

Hawaii eruption brings tourism boon during slow season

December 2 2022, by ANDREW SELSKY, AUDREY McAVOY and HAVEN DALEY



People stand on lava rock from a previous eruption near the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

The spectacle of incandescent lava spewing from Hawaii's Mauna Loa has drawn [thousands of visitors](#) and is turning into a tourism boon for this Big Island town near the world's largest volcano.

Some hotels in and around Hilo are becoming fully booked in what is normally a slower time of the year for business. Helicopter tours of Mauna Loa, which began erupting Sunday after being quiet for 38 years, are also in high demand by tourists and journalists.

"Right now, it's boomed," said Marian Somalinog, who staffs the front desk at the Castle Hilo Hawaiian Hotel. "We're sold out until after Christmas."

She attributed the increase to people wanting to watch the rivers of bright orange molten rock gush from Mauna Loa, a shield volcano whose name means "Long Mountain" in Hawaiian. [The glow from the eruption](#) can be seen in the distance from parts of the hotel.

This time of year is normally a slow season for Hawaii's travel industry, falling between the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

But this week thousands of cars have created traffic jams on Route 200, known as the Saddle Road, which connects the cities of Hilo on the east side of Hawaii Island and Kailua-Kona on the west side.

Volcanic flows pose a potential future threat to that main artery but are currently still several miles (kilometers) away and not a danger to any communities. That means onlookers can take in the spectacle while exposing themselves to little danger. Tourists and locals are in the crowds, many snapping photos and taking selfies.



A man talks on a phone in his car alongside Saddle Road as the Mauna Loa volcano erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Hundreds of people in their cars lined Saddle Road, which connects the east and west sides of the island, as lava flowed down the side of Mauna Loa and could be seen fountaining into the air on Wednesday. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

Somalinog hasn't bothered to join them, however.

"The traffic is crazy," she said. "It's not worth it."

Brett Steen flew from Oahu to the island of Hawaii with his parents, who are visiting from Florida, on a trip booked months ago. The volcano began erupting right before their arrival on the Big Island.

"It's a bonus part of our trip," Steen said. "We're super excited to get out here."

At Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, spokeswoman Jessica Ferracane said many visitors know about Mauna Loa but aren't aware that Kilauea, a smaller volcano, is also erupting—and that they can see both from multiple spots near the latter's caldera.

"That hasn't happened since 1984. It's a really special time to be here," Ferracane said.

The number of visitors to the park hasn't increased since Mauna Loa's eruption began late Sunday, but she expects it to rise late next week in line with normal seasonal patterns.



Janice Hazen of Ocean View, Hawaii, uses a binocular to view the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

Saddle Road, which is outside the park, might not remain a prime viewing spot for long. The red-hot lava is creeping toward it.

Ken Hon, scientist in charge at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, said the flow has "slowed considerably" and on Thursday was 3.3 miles (5.3 kilometers) south of the highway. At that rate, he said, it would be at least a week before it arrives.

"We don't really know which way the lava flow will ultimately go," Hon said.

A blockage of the road would pose problems, especially for those who use it to commute from Hilo and other parts of the island's east side, where housing is generally more affordable, to jobs on the west side, home to many of the larger beach resorts.

Unless some sort of bypass is constructed, commuters would need to take coastal routes to and from Kailua-Kona, adding at least an hour drive time each way.



A photographer takes pictures of the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

Steve Solberg, general manager of Outrigger Kona Resort & Spa in Kailua-Kona, said many guests have headed up Saddle Road to see the eruption. Some people cancelled reservations at the resort because of the volcano, but those were snapped up by others wanting to see the eruption.

"So it's really kind of a wash at this point, but we expect it to be a very positive thing in the next week or so," Solberg said.

He said that if Saddle Road is closed, the dozen or so employees who live in Hilo will be provided rooms at the resort during their five-day

workweek so they don't have to make the long commute every day.

Gov. David Ige has issued an emergency proclamation to allow responders to arrive quickly or limit access as needed. If lava does cross the highway, the Hawaii National Guard can help plan for alternatives and try to set up bypass routes, the governor said.



