

# Big-time fun and golf at Big Island Country Club in Kailua Kona

By [Mike Bailey](#), Senior Staff Writer

KAILUA-KONA, Hawaii -- Cool mountain breezes, sheep and goats aren't normally associated with Hawaii golf, but that's just what you get when you play [Big Island Country Club](#).



Big Island Country Club has an entirely different look than most golf courses in Hawaii. It's still tropical, mind you, which is evident by the views of the Pacific Ocean 2,000 feet below. But the temperatures and the pace are noticeably cooler than by the shore. Opened in 1997, Big Island Country Club isn't the only mountain golf course in Hawaii, but it's certainly one of the most unique. That much is evident when you get to the greens; they're not Bermuda or paspalum -- they're bentgrass.

"Cooler temperatures, less wind, and it's the most improved course in the state in the last year," said Herman Manalili, director of golf at Big Island Country Club. "It also has two of the better, in not tougher, closing holes."

There are all kinds of flowers, trees and animals throughout this 18-hole journey. One prominent resident of the course is the Hawaii state bird, the Nene goose, and players need to heed the sign near the clubhouse that pleads with visitors not to feed them. Obviously, many have not seen the warning or ignored it as the birds readily approach players hoping for a morsel of cracker or trail mix.

Another native bird found on the course -- often in the water hazards -- is the Hawaiian Coot. There are also plenty of small yellow finches, sheep and goat, which make their way through the many varieties of trees and flora. The course is so dedicated to the preservation of this natural habitat that a portion of the green fees is donated to the nearby Hawaii Wildlife Center.

Half the holes have water on them, and there are plenty of elevated tees, providing panoramic views of the golf course and beyond. On a clear day, as you're coming off the ninth hole, you can even see Maui in the distance.

With new owners, Big Island Country Club also received some much needed improvements in 2010. Though it was only 13 years old, it had already seen significant signs of wear and tear, so the new ownership group invested in new turf, improved the bunkers, and generally brought the course up to par.

Those improvements are ongoing with new on-course restrooms, new tee boxes, ornamental enhancements around the course and generally better playing conditions under superintendent Steve Patterson.

## **Big Island Country Club: In the Dye tradition**

This 7,116-yard, par-72 course is kind of a Pete Dye light, if you will. Designed by son Perry Dye, it isn't overly difficult, but it's not a pushover either.

The course starts out with a dogleg left par 4 that plays 449 yards from tips, but only 386 from the next set of tees. From there it's a mix of easier and more difficult holes. The last two are especially tough, but more on that later.

With five sets it can play as short as 4,803 yards, making it a perfect course for families or couples. The greens are medium size with subtle undulations. Because they are bentgrass, they roll extremely smooth and are receptive to approach shots, given that they receive lots of water for their survival.

Like any good golf course, Big Island Country Club has plenty of memorable holes. The fifth, for example, is a long par 3 that plays over a creek that runs along the left side and in front of the green. From the tips, it's 240 yards.

The sixth is a good risk-reward, 557-yard par 5 with a lake that runs down the right side of the fairway. Play the right set of tees and you might have a shot of hitting this green in two.

And the two closing holes are as good as it gets. Perry Dye paid homage to his father on the 17th with an island-green par 3 that's almost as intimidating as the one at the TPC Sawgrass. And the 18th, a 472-yard par 4 from the back tee, has water that comes into play from the tee and the approach. The water, in fact, bisects the fairway from the green, setting up an intimidating approach to a green completely fronted by a lake.

## **Big Island Country Club: The verdict**

Any golf trip to the Big Island should include a stop at Big Island Country Club. With the recent improvements and a terrific setting, Big Island Country Club promises an enjoyable golf experience on a course that's anything but boring. And it truly does play to all levels.

It's also a good place to work on your game, with good practice facilities and Darrin Gee's Spirit of Golf Academy on the Big Island of Hawaii. Gee created the internationally renowned "Seven Principles of Golf," which is taught to golfers of all levels at his top-ranked golf school. (The Academy also has locations at [Hapuna Golf Course](#) at Mauna Kea Resort and [Makalei Golf Club](#)).

Big Island Country Club also runs a number of promotions, including its Preferred Player Program, which is good for various discounts, including 50 percent on Titleist rental clubs, a valuable incentive for the traveling golfer who doesn't like to haul clubs over the Pacific Ocean.