

## Four-star Maui vacation on two-star budget

Living it up — on a budget — in Maui around the popular Kaanapali beach area.

By Carol Pucci

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Condo by the beach with pool and ocean view: \$129 including taxes.

Late lunch at the ritzy resort next door: \$10

Kona coffee, beach towels, beach chairs, parking. Priceless. As in free.

Even on Maui, one of Hawaii's priciest destinations, affordable luxuries await those skilled in the art of penny-pinching without the pain.

Forget McDonald's and cheap motels. Four-star Maui on a two-star budget was my mission. To up the ante, I zeroed in on West Maui, the island's most expensive resort area, loved for its calm waters, cool trade winds and beaches for snorkeling, surfing, swimming and people-watching.

With a little creative financing, it's possible to dine, sleep, swim and tour in style,

without blowing the bank account or trading valuable beach time for high-pressure time-share offers.

### Cheaper sleeps

A check on [www.biddingfortravel.com](http://www.biddingfortravel.com) showed savvy travelers using Priceline's name-your-own price scheme to score rooms at four-star resort hotels for \$150 — not bad, considering Maui's average daily room rate was \$226 last year, the highest of the four major islands. Still, with taxes, resort fees and parking fees pushing the average winning bid closer to \$200, I decided to look elsewhere.

My heart soared when I saw a one-bedroom condo on Kaanapali beach — West Maui's signature beach with three miles of white sand and a paved waterside boardwalk — for \$129 per night on the vacation-rental-by-owner site HomeAway ([www.homeaway.com](http://www.homeaway.com)).

But an exchange of emails with the owner revealed hidden charges including an \$85 cleaning fee.

Then I scored: Among the HomeAway listings was a unit at the family-friendly Napili Village, one of a string of low-rise, 1960s-style resorts in the residential community of Napili, a few miles north of Kaanapali. Available was a newly renovated second-floor studio with an ocean view for \$129, including taxes, with no extra cleaning or parking fees.

Well-tended gardens surrounded a sparkling, oval-shaped pool ringed by individually owned units. Ours came with a king bed, pullout sofa, TV, dining room, full kitchen and a balcony overlooking the pool. It was just my husband, Tom, and me, but the room could easily have slept four, given a handy room divider that made the unit feel more like a one-bedroom than a studio.

Best of all were our classy neighbors:

- Snorkel Bob's, where we rented snorkel gear and boogie boards for \$6, half what the big resorts charge.
- The Kapalua Bay Resort, West Maui's ritziest neighborhood, home to the Ritz-Carlton and two world-class golf courses. The resort maintains extensive nature trails on the former Honolulu Ranch and pineapple plantation. By law, Hawaii beaches are open to the public and there are public showers, restrooms and parking at Kapalua beach.
- The Napili Kai resort, where room rates start at \$250 per night. The resort's classy beach-side restaurant on tranquil Napili Bay became our home-away-from home for \$7 Hawaiian sweet bread and French toast breakfasts and \$5 happy-hour drinks and appetizers.

### **Save on car rentals**

A colleague dropped by my desk, shaking his head at the \$365 price for a weekly rental car at the Maui airport. I urged him to cancel his reservation and book at an off-airport rental office.

For the price of a \$10 taxi ride (rental-car companies with off-airport offices can't pick you up) I snagged a weekly rate of \$239 on an economy car through Enterprise's location two miles from Kahului Airport, versus \$472 at the airport. (Prices can be higher in peak season.)

The surprise: With the exception of taking the car on some scenic drives, we left it parked most of the time. Everything we wanted to do was within a short walk or a half-hour ride on the \$1 Maui bus, the county operated transit system with 12 routes and hourly service.

### **Waterside bargains**

A shopping center filled with luxury stores seemed an unlikely place to hunt for bargains, but the bus stops at Whalers Village, a megamall fronting on Kaanapali beach. After a quick look around the free Whalers Museum, we happy-hour-hopped our way along the

oceanfront boardwalk, assembling a movable feast of cheap drinks and appetizers at fancy restaurants where dinner for two can run \$100 or more.

The best people-watching was at Leilani's, a beach restaurant near the Westin and Hyatt hotels. High hedges block the water views, but the \$4 margaritas and five kinds of sliders made for a budget-friendly early dinner.

Quieter and more elegant was Duke's Beach Club near Black Rock, a favorite snorkeling spot by the Kaanapali Sheraton. Happy hour here is on a shaded deck with a clear ocean view.

Most of the restaurants have live bands at happy hour. Whalers Village sponsors free nightly outdoor jazz concerts and dance performances by students from local hula schools, professional and easier on the wallet than the expensive hotel luaus.

## **Beyond the beach**

Lazying around, swimming, snorkeling or surfing sounds appealing, but almost everyone eventually looks beyond the beach.

We hiked in style along the Kapalua Coastal Trail, a 1.7-mile path that's part of the trail system maintained by the Kapalua Resort Association. The trail skirts sand dunes, a seabird sanctuary, four beaches and ancient burial sites.

Guidebooks often recommend a trip to historic Lahaina in the evening to watch the sunset, but after making several trips there on the \$1 bus, our favorite time was morning when the temperatures were cooler and the crowds smaller.

Using a free walking-tour map, we explored art galleries, small museums and historical sites recalling Lahaina's history as a 19th-century whaling and trading port. Memorable were the Wo Hing Museum, a Taoist Chinese temple built in 1912 from a Sears Roebuck kit, and an abandoned prison, where townspeople were once jailed for crimes such as "furious riding."

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