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M IS FOR MAUI: Staying Busy on Hawaii's Sunny Isle

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LAHAINA, Maui -- "Lava!" sang out Robert Baclig, our instructor, giving the Hawaiian command to stop paddling.

"Check out the green sea turtle," he said, pointing off the bow.

Novice paddlers halfway through our second Hawaiian canoe-paddling lesson, we'd learned to answer Mr. Baclig's grunted "Ho'omaukaukau?" (ready?) by shouting "ai!" and to dig in hard and stroke in unison when he ordered "imua" (move forward).

Now we stopped (more or less together) and peered through the greenish-clear water. A few yards away, the turtle floated to the surface, looked us over and dove back down, passing a black-and-white-striped manta ray lazily trolling across the bottom.

Yep, another beautiful day in paradise and another bonus thrill, courtesy of the free outrigger canoe classes at our hotel, the Four Seasons Resort, on Wailea Beach, in Maui.

By mainland standards, Maui isn't a budget destination.

Even if you won a free week's vacation on this sunny isle, you could still spend a king's ransom on meals, a car rental and extras like snorkel cruises and rounds of golf. But things are looking up.

Though "all-inclusive" is still a no-no here, most beach-front resorts, anxious to compete, are offering all kinds of enticing -- and valuable -- extras.

Gone are the days when sunbathing on the sand and mai tais by the pool were enough to lure people to Hawaii's wave-kissed beaches. Tiki torches, flame dancers and hula performances are still iconic symbols, the mainstay of most hotel luaus. But the truth is, today's travelers would rather do than watch.

If doing means swinging your hips, stay at the Westin Ka'anapali Ocean Resort Villas, a timeshare property with 280 studio, one and two-bedroom units, most of which are in the rental pool. Book a basic unit, which sleeps four and has a kitchen, and it will cost about \$400 a night, but the hula lessons are free. And so are water aerobics, the daily keiki (kids) hula show and children's games on the lawn. Also free are races in the pool, bingo, evening movies, sand art, Hawaiian storytelling, face painting and henna tattooing.

"We didn't know there'd be so much to do," said Sonny Wycliff, from Texas, on a week's vacation with family. "We really picked it for the location. Ka'anapali's got great beaches and it's close to Lahaina. But the kids would rather stay and play here."

Underground parking is free; you can also ride the free shuttle bus to nearby hotels and into Lahaina. The Pu'ukoli'i General Store in the main wing sells groceries, fresh bakery items, deli sandwiches and meats and sundries. At the Ocean Pool Bar & Grill, kids age 9 and under eat free. Though it's a timeshare, this Westin runs like a hotel, with a restaurant, a huge pool with a water slide, a towel kiosk, a Concierge and Activities desk, and maid service for a small extra fee.

The Four Seasons Wailea, a five-diamond marvel at the opposite end of the vacation spectrum, is regularly ranked among Hawaii's top luxury resorts. Yet even here, the daily room rate for two in a double (starting at \$440 for a mountain view) includes an encyclopedic list of free activities, for adults and children. Some goodies are real money-savers; the outrigger canoe lessons were our favorite. Others, like the early-riser's coffee-and-muffins trolley in the lobby and fresh fruit snacks served to you at poolside, or on the beach, are designed to pamper you thoroughly.

Never one to scrimp on anything, the 380-room hotel's recent \$50 million remodel includes a new fine-arts collection, with 2,000 works

by contemporary Hawaiian artists. The largest pieces in the collection, assembled by Santa Barbara-based art consultant Julie Cline, are mounted on the hotel's two lower levels, where open walls and natural lighting show them to best advantage. Even if you're not a guest, you're invited to stop by and treat yourself to a self-guided tour.

But the biggest bonus -- for families with young children in particular -- is the hotel's Kids For All Seasons program, with morning, afternoon and all-day sessions for kids ages 5 to 12. Held in the hotel's on-site licensed child care facility, KFAL operates like a day camp, with a schedule of indoor and outdoor activities.

"The front desk tells us who's visiting with kids, and who's signed up to attend, so we plan our staffing accordingly," said program director Raine Pushckor, explaining that she divides the children into groups of six, sorted by age and interest. "A typical program for older kids might include swimming in the pool (not the ocean), hula lessons, making bead bracelets, playing ping-pong, learning volcano lore or nature hunts," she said.

"For the younger ones, we stock easy games, build sand castles on the beach, stage puppet shows, play with Sculpey Clay, make paper crafts and built with Legos."

For adults, most activities are free, including introductory scuba clinics -- with gear -- in the swimming pool; snorkeling, exercise and stretching classes in the pool; aerobics and yoga in the fitness center; and cooking demonstrations in the Four Seasons' new restaurant, Duo. Massages, wraps and facial treatments at the hotel's newly renovated spa, Hawaii's first to feature the new Kate Somerville Healthy Skin product line, are definitely not free; nonetheless, guests can use the steam room, soaking tubs and other spa facilities, as well as the fitness equipment without charge.

At the Sheraton Maui Resort, the oldest hotel on Ka'anapali Beach, the Friday night show at the Keka'a Terrace, with traditional music and hula dancers, is free when you eat there. If you book the Sheraton's Family Vacation Package, children age 17 and under can stay free with you, or you can book a room for them at half price.

Kids 12 and under can also eat free in some restaurants. Double rooms booked on the Endless Escape Package start at \$345 a night.

Not surprisingly, one of Ka'anapali's most interesting outings (which also happens to be free) is more than merely entertaining. The Historical Trail & History and Legends Tour is led by a traditional Hawaiian storyteller.

The tour begins at the Royal Lahaina Hotel, continues to the Sheraton Maui Resort and along the beach walk to the Hyatt Regency Maui. For a glimpse of long-ago Maui and the way things were, don't miss it.

STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTO

The pool deck at the Four Seasons in Maui.

IF YOU GO

Prices at all Ka'anapali Beach and Wailea Beach hotels may vary from day to day depending on the month, day and availability. Always ask about corporate and association discounts, and for special seasonal packages.

The hotels at Ka'anapali Beach and Wailea Beach are 45 minutes from Kahului Airport,

depending on traffic. Rent a car at the airport, or call the hotel for approximate taxi fares.

For the Four Seasons Resort, call 800-332-3442, or visit www.fourseasons.com/maui. For the Sheraton Maui Resort at Ka'anapali, call 888 488-3535, or visit www.sheraton-maui.com. For the Westin Ka'anapali Ocean Resort Villas, call 808-667-3200, or visit www.westinkaanapali.com. For Starwood Hotels, visit www.starwoodhotels.com/hawaii.

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. Free activities can be found on island

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