metal-grated bridge with a 3-foot wooden walkway. Many of us actually drop our pace to a fast walk rather than full stride since it's so narrow and can be slippery when wet. The span earns its moniker from the low-pitched hum that occurs when cars drive across it.

As I run along Kamehameha Avenue, my mind wanders to all of the great eateries and hole-in-the wall haunts I will tap into once the race is *pau* (ended). A place called Cronies has us covered with brews and pub food. There is Bears, an incredible coffee shop with what locals claim are the best Belgian waffles outside of Belgium. Since the "loco moco" breakfast feast was created in Hilo, Café 100 is a no-brainer. There is also Bayfront Coffee, Kava & Tea for a little perk-you-up or mellow-you-out.

Miles 11 and 12 take us onto Hilo's historic Banyan Drive. Aside from being home to Liliuokalani Park and Gardens, one of the cool things about this thoroughfare is that famous visitors planted the trees when in Hilo during the 1940s and 1950s.

Built in the early 1900s, the 30-acre retreat was donated by Hawaii's Queen Liliuokalani to create an ornamental park honoring Japanese immigrants who came to Hawaii Island to work at Waiakea Sugar Plantation. It's always peaceful strolling around this sanctuary that seems to be quiet



What: Big Island International Marathon

When: March 17, 2013

Events: Marathon, half-marathon, and 5K run/walk

Course record: 2:34:39

Website: www.hilomarathon.org

Executive director: Wayne "Big Dog" Joseph

Phone: 808/969-7400

E-mail: waiakeabigdog@aol.com

regardless of how many people are wandering the paths.

As we head inland at mile 12, we've pretty much witnessed all of that drop-dead gorgeous beauty spoiling us in the first half of the race. This is a tough part of the course since we're running on the shoulder of a four-lane road.

There are two out-and-back sections that can be momentum killers. One is from miles 12 to 16.5 in the old airport area, while the other takes us out to mile 17.5 to a point called King's Landing at mile 20.5. But the scenery picks up again when we return toward town and loop back to Liliuokalani Gardens for the second time.

As with most Hawaii marathons aside from Honolulu's, BIIM's course is open to traffic. While this can be inconvenient to runners, it's often a necessity for planners and is definitely a luxury to spectators like Israel Gonzales, whom Gillette sees all over the course.

"Since it's a small-town marathon, BIIM doesn't have a large quantity of spectators," says Gillette. "But they have quality like Israel. He was all over the place ringing a large cowbell and encouraging runners. His SUV was stocked with water for anyone who needed it. I'll always recall his enthusiasm."

Just less than a mile from Banyan Drive at Wailoa River State Park on the Waiolama Canal, the finish line is in sync with BIIM's goal of being a small, intimate event leaving minimal environmental impact. Race directors, volunteers, and spectators pack in to assist athletes, hear their experiences, and limit the trash left behind.

Joseph advises runners to book flights and hotels early since Hilo has limited accommodations. But on a positive side, those rooms are within walking distance of bus pickup for transportation to the starting line.

UCC Coffee Kunitake Farms Kona Marathon

If you are running the UCC Coffee Kunitake Farms Kona Marathon on Hawaii's Big Island, you will certainly find great inspiration by visiting Kailua Pier adjacent to the Courtyard King Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel at the north end of Alii Drive. This is where those insane Ford Ironman Triathlons do that crazy 2.4-mile swim during their annual event each October.

It's also the grounds where Hawaii's King Kamehameha ruled until he died in 1819. So there is much *mana* (spiritual power) here to pump you up before heading off along the 26.2-mile challenge.

According to assistant race director David Ranck, a field of 400 runners was expected for the 2012 edition of the out-and-back course that starts and finishes at the Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort. Of the 358 marathon entries in 2011, 305 finished.

“One of our major attractions is location,” says Ranck. And while this aspect alone should be ample to lure high-quality runners, there is another significant draw. “The marathon course follows the run portion of the Ford Ironman World Championship,” he says. “Runners come from everywhere to ‘Run the Rock’ and experience this famous course.”

Justin Gillette agrees. Remember him from Hilo’s BIIM? Gillette likes competing on both sides of this island, proving his allegiance by winning the Kona Marathon for four consecutive years. In 2011, Gillette broke the tape at 2:34:41. His wife, Melissa, won the women’s division in 2010 and finished second in 2011 behind England’s Valeria Sesto, who clocked in at 3:05:44.

“I really like that it’s an Ironman course, plus I like the challenge of running in the heat,” says Gillette. “Since it’s an out-and-back that you run north to start and south to finish, you’ll have a tail wind one way or the other. So be mindful of which way it’s blowing.”

