

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

I Stayed in a 'Resort Bubble' in Hawaii — Here's What It's Really Like

Resort bubbles may be the answer to post-pandemic travel.

BY STACEY LEASCA | APRIL 03, 2021



CREDIT: COURTESY OF TIMBERS KAUAI AT HOKUALA

In 2020, the [Hawaii Tourism Authority](#) reported year-over-year visitor arrivals fell 74% due to the global pandemic. Just 2.7 million people flew to the islands last year, making it the first time that fewer than 3 million people visited since 1975. But, just because Hawaii is down doesn't mean it's out, especially when you learn about all the unique things hotels and resorts on the islands are doing to ensure travelers can safely visit once again.

In early March, I flew to the island of [Kauai](#) to test out the island's [resort bubble program](#) with a stay at [Timbers Kauai at Hokualea](#). The program, first approved by Hawaiian Governor David Ige in September 2020 and later approved by Kauai Mayor Derek Kawakami on Dec. 30, allows travelers to the island to bypass the mandatory 10-day quarantine, so long as they also present a negative COVID-19 test from an approved provider taken with 72 hours of departure to Hawaii. It's also a program now being adopted or considered by other [resorts around the world](#).

Upon arrival in [Kauai](#), it was clear this wasn't business as usual.

Gone are the days of live ukulele performances in the airport, happy travelers in their best Hawaiian t-shirts smiling and milling about, and the stunning lei you used to get when stepping off the plane? That's gone, too. Instead, these relics of a bygone travel era have been replaced with post-pandemic necessities, including social distancing signs, airport employees at every turn to remind travelers to wear their masks over both their nose and mouth, and even a few members of the National Guard, who are on hand to check traveler's paperwork and ensure they're heading to either a bubble or a place to quarantine.

After an extremely brief drive from the airport to Timbers, I headed for check-in, which felt like any other hotel experience, until I was asked to hold out my wrist so they could attach a tracking device that looked somewhat like an Apple watch. For the next 72 hours, the device would track my movements, ensuring I didn't venture off property, thus endangering the lives of locals living in Kauai.

"At Timbers Kauai, we're committed to providing exceptional travel experiences that are also safe and responsible," Bret Robins, the director of sales and marketing at Timbers, shared with *Travel + Leisure*. "The Enhanced Movement Quarantine (EMQ) or 'resort bubble' program is an innovative solution that gives people a chance to experience travel again with precautions that protect guests, associates, and the local community. We've meticulously curated the resort bubble experience at Timbers Kauai to be the gateway to the island for our guests, bringing the flavors, history, culture, and spirit of the locale directly to the resort."

And sure, at first glance, this sounds restrictive. However, a bubble stay at Timbers is anything but. That's because the hotel paired up with its neighboring Marriot property to ensure guests can roam more than 800 acres of land during their three-day bubble period. The resort is even offering some unique programs for bubble guests to take part in to help pass the time. Here's what you need to know if you're interested in vacationing in a bubble right now.

COVID-19 testing is still mandatory

Even if you choose to stay within a resort bubble hotel, getting a pre-travel COVID-19 test is still mandatory for travel to any island in Hawaii. As the state's website reads, "Whether you are a returning resident or a visitor to the Hawaiian Islands, we want to ensure that all travelers remain safe and healthy. For this reason, travelers are strongly advised to take a pre-travel COVID-19 test from a trusted testing and travel partner prior to the final leg of their trip to the State of Hawai'i. Trans-Pacific travelers arriving without a confirmed negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of departure are subject to a mandatory 10-day quarantine."

The negative test result must also be uploaded onto Safe Travels, the state's official portal, prior to departure, or printed out prior to your flight, so it can be shown to an official.

What you can still do at Timbers Kauai at Hokuala



CREDIT: COURTESY OF TIMBERS KAUAI AT HOKUALA

Here's the beauty of bubbling at Timbers: You won't even notice you're in the bubble. With hundreds of acres to roam, the property is expansive enough that you can venture on bike or on foot for days and still not see it all.

