

Mauna Kea Golf Course
Kohala Coast
Big Island, Hawaii

Designer: Robert Trent Jones Sr (1966)/Rees Jones (2008)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Blue	72	6806	74.7	134
Orange	72	6358	72.2	130

Overview:

Robert Trent Jones was “the man” among golf course architects in the 1960’s when he was asked by his wealthy friend Laurance Rockefeller to design a course to compliment a \$15 million dollar remote destination resort being contemplated for the arid west coast of the Big Island. Trent was confronted with a challenging piece of hilly, lava entombed real estate next to a large piece of paradise. It took all his creative skills and engineering prowess but he did a marvelous job orchestrating the ground into a stage for an unforgettable golf experience.

Much like his creations from this same period at Spyglass Hill or The Golden Horseshoe, he found a way to use the tumultuous terrain to his advantage to provide startling vistas and tactical golf challenges. Robert Trent Sr. was one of the patriarchs of the heroic school of design so this one is not for the feint of heart. It was updated by his son Rees in 2008, who is another one who does not cut any slack for the meek, so if anything the resulting course became harder.

His son’s renovation work looks to have touched every corner of the property. The main improvement was the move to the latest version of Tiff Bermuda grass throughout which makes it more durable and environmentally friendly to maintain. The irrigation systems and the drainage were improved to solve long standing issues. What you see are typical Trent Jones greens-sprawling and segmented to make them tactically relevant-that roll a top speeds because of the new grass. The bunkering has Rees’s fingerprints all over it-plentiful, artistic, always front of mind. His presentation of these green complexes will take your breath away and often leave you scratching your head walking to the next tee. The bermuda grass presents a particular challenge when pitching and chipping around these greens. Steep swings get caught in this sticky grass which takes the high lob shot out of your repertoire for the day.

What you see is a place with a real 60’s retro feel about it-the architecture of the buildings and the residences throughout the property are that low square “I Spy” California look. They have recently redone the golf shop and Number 3 restaurant to bring them up to the quality of the rest of the facility. The only disappointment is the practice area which remains in dire need of upgrade, expansion, and softer golf balls. They could also do a much better job in relating to you the green topography and pin positions of the day, especially since both should figure into your playing strategy on every hole.

Robert Trent’s challenge at Mauna Kea was two-fold, he had to make arid land seeming inhospitable to grass growth suitable for golf and reign in the rugged topography to route holes that were challenging, playable, and would showcase the dramatic vistas of the Hawaii’s Kohala Coast.

Lava fields dominate the coastal areas on this side of the Big Island creating a rocky wasteland over the 230 acres intended for the site of the golf course. This side of the island gets very little rainfall so finding the water to support any vegetation would be a challenge as well. Trent realized that there were two kinds of lava present-brown lava that can be crushed to a powder mass and blue rock lava that is virtually impossible to break up. Managing a metamorphosis of this ground to make it suitable for golf seemed like an insurmountable challenge.

Never one to back down from a challenge Trent and his experienced engineering crew developed their own engineering techniques and processes that enabled the use of the crushed lava as a soil base on which he added a mix of lime and crushed coral dredged from the nearby bay to grow a hybrid brand of Bermuda grass with great success. The water he needed was provided by drilling a couple of wells almost 400-feet deep coupled with the first fully automatic underground golf course irrigation system of their own creation. The result was astonishing, green grass flourished in what had appeared to be an arid desert. The blue lava was either blasted, buried, or left alone as an accent to the developing holes. The cost of all this was over \$2 million dollars, equivalent of close to \$15 million in today's currency, an unheard of expenditure for building a golf course in those days. But Rockefeller had the deep pockets and the desire to have a special centerpiece to his high end resort.

Routing the holes straight up and down the slopes he gives you some very severe elevation changes that will increment club selection but very few holes with side ways roll offs. This makes picking and maintaining shot lines much more manageable. As is often the case with this type of terrain, there is rarely a long run for a straight fairway so most of the holes bend dramatically or are folded to fit the available shape of the land. The result is that there are many short par fours that play from a high tee to a landing area below and then turn dramatically to a four-story green complex on top of the next hill. This template will wear on you, especially if hitting high elevation, full carry approach shots is not in your wheelhouse.

