



Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa Review

By [Katherine Rodeghier](#) - April 24, 2018

No roller coasters, no long lines, no mouse ears. Ubiquitous items I associate with the word Disney are noticeably absent at Aulani, Disney's upscale resort in Hawai'i. You won't find a theme park here. You also won't see kitschy cartoon characters everywhere. The architecture and décor incorporate Hawai'ian culture and motifs and show off one of the world's largest collections of native Hawai'ian art. Classy. The only time I shook hands with Mickey was during a character breakfast in one of the resort's 10 dining venues.

Opened in 2011 on Oahu, 30 minutes from Honolulu, Aulani, A Disney Resort & Spa earns four diamonds from AAA and a 4.5-star rating from TripAdvisor. Though it caters to adults — and has a conference center for business meetings — it's best suited to families and multigenerational groups. Two 15-story towers overlooking the ocean and a sheltered lagoon hold 350-plus accommodations ranging from standard rooms starting around \$550 offseason to three-bedroom villas with amenities families love: full kitchen, washer/dryer, portable crib, highchair, twin Murphy bed, sofa bed and king-sized bed. Though Disney sells timeshares, I didn't witness any high-pressure sales tactics.

A children's program for ages 3–12 runs from early morning until 9 p.m. at no charge except for meals and optional activities. Babysitters can be booked through an outside agency.

Families divide their time between the beach with free use of sand toys and boogie boards, and several swimming pools ranging from zero depth to a thrilling waterslide plunge into a lazy river. A splash park and aquatic playground attract the youngest children. Some pools and hot tubs are reserved for adults. Wristbands identify Aulani guests, keeping out beach-goers from the Four Seasons next door. There's no resort fee.



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All ages enjoy Rainbow Reef, an open-air aquarium stocked with tropical fish. Rent snorkel gear to swim with colorful tangs and angelfish or view them through below-water windows.

Aulani's spa has a separate area just for teens, the only one in Hawai'i, but teens also may accompany adults in the main spa. Show up an hour before treatments to enjoy outdoor rain showers, four soaking tubs in varying temperatures, a sauna and a steam room. Unlike other spas at Disney resorts, Disney operates this one itself.

While it has a fine-dining restaurant, 'AMA 'AMA, most Aulani dining spots are poolside and casual, including a grab-and-go café that sells pizza and poke bowls. The quality of food on the buffet during the character breakfast and dinner surpassed my expectations. Yes, there were Mickey-shaped waffles, but the breakfast spread also included an omelet station, salmon, eggs Benedict and Hawai'ian loco moco. The dinner buffet proved grander still with carving stations for ham and prime rib, platters of crab legs, shrimp and oysters. Reservations should be made well in advance.

Aulani's daily program lists a dizzying variety of activities, some you'd expect at any resort, others I haven't seen elsewhere: a high-tech scavenger hunt, evening storytelling around a fire pit, sunset photography lessons. A few times a week a luau sets up on the lawn. Cast members in traditional dress guide guests through hands-on Hawai'ian activities, such as stringing flowers into leis, pounding taro into poi and applying temporary tattoos. Pulled pork from a whole roasted pig follows along with fish, salads and desserts. The after-dinner show blends Disney characters — Moana is a player — with time-honored tales from Hawai'ian history told through singers, dancers and prancing warriors.

With so much to offer, Aulani guests need never leave the premises. Still, the excursion desk puts together trips — horseback riding, a catamaran cruise, hikes to a waterfall — for guests who want to experience more of Oahu.

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