The resort also comes with an absolutely stunning 18-hole golf course that people in the bubble or out can use at any time of day. Choose from morning or afternoon tee times, or choose to just play the back nine for an oceanfront round.

"With so much space and varied landscapes, activities are virtually limitless," Robins says. "Guests can go golfing at the Ocean Course, our signature Jack Nicklaus course; hike or bike on 16 miles of recreational trails; kayak or paddle through our lagoons; lounge by the pool and shop our weekly pop-up market

featuring the island's most beloved artisans." (I picked up some Hawaiian rubs from the local shop [La Morena](#) during the weekly pop-up as a souvenir, and trust me, your future at-home meals will thank you for doing the same.)

Timbers is also home to its own fully operational organic garden, which guests are welcome to explore on their own, or via a tour with its head farmer, Cody. On the tour, guests can taste test the 30 different fruits growing on the land, including lots of mangos and avocados, or "anything else you might want when you come to Hawaii," Cody exclaims while proudly showing off his produce on our tour.

And, perhaps the most delicious activity of all is the ridiculously tasty poke bowl class, which comes with the freshest local ingredients, including a few veggies right from the garden.



CREDIT: COURTESY OF TIMBERS KAUAI AT HOKUALA

And what you can't

While there is most certainly plenty to do to fill the time, there is one important thing those in the bubble cannot do: visit the beach. At all. We're talking, not a single toe in the sand. However, those guests still in the bubble are allowed to sit on the grassy area butting up against Kalapaki Beach if they so choose. The reason for this is because the beach is still a public access point, meaning it's used by both guests of the hotels and by the public. The rule is meant to protect the locals living in Kauai from potential exposure while allowing them to still access the beaches they adore. Don't worry, after your three days is up you can join them for a surf.

"From the very beginning, Timbers Kauai has worked closely with local authorities to safely reopen in a way that protects our local community, our staff, guests, and owners," Robins says. "Our team conducts extensive pre-arrival outreach to review local safety protocols and policies with incoming guests."

The only other thing you can't do is venture off property for a meal, but no need to worry there either as the hotel will happily stock the kitchen in your residence with anything you desire, from breakfast to dinner and all the snacks in between.

What happens at the end of the 72 hours?

After three days, guests participating in the resort Bubble may "test out" of the program. That involves a nurse coming to your room and giving you a quick nasal swab for a rapid test. The process was extremely easy (I won't say painless because as anyone who's gotten a COVID-19 test before can attest to, nasal swabs aren't fun) and within mere minutes we were done.

Following the test, guests are free to roam about the island at will and take part in excursions with Timbers, including private waterfall hikes, surfing lessons, or simply enjoying those Ocean Club beach services at Kalapaki Beach.

So, should you do it?

In a word, yes. As long as it feels right for you.

If you're looking for a vacation option that absolutely does the most to ensure your safety and the safety of local residents, then this is the right option.

"The resort bubble experience is the ideal option for anyone who is looking for an escape without feeling confined to a hotel room," Robins adds. "Travelers can experience the natural beauty and wonder of Kauai safely and effectively right on our property. Our expansive residences also include fully equipped kitchens, spacious lanais, and multiple bedrooms with en suite baths, making it perfect for both families and travel pods looking for both space and privacy."

As for timing, I'd suggest flying in on a Wednesday and working from the property until Friday, when you can test out of the program and freely roam by the weekend. Oh, and if you love your room, you can actually *buy* it, as the residences at Timbers, which are available for overnight stays, are also available for purchase through fractional- and whole-ownership.

"In fact, many guests who visited Timbers Kauai in the last year have ended up falling in love with the locale and staying several months," Robins says. "Some of them were so enamored that they've even purchased a home at Timbers Kauai to permanently join the ohana."

See more about booking options at [Timbers Kauai at Hokuala here](#).