

## Kona Coffee Country: Farm tours keep the java flowing

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We see the small, ripe red fruit ready for hand-picking in the fields. We learn about its processing, bulk storage and packaging. In the tasting room, we finally sample the goods -- several varieties, including the estate's special reserve. A good buzz sets in.

No, we're not in Napa Valley. We're in Kona, on the Big Island of Hawaii, and we're sampling coffee. There are no spittoons, and the coffee is in self-serve thermoses. As in California's legendary wine country, we easily spend a day touring and drinking our way through 20 miles of hilly, green country.

Looking down, it's hard to believe anything grows out of the volcanic, black rocky ground, yet the area is lush with tropical fruits, macadamia nut and cacao trees and, of course, coffee. It's summer, the rainy season, and the September harvest looms. Morning showers give way to partly cloudy skies -- weather that Shirley Shook, guide for Kona Blue Sky Coffee, says is necessary for good java. That and the volcanic nutrient-rich soil.

Many plantations welcome visitors, giving free tours of their fields and processing plants. But for those of us not fluent in Hawaiian, the farms aren't always easy to find. Have fun navigating with street numbers such as 84-8927 on roads like Mamalahoa, Hualalai, Napoopoo and Walua in often dense, jungle-like areas.

And since most of the coffee plantations have some combination of "Kona," "Coffee," "Farm," "Plantation," "Mountain," "Coast," and "Hawaii" in their names, you'll find yourself consulting our driving tour map (see box) frequently.

Our first stop, on Hualalai Road in Holualoa, was Kona Blue Sky Coffee, where the staff in the tasting room invited us to pour a small cup of regular or decaf coffee to drink while we watched a 7-minute video about coffee growing and processing. My 3-year-old skipped the coffee but did gobble down samples of chocolate-covered coffee beans, dried fruit and white chocolate-covered macadamia nuts.

Twigg-Smith Estate, which grows the Kona Blue Sky brand, tends up to 500 acres of coffee; most of Kona's 600 coffee farms have only two to three acres. These are part-time coffee farmers for whom a larger farm is impractical because of the labor-intensive, and therefore expensive, picking season.

Many of these small farms sell their beans to other coffee growers or to the Kona Pacific Farmers Cooperative, which represents 300 farms. They might also process the beans at a large plantation, then sell them under their own name.

Arabica coffee has been growing in Kona since 1829, planted by missionary Samuel Ruggles. As with much of American history, the initial farms were Caucasian-owned, with manual labor provided by native Hawaiians, Chinese, Filipinos, Portuguese and later Japanese immigrants. About 60 percent of the farms are now owned by Japanese Americans. Due to the terrain, the beans are still picked by hand.

Back on the road, we traveled south about 20 minutes to 22-acre Greenwell Farms, which offers a free tour and eight coffees to sample, including one decaf.

Both the Twigg-Smith and the Greenwell families are well rooted in Kona. The Twigg-Smiths claim to be one of Kona's original agricultural families, now in its seventh generation of ownership. The Greenwells, with five generations, have been farming in Kona since 1850. They claim to grow 4 percent, or 300,000 pounds, of Kona coffee and process an additional 1.8 million pounds from 200 other farms.

With prices upward of \$16 a pound for Kona beans, it seems that the coffee growers should be rolling in the dough. But it takes seven pounds of cherries for one pound of drinkable coffee. Each acre's revenue is around \$22,000 yearly, making it difficult for small farms to exist on coffee alone.

On each tour we see trees bearing mostly green berries that adhere closely to the branches. When the beans ripen, they turn red and are known as "cherries;" they must be picked in 10 to 14 days or they spoil. September to January is harvest season, but some cherries are ready for picking in summer.

According to Greenwell guide Daniel Swanson, the farm employs 15 full-time pickers and imports 50 seasonal workers from Mexico (it's hard to find islanders available to work only five months of the year).

