

# BIG ISLAND

## All-Terrain Adventure

With ATV Outfitters Hawaii it's ride, baby, ride, and see the Big Island like never before

BY MARTY WENTZEL

**K**APAAU, Big Island — When you find yourself straddling a growling 1,000-pound monster, what should you do? If your steed happens to be an all-terrain vehicle, just hold on tight and ride, baby, ride.

I came face to face with that challenge recently, having signed up for the 15-mile Waterfall Adventure with ATV Outfitters Hawaii. Run by Bill and Sandie Wong, the Big Island company combines the wind-through-your-hair thrills of big-wheeling with an education in the nature, culture and history of the island's North Kohala region.

The Wongs recently relocated their headquarters from a Kapaau storefront

Sandie said. "Still, our biggest challenge is to change people's perceptions of an ATV. Some folks think it's too dangerous to ride."

It's true that an ATV adventure isn't for the timid, the reckless or kids under age 16, and Wong's team makes sure participants know how to handle their rigs before hitting the trail. After signing release forms and suiting up in protective gear — head socks, helmets and heavy-duty gloves — our group went through a lesson in operating the massive vehicles. Under the watchful eye of our guides Fado and Darroll, we took several practice loops around the grounds by their headquarters.

I'm not known for my upper body strength, but I quickly mastered the maneuvering of my ATV, since my thumbs did all the work on the gas and brake levers. The trick is balance, leaning left or right around turns, and sliding forward or backward on the seat when going uphill or down.

Then off we powered beneath canopies of trees, along lanes of wild ginger, through mountain streams, past herds of grazing cattle and alongside overgrown railroad tracks used to transport cane during the heyday of the island's sugar industry. Our upcountry destination was an 85-foot waterfall surrounded by one of the oldest rainforests on the Big Island.

ATV Outfitters Hawaii prides itself on the fact that all of its guides are Big Island natives.

"They're sharing their history with our visitors," Sandie said. "This island is part of their heritage."

True to form, as Fado and Darroll gathered and



ATV Outfitters Hawaii, started by Bill and Sandie Wong, was the first ATV tour on the Big Island.



to a charmingly refurbished cowboy shack, which they towed to a one-acre pasture just north of the town. There, Sandie Wong filled me in on the company's background and unique selling points.

"Bill is a native Hawaiian and a fourth-generation resident of the Big Island, and he really knows this area," she said. "I'm from Oahu, but my great-great grandfather came to North Kohala from China. When I moved to the Big Island, I felt a strong sense that I belonged here."

The Wongs launched ATV Outfitters Hawaii six years ago. "We wanted to do something that kept us in touch with our Big Island roots," Sandie explained. "We were the first ATV tour company on the island, but now others have started up, maybe because they've seen how busy we've been."

At first, Bill and Sandie ran the company on their own, with a fleet of six ATVs. Today they have 30 vehicles and a staff of nine including several trail guides although Bill still enjoys leading tours himself when he can.

Outfitters Hawaii's rides have attracted a mix of visitors, from actor Mayans to the Princess of Indonesia and her entourage. A year-old man told me that the trip made him feel like a youngster,"

cracked open guava and macadamia nuts for us to sample by the falls, they captivated the crowd with stories of life on the island.

The 2.5-mile waterfall excursion costs \$166 per person, with juice and bottled water provided.

ATV Outfitters Hawaii also runs a 1.5-hour ocean cliff trail, with a stop at a secluded pebbled beach once favored by Hawaii's King Kamehameha the Great (\$94).

The company's 30-mile all-day ATV adventure takes clients from the mountains to the sea, with stops at several waterfalls (\$325 including a light lunch).

All riders must be at least 16 years old and weigh 90-300 pounds. Children ages 5-15 who weigh 45-120 pounds can come along at reduced rates, providing they ride with the trail guides. Clients booking the ride should wear long pants and close-toed shoes. ■

## CONTACTS

The following companies offer all-terrain vehicle tours on the Big Island:

### ATV Outfitters Hawaii

A family-run company presenting tours out of North Kohala.  
888-288-7288  
www.outfittershawaii.com

### Bedrock Ranch ATV

Leading groups to a green sand beach on the South Shore.  
808-929-8157  
www.bedrockranchatv.com

### Waipio ATV Adventure

Offers rides through the sugar cane fields of Kukuihaele on the Hamakua Coast.  
877-757-1414  
www.kukuiatv.com