For me the par threes are the centerpiece of this course. Number 3 is the signature hole with the Cypress Point look and not as much ocean to carry. This is a photo opp for sure so you can expect a backup due to clicking digital cameras. Number 11 is another absolute beauty-a medium length par three. It is a downhill look at an evasive green nestled against the ocean-it brings to mind the 7th at Pebble with a much longer club in your hand. The par fives are some of the most imaginative you will play anywhere. Here Trent uses the incline, some carefully placed fairway bunkers, and dramatic green arrangements to give you chances for success or disaster on every one of them. Eight and seventeen are tumbling dice affairs where you cannot believe how far your ball has traveled and are tempted to do things you probably should not consider. Of the par fours I like nine and eighteen in particular because both give you the distracting dramatic look of the coast line below but demand you control the line and carry of your shots to have a scoring chance at the end of each side.

Sequencing of the holes is what creates a tactical momentum for any course. He did a marvelous job in this regard starting you out with relatively easy holes each nine and then quickly picking up the challenge in the next few holes. Once you reach that level the challenges come in a variety of forms in rapid succession, you barely get over the rush from the last whole when the wow factor of the next tee hits you. This is a course where you will have a bad hole but there are plenty of chances to redeem yourself with smart decision making and timely shot execution.

As I said earlier, this is not a course for those who are not up for a stiff challenge. If you cannot hit the high carry shot or big bad bunkering intimidates the hell out of you then take the day off and go to the beach instead. But if you are up for it this is Robert Trent Jones at his macho best. Play well here and you will have some serious big fish stories to lay on your friends.

Hole-By-Hole Analysis:

#1 Par 4 374/353 Yards

The course begins simply enough with a shortish dog ear par four adjacent to the driving range. Drive it to left center and you end up about 150 between the fairway bunkers. No percentage in trying to clear the bunker on the corner because the slightest mistake right on that line and you are OB in the practice range. The hole turns almost 90 degrees to the right at this point and climbs a steep hill. You have to carry this next one onto the putting surface, so pull enough club for the elevation change, there will not be many hit it short and trundle it on today. Bank a par and fasten your seat belt your pulse rate is about to go up quickly.

#2 Par 4 357/336

One of the criticisms of this course is that there are a number of par fours with the same look. You are going to see a lot of this one today-high precipice tee to a landing area well below you, followed by a sharp turn to the left to a green perched on a hill above you. That being said, each of the holes plays a bit differently and the challenge really does not get old. Take in the view from this tee before focusing on the drive, it is quite spectacular. You want to hit a draw that begins center and will leave you at the base of the hill looking up at the green. The landing area is wide to the right but I think if you let your eye start looking at that you can end up with a peel shot well into the Bermuda rough. This is a shallow putting surface with a spine across the center-steep toward you on the front and a shelf above. You need to be precise on this approach to stay on the green and give yourself a birdie putt.

#3 Par 3 205/179

Every piece you read about Mauna Kea talks about this hole, when you step on this tee you will see there is good reason for this. At 179 yards it is not the 16th at Cypress Point, but it sure has most of the visual elements. The view from this tee will take your breath away so give yourself an extra minute to take in the awesome view and let your heart rate get back within the aerobic range before selecting a club. The key to this hole is the length of the green-it is very long which gives you plenty of surface to play with in making your club selection. I favor the longer one working right to left over dry land. The green is a narrow kidney but sufficiently wide up front to hold the curve. Once on the putting surface I think the fun just begins because there is serious contour here that you have to negotiate to actually make a par. There is a heel print in the center that will make balls move away from the right side locations. Looking back from the green is a spectacular view as well.

#4 Par 4 385/357

From the template of number two this one is a little longer and not as much turn to the left. Drive it to right center turning it off the right bunker and you end up in a flat area at the base of the hill. The elevation is a club difference to the blind green sitting on a 5 to 11 angle on the hill above. One deep greenside bunker on the left but there is a small thumb print retention area that will collect some of the balls heading for the bunker. This green has tilt from back to front.

