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Should Tourists Still Visit Maui? Hawaiian Travel Specialists Weigh In

by Briana Bonfiglio (/tmrsearchresults?st=1&sr=Briana Bonfiglio) / August 18, 2023





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Travelers with trips to Maui booked from now through the end of the year are faced with a pressing question following devastating wildfires on the island: Do I keep, change, or cancel reservations?

It's both a logistical and moral dilemma that may not have a clear answer. While West Maui is out of the picture for tourists for a while – Hawaii Gov. Josh Green is strongly discouraging all non-essential travel to West Maui through at least the month of August – other parts of the island are still open. In a news conference on Aug. 17, the governor encouraged travel to other parts of Maui and to the other Hawaiian islands.

"Like we saw in the pandemic, decisions we made can affect everyone across the islands. So what we're saying now is travel should not be to West Maui. But the other parts of Maui are safe," Green said. "And the rest of the state, of course, is also safe."

"I'll be making a much broader announcement and have a broader discussion about this on Friday in a statewide address," he added. "But we want people to travel to the state to the extent that they're not impacting the hard work that these extraordinary people are doing (supporting disaster recovery)."

Yet according to travel advisors, that doesn't necessarily mean Maui travel is back to business as usual. Travel advisors specializing in Hawaiian tourism who spoke to TMR this week are mostly steering clients away from Maui while the island focuses on recovery efforts. Wildfires ripped through West Maui on Aug. 8, decimating the historic town of Lahaina and leaving at least 111 people dead, according to the most recent reports.

"It's heartbreaking to see how much change happened overnight," said Stacy Small, founder of Elite Travel Club, an affiliate of Gifted Travel Network, a Virtuoso member. "It's a time when the community is really pulling together to help each other."

Small lived on Maui for several years, including during the pandemic, when she ran a bakery on Lahaina's historic Front Street while the travel industry was on pause. She has since moved to California, but her connections to Maui remain. In talking to residents, she says many of the locals prefer to be among their own community members while they heal.

"There is a level of sensitivity that needs to be taken for those who are living there right now," Small said. "The emotional toll... Everyone is exhausted over there. There's just a lot of emotions right now."

Many hotels and vacation rentals continue to house displaced people. So, no matter what, guests or their advisors should call the property they're staying at to ensure there is still room for them. In addition, the island's focus is currently on assessing damages, completing search and rescue, and restoring other services.

"Having visitors [in West Maui] right now would be disruptive and would tax resources that are needed for residents," said Marilyn Clark, owner of Lighthouse Travel, a Signature Travel Network member.

At the same time, Clark hopes visitors can return to other parts of Maui quickly because many residents work in the hospitality industry and rely on tourism for their paycheck.

"I am mindful of what has happened on Maui and the aftereffects of the devastation the wildfires caused, but if visitors respect the rights of the island's residents, their history and culture, and the current situation with which they are dealing, I know that the revenue that tourism generates will help many who are in great need at this time," she added.

"Typically, September after Labor Day and October are slower times tourism wise, which should make it a bit easier for the community to accept visitors back."

Jim Bendt, owner of Pique Travel, a Virtuoso member, is taking a similar approach and called the decision to visit Maui at this time "a delicate balance" between respecting locals and supporting its businesses.

"How do we respect and provide space for our friends in Hawaii to mourn, heal and rebuild?" he said. "While at the same time, how do we continue to support Maui economically through tourism which is essential to the local economy?"

Bendt says that those with trips booked to West Maui soon – August through October – who cannot move their dates should visit different parts of Maui that are open, such as Kihei, Wailea, or Hana, or one of the neighboring islands: Lana'i, Kauai, Hawaii Island, or Oahu.

Bendt is encouraging those who are flexible with their travel dates to show their *kokua*, or help, by traveling to Maui "at a time when the island is ready for more visitors." He advises those with trips after November to "take a wait and see approach and work closely with your partners in Hawaii to determine when you need to make a decision."

"If you are tempted to see the devastation in Lahaina, don't go. It's not an attraction. It's a place of mourning, healing, and rebuilding," Bendt added. "Groups of tourists taking pictures are insensitive to the people that have had to endure this pain."

Beyond being respectful to locals, travel advisors have noted that a trip to Maui simply won't be the same as it would've been before the fires in Lahaina, which Small calls "the heartbeat of Maui." Clark agreed, calling it a "huge, immeasurable loss."

Many of Lahaina's buildings, most of which are now ash and rubble, were built in the 1800s and designated the town as a National Historic Landmark District. Lahaina was the original, royal capital of Hawaii and considered sacred to many locals because of the Waiola Church, which celebrated its 200th anniversary a few months ago and was largely destroyed in the fires. For tourists, visiting Lahaina was an opportunity to experience Maui culture because it was a hub for parties, dining, and activities on the harbor.

"If someone is paying to get their dream Maui vacation, you simply can't get that experience right now," Small said, noting that she could not imagine visiting Maui without seeing the vibrant culture of Lahaina – greeting the locals, eating the foods, and seeing Front Street.

Because of this and logistics in the recovery process, travel advisors should manage their clients' expectations when it comes to visiting Maui at this time. Especially in West Maui, but in other parts of the island as well, experiences may simply not be the same because those who run tours and other activities are focused on relief efforts.

It is therefore a good time to "support the other islands and support Hawaii tourism and just do Maui on a future trip," Small said.

She added that there are some other ways to support Maui's economy without traveling there, such as finding a Maui-based online business to purchase from or donating to a relief fund.

"Tourism is going to take a hit for sure," Small said. "But I think people will rally."

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