



Climbers make their way up Makapu'u Head with Hawai'i Rocks Climbing School.



Rock climbing doesn't get the same billing in Hawai'i as surfing or snorkeling. But a handful of established climbing routes exists—the majority on O'ahu—and the local climbing community, while small, is as active as any on the Mainland.

"There is so much else to do in Hawai'i, whether it's surfing or other water-related sports," says Mike "Bugman" Richardson, co-owner of Hawai'i Rocks, the O'ahu outdoor climbing school guiding me today, and Climb Aloha climbing gear shop. "Unless the cliff is prominent, it might not figure into most people's perceptions."

It's no wonder: The majority of the state's solid, climbable cliffs top out at about 150 feet, while Mainland climbing areas can soar to 3,000 feet—Yosemite National Park, for example. Plus, there's the mistaken belief that the Islands lack the hard rock necessary for safe climbing.

"There's a prevailing misconception that rock in Hawai'i is unsafe," says Richardson. "This isn't necessarily true, as our established climbing areas are on blue-rock basalt—the same stuff that comprises many street curbs and some of our historic buildings around town."

The established sport-climbing sites on O'ahu include the one I'm on, Makapu'u Head on the island's southeastern tip, which offers about 10 easy-to-moderate routes on a 40-foot rock face. O'ahu's North Shore is home to two other established cliffs, both in the Mokulē'ia area—a site dubbed The Jungle, which has 30 routes, and the adjacent Mokulē'ia Main Wall, an 85-foot-high cliff with about 55 routes of varying difficulty.

Hawai'i Rocks offers introductory lessons for beginning, intermediate and advanced climbers, and general guiding for

SUCH GREAT HEIGHTS

You've surfed and snorkeled in Waikīkī. You've hiked the ridges of the Ko'olau mountain range. For a new O'ahu natural high, try rock climbing. **BY JENNY QUILL PHOTOS BY DAVID CROXFORD**

TRUST THE ROPE. JUST TRUST THE ROPE.

I've been muttering this mantra under my breath for the past 10 minutes, hoping that it will give me the confidence to conquer the O'ahu sea cliff off of which I'm currently hanging. So far, it's working.

Searching the rock with the toe of my shoe, I find my next foothold, wedge my fingers into a small crack and, willing my fatigued muscles to work just a little longer, push myself up.

I glance over my shoulder at the scenery around me. It's postcard Hawai'i. Two hang gliders pass above, having launched off nearby Makapu'u Ridge, their shadows dancing across the rock. Sprawled out behind me are miles of crystal-blue ocean punctuated by frothy white surf, frigate birds skimming the surface and, in the distance, fountain-like sprays from a pod of humpback whales.

I'm fortunate enough to be sitting above it all, after completing my first rock-climbing lesson.

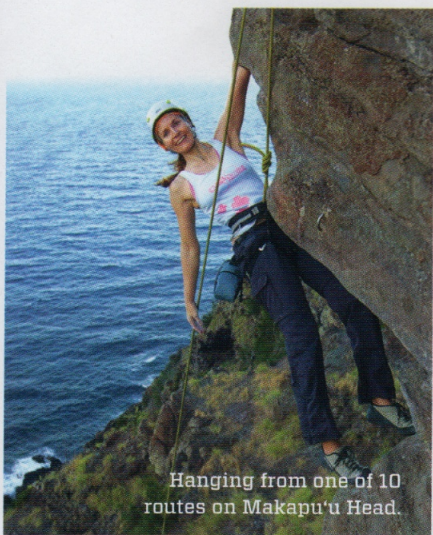
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experienced climbers who want to check out local crags. I signed up for Climbing 101, an eight-hour course that was equal parts nature hike and entomology lesson. The short trek to Makapu'u Head captured scenic viewpoints and interesting flora, while Richardson, also an entomologist with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, pointed out various creepy crawly fauna. My fellow climbers—six of us in all—were twentysomethings, but children as young as 6-years-old can sign up. In fact, says Richardson, the entire family—grandma and grandpa included—can get in on the action.

“Our oldest participant so far was a 77-year-old woman,” he says. “She even took our second, follow-up course and loved it!”

After spending the first half of the day learning the basics—rope knots, how to wear a harness and climbing lingo (*climbing* and *falling* were fairly self-explanatory)—the remainder of the lesson was more action-packed. We took turns rappelling down the rock face, *belaying* (the process of securing a rope to protect your climbing partner from falling) and, finally, climbing.

One by one, we scaled Makapu'u Head—some of us inching our way up, while a nimble few reached the pinnacle in what seemed like record time. More tortoise than hare, I wasn't one of the latter. But climbing to the top, and experiencing and viewing Hawai'i in a way that few do, was victory enough. 🌿



Hanging from one of 10 routes on Makapu'u Head.

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