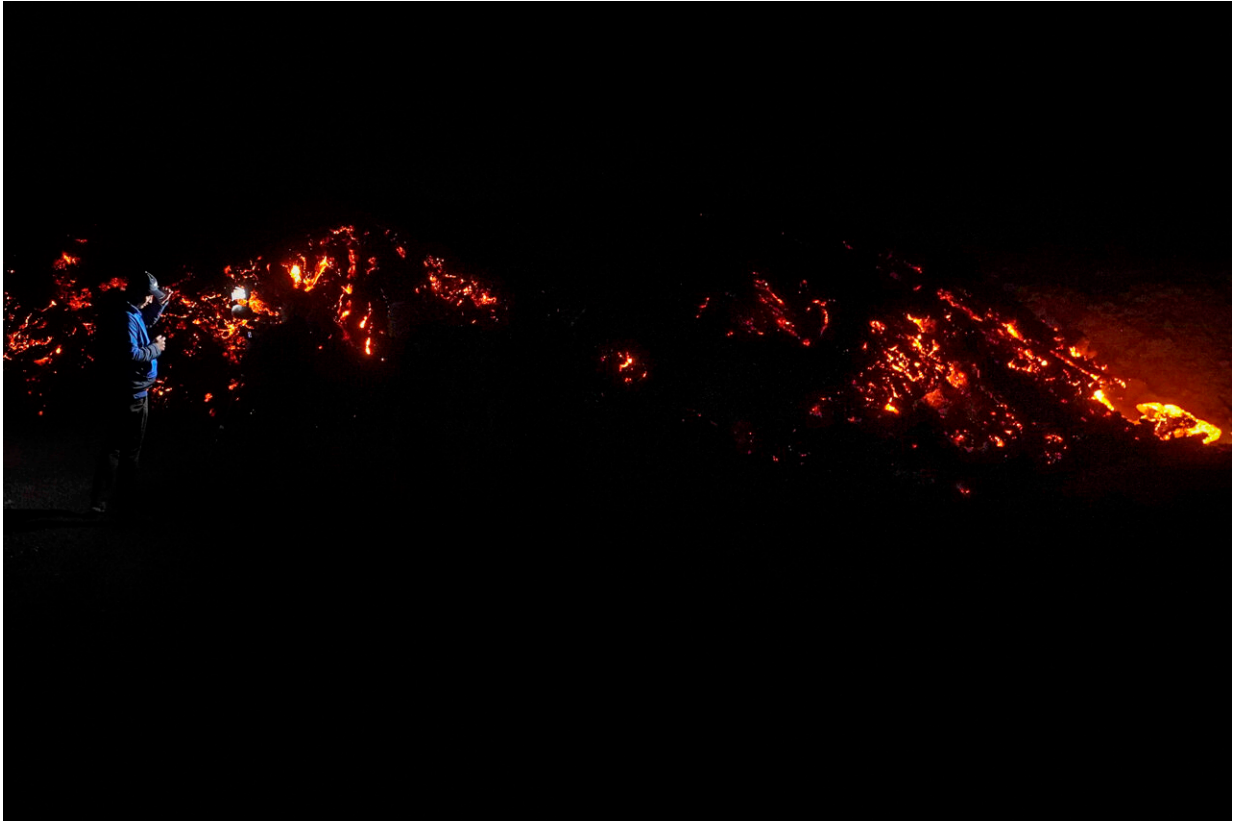
An offering sits among blackened lava rock from a previous eruption near the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Children run on blackened lava rock from a previous eruption near the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



A journalist records images of lava from the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



A journalist, left, records lava from the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



A man looks on as lava erupts from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Ingrid Yang, left, and Kelly Bruno, both of San Diego, take a photo in front of lava erupting from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Journalists record images of lava from the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Mike, left, and Janice Hazen, of Ocean View, Hawaii, use a binocular to view the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



People pose for a photo in front of lava erupting from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