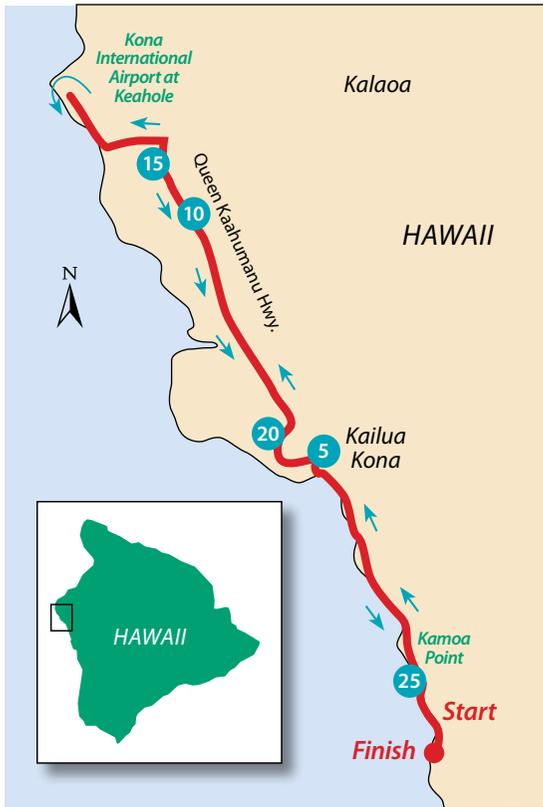
He also discourages being a hero. “You’re running in heat that you may not be acclimated to,” says Gillette. “You won’t probably run your PR. It’s hot enough and hard enough that there’s no reason to push yourself to do damage to your body.”

Located along the island’s western shore, Kona typically sees warm to moderate weather conditions year-round. And it’s generally much drier than the island’s northern and eastern shores. Mostly fast and flat and run on paved surfaces throughout, the route features largely gentle uphill and downhill, with no hills climbing more than 120 feet above sea level. So its contrast to BIIM is substantial.

The 2011 starting-line experience is one that pays respect to local culture with a Hawaiian practitioner offering a traditional conch-shell blowing in alii attire. Yet it also celebrates all



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the energy of the event, with radio station LAVA 105.3 DJs Eddie O and Danny Jesser rattling off names of top contenders and defending champions running the race.

We all feed off the upbeat vibe and appreciate that the two are also participating—Eddie O doing the half so he can announce marathon finishers’ names, and Jesser competing in the full.

From the Outrigger starting line, the course takes us north on Alii Drive through Kona and up to the intersection of Alii Drive and Kuakini Highway. Along the Kona sea wall, we run past historic Hulihee Palace, restored Ahuenu Heiau, and waves crashing against the rocky Pacific shoreline.

The route then turns left on Kuakini Highway to “The Old Airport,” the former facility that was converted into a park after Kona International Airport at Keahole was built. It then jogs right up Makala Boulevard through Kona Commons Shopping Center and then left onto Queen Kaahumanu Highway.

“When you run through the shopping center at 6.5 miles, be sure to watch for the 180-degree turn in the parking lot,” Gillette warns. “It’s not so bad going out. But at mile 20 coming back, it might aggravate something that’s sore since it’s so tight.”

Along Queen Kaahumanu Highway from miles 6.5 to 11.5 and miles 15 to 20 on the return, we find ourselves running along the 6-foot shoulder of a four-lane highway. So navigation is a bit tight.

Gillette and I agree that the best part of this course is Alii Drive. “There’s a lot of energy because so many people are out there—especially toward the end of the race,” says Gillette.

On the downside, part of that final stretch finds us running against oncoming racers and maneuvering through traffic at the aid stations. “Because of that, it’s important on the way out to make sure you’re hydrating properly,” Gillette advises.

“On the way back, you may opt to avoid the crowd because it’s congested.”

What speaks volumes about this race is how the corporate sponsors are so involved. “You see UCC Hawaii people at the start, at the finish, and throughout the event,” says Gillette. “The Kunitake family doesn’t just throw money into the race. They’re very involved and volunteer to help out. That’s a really nice aspect to this event.”

What: UCC Coffee Kunitake Farms Kona Marathon

When: June 23, 2013

Events: Marathon, half-marathon, 10K, 5K, and keiki fun runs

Course record: 2:23:31

Website: www.konamarathon.com

Assistant race director: David Ranck

Phone: 808/967-8240

E-mail: raceinfo@konamarathon.com

Other Marathons of Hawaii

The marathons featured in this article are the most established on each island. In the case of Hawaii Island, both races were highlighted since they are so distinctive from each other.

Hawaii also hosts marathons on Maui’s south shore and Oahu’s north shore that are additional options for putting your pads to the pavement in paradise.

Maui Oceanfront Marathon

January 20, 2013. As its name suggests, the Maui Oceanfront Marathon presents runners with a point-to-point course that runs along the oceanside highways of the island’s sunny western coast. The full marathon begins in Wailea Resort on Wailea Iki Road and continues through Kihei Town to Kamehameha Iki Park near the Banyan Tree on Lahaina’s Front Street. There are also 5K, 10K, 15K, and half-marathon events that all finish at Kamehameha Iki Park. Visit www.maui-oceanfrontmarathon.com, call 530/559-2261, or e-mail runmaui@gmail.com.

North Shore Marathon

The second annual North Shore Marathon was held in April, with the 2013 date TBA. Starting in historic Haleiwa Town, this scenic out-and-back route winds through the roads of Haleiwa before taking you to Mokuleia, where the course passes crashing waves, white sandy beaches, and beautiful mountains. The course returns to the finish line in Haleiwa, where you will find plenty of live music, tasty food, and massages. Contact 808race@gmail.com.