#5 Par 5 560/518

Some of the coolest holes you play all day are the par fives and this one is a perfect example of Trent's creativity on the three shot holes. This hole plays uphill the whole way so you need a strong drive followed by a strong lay up. Hit a draw at the spread tree you see on the right and it will lean to the left of the ground-cutting the left corner makes no sense because you will end up in the rough and that will make the three wood you want to hit much more difficult. Your second is to a blind landing area around 100 from the green-the air conditioning unit on the roof of the palace on the hill is a nice aiming point. There is a magnetic nasty in the center of the fairway just inside this so be careful not to be too bold. The green is a large oblong heart with three distinct sections-it is a must to put the ball in the one with the pin to give yourself a good scoring chance.

#6 Par 4 338/315

Another spectacular look from the tee as you are turning back toward the ocean once again with the short dogleg left template par four. Here three wood is probably the right club choice just to keep yourself out of the bunkers that frame the landing area. From there this is a Tower of London pitch to a deep green with very deep bunkers set into the hill. There is no back right to this green-balls long there will fall into a low grassy area behind the horseshoe bunker on the right and leave a dicey elevation pitch back up to the green.

#7 Par 3 198/188

Least spectacular but maybe the hardest of the three pars today. This is a steep elevation change from the tee beside the entrance road to a green embedded into the hill above you. Bunkers sandwich this green but there is an opening from the right so I like a club more than the distance landing on the front of the green feeding back to the left. This green slants from right to left because of the hill influence on the right so missing on that side will leave a very slick pitch down the slope. A bogey here will not be a surprising score.

#8 Par 5 526/493

If you thought the last par five was fun wait until you play this dipsy doodle affair. The hole plays significantly downhill almost all the way to the green, though this is not apparent when you stand on the tee for the first time. Hit a big draw turning off the right bunker and you will get lots of roll out toward the green. Once you get to your ball you will be amazed at how far it has ambled and you likely have a shot at a stunning coffee table green complex set slightly above the fairway. The front right bunker is beautiful but no place to play from so hit it hard at left edge and hole that line. You will likely have a short pitch left up onto this large green-walk up to the edge so you can see the contour you will have to negotiate. The predominant lean is back

to front so you need to hit a lower version of the sand wedge to roll it out to the hole. Look back from the green and you can appreciate the Mick Jagger tumbling dice contour you just played.

#9 Par 4 375/342

Almost time for a cool one at the #3 halfway house but don't get distracted, this is a difficult technical hole you need to negotiate. From the high tee you have another panoramic view of the property as it heads back toward the ocean. Hit a strong shot down the right center just beyond the large bunker he placed on the right-if you wander left you have a large tree jutting into your line to the green surface. This green is folded over a spine from 8 to 12 leaning toward you in the front and funneling off to the left in the back. It should handle a right to left curve nicely so take it out to the right and work it up the green. If you miss left your ball will fall to a grassy area well below the green-difficult elevation up and down from there.

#10 Par 5 534/509

From here out it is Trent Jones at his best. There is not a hole you will play in this nine that is not unique, intriguing, and downright fun. Start this side with a drive to a landing area slightly above you-ignore the three bunkers he placed in the hill on the right-there is no cutting this corner-aim at the sprinkler control box on the hill on the left. From the left center of the fairway you will see three Dr. Seuss spindly palm trees-the one on the right is your aiming point for the second shot. Like the first par five there is a nasty bunker set at the foot of the hill at about 70 yards you cannot take on. The green is up a small hill and is well protected by deep bunkers that pinch the sides. The narrow front of the green banks toward you and then the back half spreads and leans away to the right. This is a par hole if you are not careless.

#11 Par 3 214/206

If it was not for the notoriety of number three this would be the signature hole on the course. From the top of the hill looking down at the sea it is a resplendent view-this hole bears a resemblance to number 7 at Pebble just twice the length and a bit less ocean. The downhill is a club less but the prevailing wind from the ocean gives it back so I think it plays the measured distance. Looking down at this green you recognize that there is no bail out except short-hedges on the left and right and scrub to the ocean over. Bunkers frame the target on either side and he even provided one in the back left to keep you from the oblivion if you are trundling on that line with too much enthusiasm. The front is open so you can land it on the down slope and feed onto the front third of the green. The green leans toward you and to the right so it should break the momentum of the ball nicely.

