

Thurston Lava Tube

Directions: It's inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park (a.k.a. Volcanoes). Parking can be tight, but there is overflow parking at the Kilauea Iki overlook. If you park there, it's a short (half mile or so) walk along the crater rim in the shade.

Amenities: The restroom tends to be crowded (and hence used well over their intended capacity). You are better off holding out for the ones located at the Kilauea Visitor Center. If you have to go, they are located down the path to the left (at the exit to the tubes).

The path for this site is one way. You start by going to the left and walking through a deep rain forest. Plan on it raining while you're here. My guess is that it rains half the time in an on and off trickle, accentuated by light sprinkles.

If a fun bit of rain forest. The birds are happy and there is a nice mix of flora, but the real attraction is the people. Every tour bus is here, so you'll be walking only as fast as the folks in front of you will let you. Don't worry. It's only a 10-15 minute wait and then you'll be crossing a bridge into the cave.

Take your time at the bridge and the entrance. The transition and the initial moment is one of the best parts of the site. Feel free to let others walk around you. Pretend you are taking a picture if it will make you feel more comfortable.

Once inside, take a moment to let your eyes adjust. The floor is a fairly consistent mixture of wet gravel and shallow puddles. Water drips from the ceiling. Compared to the forest, it's cold.

My advice is to remember that this is one of the great tourist destinations on the island. If you continue with the flow, and keep step with everyone else you will walk out of the tube in under five minutes. I say stop in the middle. Pose for a picture. Watch a few dozen tour (buses) go by, and then move on.

By this time if you haven't had your fill, walk to the end of the tube, and open the gate. It's OK. It's not locked. Then, take out the flashlight you brought along for this purpose (may I recommend a red LED one), and explore the spur. If you brought a coat and a bite to eat, you could have a picnic. I've never actually been down the spur. No one that I've come with has ever wanted to, but if you are a spelunker at heart, word is you can go as deep as you want.

If you are going to explore the cavern deeper, I recommend putting on long pants, hiking boots, a hat, and gloves, along with a flashlight. I probably don't really have to mention the flashlight again. If you didn't bring one along, you simply won't be getting far.

After you are done with the tube, in the forest, off of the path, there are multiple indentations and impromptu sitting areas suitable for a picnic, group picture, or simple rest and relax. If you are so inclined (and carry one with you), it might be a good place to take out your sketch book and set a spell.

{Go slow. Stop. Walk the opposite of the main flow of traffic. These are my generic suggestions for better appreciating and enjoying any major tourist destination.}

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