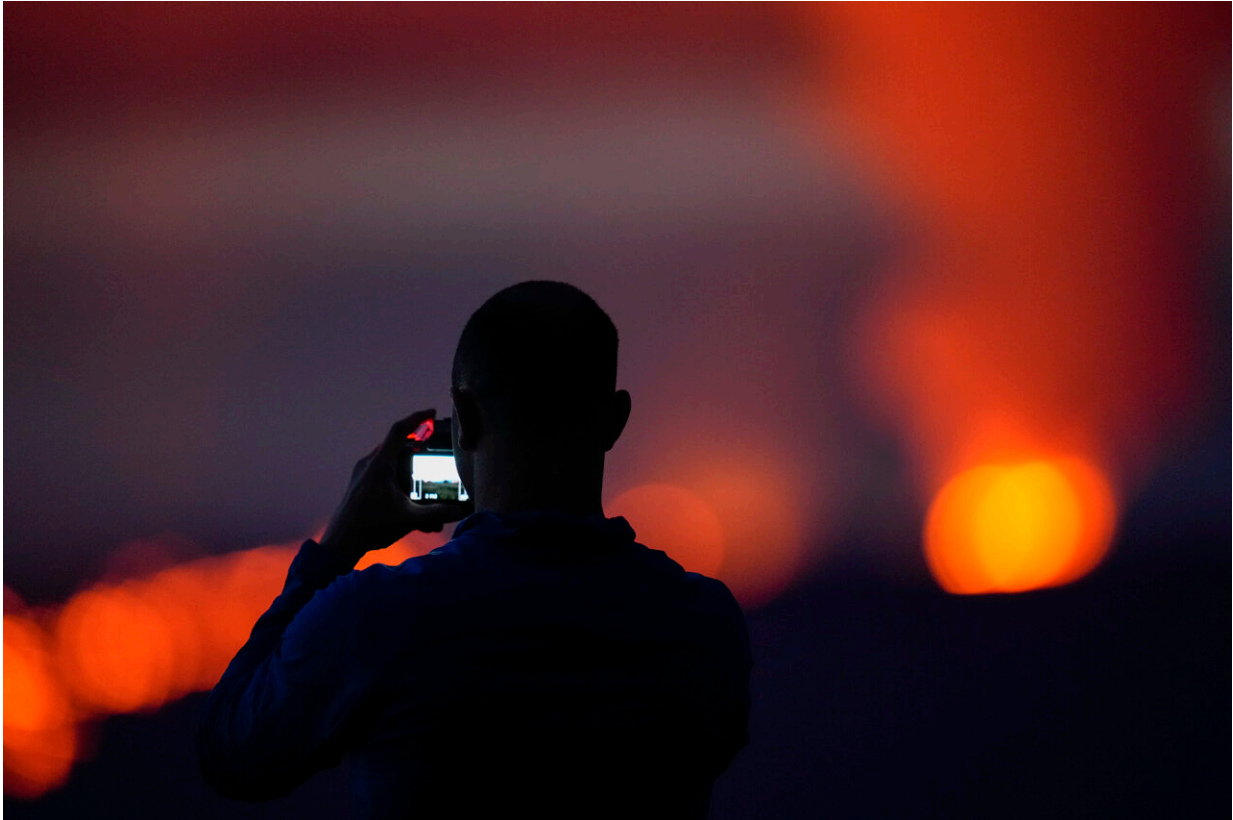
An overflow of cars sit in a parking lot near the Mauna Loa volcano as it erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Lava erupts from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Abigail Dewar, of Alberta, Canada, holds a stuffed animal as she walks over hardened lava rock from a previous eruption as the Mauna Loa volcano erupts, behind, Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Brian Lichtenstein, of San Diego, takes a photo in front of lava erupting from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii.
Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull



Lava erupts from Hawaii's Mauna Loa volcano Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull

Mauna Loa last erupted in 1984. The current eruption is its 34th since written record keeping began in 1843. Its smaller neighbor, Kilauea, has been erupting since September 2021.

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