#12 Par 4 373/340

From here on the bunkering is very elaborate and pleasing to the eye-sometimes not pleasing to the scorecard. Rees does not like unfettered green space between tees and greens. This is a shortish dogear right par four with a wonderful hyphenated array of bunkers that frame the left side of the hole. One lone bunker on the right corner of the dogleg. Hit it solid up the left and stay out of the punctuation-this should leave you about 110 to 130 up a steep hill to a 3 step green fronted by very intimidating bunkers on either side. The tiering of this green make getting the ball to the pin and all air affair. Difficult par here.

#13 Par 4 337/326

The short dogear left uphill par four template strikes again. This is the oddest of them all. I am convinced Rees decided he had to put full fear in the long hitter who might try to drive this green so he put a series of five stepped bunkers in the face of the left side of the hill going up to this turret green complex. It looks like a Coney Island Skee Ball game from the tee. There is a single bunker on the right side and you want to hit a driver past that with a bit of draw. Now you have a repelling wedge to reach the top of the turret-it is a good club longer even with a short club. Deep U-Shaped bunker that you have to traverse from that side. There is no way to reach this green without a carry over sand. Not very fair for the women, children, or old folks.

#14 Par 4 425/405

Long par four sharp dogear left-you have no idea where the green is from the tee. Drive it to the center of the wide landing area to the right of the two fairway bunkers that delineate the turn in the hold. Another high approach to the damsel in distress green complex well to the left and up a steep incline. You are likely hitting this approach off a side hill stance so accommodate your aim accordingly. Fiercely deep bunkers in front that have handled ceremonial human sacrifices before you-do not become another one of their victims or it is double or worse on the card.

#15 Par 3 188/171

Trent presented us with four par threes that are all totally unique, beautiful to behold, and very challenging. This one is about 170 but it plays slightly uphill and has another very long green which helps accommodate the club selection adjustment you are contemplating. It is all carry from the tee across a small valley to a green pinched on both sides by deep and long bunkers. The green has a distinct spine across the center that actually creates a three pod effect on the green. The back pod falls away from you so don't be surprised if a shot with enthusiasm ends up on the back edge.

#16 Par 4 425/397

Big driving area on this dogleg right, but you want to hit it to left center just off the left fairway bunker for a good look back to the green setting on the right. Two big bunkers on the right and one flanking the left of one of the smaller, trickier greens you will play today. The front left is a low with a backstop wall segmenting the green into two distinct parts. The back tier hidden behind the front right bunker is three feet higher and tilted distinctly to the right. You almost have to hit a low hard one into the front section and let it skip up the hill onto the back tier. Hitting this green in two and two putting is a major challenge.

#17 Par 5 561/538

Another super cool par five as you start heading for the house-you have not seen anything like this before. Drive is to a wide uphill landing area slightly above you framed by deep bunkers on either side. Take note of the holes on the hill above the hole on the right-they have some views to die for. From here the layout is 200 or so down the left over a hill in front of you to a blinded landed area below. Take note of the bad sand pit at 190 on the right-this is a disaster you must avoid. The aiming point is the V-tree you see just left of the green

which will leave you down the left side on the flats about 100 from the coffee table green across a valley in the fairway. The bunker around this green set on a 4 to 10 diagonal to your hitting spot is Rees artistic. The green is pretty flat by Rees standards so if you can hit it in the area of the flag you have a good chance to ring up a birdie coming in.

#18 Par 4 431/385

Much like nine this is a wonderful tumbling downhill finishing hole full of challenge and excitement. Take in the beauty of the view before you plan your final assault. From the high tee you aim at the bunker you see through the fairway down the left. The ball should tumble down to around 150 and now you are looking across a low area to a very difficult greens setting up from the fairway. This is another diagonal green set with a big tier across the middle. The back left falls off the green to the left so the shot to hit is a draw at the front portion turning up the slope. This green is very large so do not be surprised if you have a long first putt to negotiate. Note that anything putted from the tier to the upper tier will pick up speed once it gets to the top as this section of the green slopes away from you and to the left. Par here is a very gratifying score.