At Greenwell laborers pick coffee for 40 cents a pound, with a good worker picking 250 to 350 pounds of cherries per day. Swanson said he picked the coffee cherries at a friend's farm for a day and only the first 10 minutes was fun. By the end of the day, he was exhausted. He'd picked 150 pounds and earned \$60 for his day's work.

After weighing, the cherries go through the wet process, which includes pulping them to remove the bean from the red husk. The beans are soaked for 12 to 16 hours in a fermentation process, then dried for up to two weeks. Beans are raked into a single layer on a hoshidana, a Japanese drying rack. If it rains -- as it often does in Kona, 30 to 40 inches a year, they're covered with a retractable roof. At Greenwell, we got to walk on the hoshidana and the beans. I'm not sure why this was a thrill, but the kids on the tour were ecstatic.

The beans are now known as parchment, due to the white papery layer covering the bean. The dry mill removes that layer and separates the beans by quality and size -- four sizes plus the expensive peaberry, which sells for more than \$30 a pound. The coffee beans are now known as green beans and are ready for storing, roasting or shipping.

Buyers often buy green beans so they can roast to their own specifications and sell the coffee fresh to consumers. Stored in airtight containers, the green beans last a lot longer than roasted beans. Many of the Kona processors roast their beans in 25- to 33-pound batches year-round for local sale.

Each farm has its own roasting recipe, but usually roasts 12 to 22 minutes at 400 degrees or higher. Those of us trying to limit our caffeine intake should drink the darker roasts, since the longer roasting time and higher roasting temperature burns off more caffeine. The darker roast also brings out the bean's oils, giving it more flavor than a light roast.

Many farms grow more than coffee, and on the tours we saw trees and shrubs with macadamia nuts, pineapple, apple bananas, avocados, papayas, cacao, litchi, guava, coconut, oranges, figs and mangos. If you're at Greenwell at the right time, you'll get some free produce.

After many samples, three tours and several drive-bys, we were exhausted. We drove back to the hotel, eager to eat chocolate-covered coffee beans while sipping a good cup of Kona coffee.

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## **IF YOU GO**

**Driving tour map** -- [www.konacoffeefest.com/drivingtour/map.html](http://www.konacoffeefest.com/drivingtour/map.html) Also check at the airport and at tourist information stands on Hawaii. The free tourist magazines have ads for several tours.

**Kona Coffee Cultural Festival** -- Nov. 4-13, with competitions for best cupping, fastest cherry picking, etc. [www.konacoffeefest.com](http://www.konacoffeefest.com)

## **TOURS:**

□ **Kona Blue Sky Coffee Co.** -- 76-973 A Hualalai Road, Holualoa. 877-322-1700; [www.konablueskycoffee.com](http://www.konablueskycoffee.com) Complimentary guided walking tours and tasting daily, 9 a.m.-3:30 p.m.

□ **Greenwell Farms** -- 81-6581 Mamalahoa Highway, Kealahou. 888-592-5662; [www.greenwellfarms.com](http://www.greenwellfarms.com) Complimentary farm and mill tour and tastings. Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

□ **Bay View Farms** -- 83-5249 Painted Church Road, Honaunau. 800-662-5880; [www.bayviewfarmcoffees.com](http://www.bayviewfarmcoffees.com) Complimentary farm, mill and roasting tours. Daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.

□ **Kona Pacific Farmers Cooperative** -- 82-5810 Napo'opo'o Road, Captain Cook. 808-328-2411; [www.kpfc.com](http://www.kpfc.com) Complimentary tours. Call for tour times.

## **ROAST YOUR OWN:**

□ **Ueshima Coffee Co.** -- Roastery and coffee bar at 82-5810 Napoopoo Road, Captain Cook. Daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Complimentary tours. Coffee estate at 75-5568 Mamalahoa Highway. Daily 9:30 a.m.-noon. Complimentary tours, but reservations required. 888-822-5662; [www.ucc-hawaii.com](http://www.ucc-hawaii.com) The "Roastmaster Experience" requires reservation. Includes 1/2 pound of Kona coffee with your own private label.