The Road to Hana - Drive or Tour?

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After over 16 years as a professional photographer on Maui, I can tell you my â€œbread and butterâ€• has always been photographing the road to Hana. Iâ€™ve traveled this road in many ways, from camping, staying at premier destinations like â€œHotel Hanaâ€•, many day trips, staying at state park cabins, rentin houses for days at a time, and many tour van trips with at least 3 different Hana tour companies. I have also photographed Hana by helicopter, by boat, either for the day or camping overnight on shore, and by driving myself in various vehicles of my own or friends rental cars (they usually say they heard to let someone else drive the road to Hana). But my preference is in a tour van, and even though I will share information about driving yourself, I have found that there are some truly great reasons to try a tour rather than drive yourself.

The road to Hanais one of the top 5 scenic drives in the world* and if youâ€™re visiting Maui it is a must do at some point. Road statistics include over 600 hairpin turns, over 50 one lane bridges, black sand beaches and plenty of waterfalls at numerous state parks. It also has one of the most beautiful National Parks in the state. Haleakala National Parkâ€™s Kipahulu District contains the Pools at Oheo, which has the best fresh water swimming on the entire island. The road is also known as â€œThe Highway to Hellâ€• and â€œDivorce Highwayâ€•. This is because of the arguments that ensue d stress of 10 to 12 hours on a narrow winding road with few good places to pull over. Locals headed to work and tanker trucks round out the general mayhem and then add on top of that if youâ€™re not sure where youâ€™re going or how long to stay at a given location and the next thing you know youâ€™re wondering if itâ€™s all worth it. Well, Iâ€™m here to say that it is and to hopefully give you some tips that could make the difference between stressing out or enjoying a great day seeing one of Hawaiiâ€™s truly unique treasures.

Tip #1 - Leave early!

I canâ€™t stress this enough. Wait to leave from either Kihei side or Kaanapali side after 8am and youâ€™re either slowed by local traffic going to work or stuck with other wandering souls who did not get the memo about this long day in the rainforest. 7am is my preference, which is also about the time a tour company will pick you up at your hotel or condo. If you drive yourself, pack the car the night before with cooler and food for lunch, closed toes shoes, swimsuit and towels, cold beverages and a full tank of gas. You donâ€™t want to have to buy these things out on the Hana side as the prices there will only add to the stress of the day. Again, a good tour company will have a nice breakfast stop, lunch and beverages on board and, of course, a guide to answer all your questions along the way. Some of my fondest memories of the road to Hana are the stories from tour drivers about growing up on the island and how they, along with friends and family, experienced Hana as kids.

Tip #2 - Bring the right vehicle

Just about any rental vehicle will get you to Hana and back. You do not need a 4 wheel drive. However, there are some misconceptions if youâ€™re driving yourself. One of them is â€œThe convertibl These are great islands cars for everywhere except the rainforest. Top up - top down all day long because it can rain at any time. When the top is up, the visibility out the smaller than usual windows will, again, add to the stress of a stressful road. Jeeps and minivans are better, but the stiffness of ride from these vehicles usually cancels the better visibility, and these vehicles can run over $100 per day plus gas, which is over $5 dollars a gallon right now on Maui. A van tour is in the $150 to $200 range and includes food and beverages, so usually about the same as going it alone. The smaller tour vans, in the 12 passenger range are my favorite and offer massive window views compared to just about any car. They sit well above roadside rainforest vegetation and bridge

railings, which is where all the waterfalls are seen. Also, some of the most scenic spots on the road are where the road narrows to one lane on the sides of cliffs. No place to pull over here, but in a tour van you can get the shot from a comfy reclining captainâ€™s chair, and you have a guide to let you know that beautiful scenic is coming up. This is invaluable to me even though Iâ€™ve been to Hana many times. A tour van driver gets to see it on a daily basis and has way more insight as to views and weather/waterfall conditions.

So there you have it. Whether you go to Hana on tour or on your own, itâ€™s worth it because it truly is the Hawaii we all dream about. Have fun and remember to take extra camera batteries and plenty of memory card space. I hope these few tips can help make the road to Hana memorable for you for years to come.

Aloha Nui Loa!

*Conde Nast Traveler Reader Survey

www.tourmaui.com for more details.

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Our a Maui tours stops at Waianapanapa State Park to see Maui's a black sand beach, blowholes, sea arches, hala trees and more.

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