

As lava oozes, Hawaii officials say rest of island is open

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Hawaii officials have had a busy month pleading with travelers to keep their plans even as dramatic images of natural disasters afflicting the islands have bombarded televisions and social media feeds.

Steam and gas rise from Kilauea's summit crater in Volcanoes National Park, Hawaii, Wednesday.Â (Source: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Hawaii: Warnings that Hawaii's Kilauea volcano could shoot boulders and ash out of its summit crater are prompting people to rethink their plans to visit the Big Island.

But most of the rest of the island is free of volcanic hazards, and local tourism officials are hoping travelers will recognize the Big Island is ready to welcome them.

Rachel Smigelski-Theiss is among those who have shifted gears. She had intended to visit Kilauea's summit with her husband and 5-year-old daughter and stay in Volcano, a town a few miles from the crater. Now they've cancelled their trip. She's worried potential flight disruptions would strand them on the island.

“My equivalent of this _ and I from South Florida where we have hurricanes _ is driving quite literally into a hurricane,” she said.

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In April, floods on Kauai Island made travelers nervous. Then last week, it was Kilauea volcano sending 2,200 degree (1,200 degree Celsius) lava bursting through cracks into people's backyards in the Leilani Estates neighborhood. Then as Kilauea's magma shifted underground, a magnitude-6.9 earthquake rocked the Big Island.

Hannique Ruder, a 65-year-old resident living in the Leilani Estates subdivision, walks past the mound of hardened lava while surveying the neighborhood Friday, May 11, 2018, near Pahoa, Hawaii. (Source: AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

Since the quake, there have been frequent aftershocks. More than a dozen fissures oozing lava have opened in the ground. Adding to the distress, of the 36 structures destroyed, 26 were homes.

And now, scientists are warning that an explosive eruption may occur at the summit crater within weeks.

Tina Neal, the scientist-in-charge of the U.S. Geological Survey's Hawaiian Volcanoes Observatory, said geologists don't expect the summit eruption to be life-threatening so long as people stay out of the national park. Volcano and other nearby communities may be showered by pea-sized fragments or dusted with nontoxic ash but they aren't expected to get hit by large boulders, she said.

Robert Hughes, the owner of Aloha Junction Bed and Breakfast in Volcano, said he's had tons of

cancellations since Wednesday when geologists first warned of the explosive eruption.

But Hughes, a 45-year resident of the village of some 2,500 people, suspects heâ€™ll soon hear from adventurers and photographers who want to see the eruption up close.

â€œIâ€™m not too worried about it because Iâ€™ve lived here so long and Iâ€™ve seen it go through lots of different episodes,â€• Hughes said.

The town, which is nestled in a lush rainforest a few miles from the crater, is a popular overnight spot for park visitors.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Parkâ€™s decision to close Friday due to the risk of an explosive eruption will discourage travelers, said Janet Coney, the office manager at Kilauea Lodge, an inn in Volcano. The lodge, which has 12 rooms and 4 cottages, has had a handful of cancellations. Coney is anticipating more depending on what happens.

There are also further potential risks where lava has been erupting 25 miles (40 kilometers) east of the crater in Leilani Estates. Scientists said the molten rock there could start moving faster if fresher, hotter magma emerges from the ground.

Neal said a chemical analysis of the lava thatâ€™s erupted since last week indicated itâ€™s from magma that had been stored in the ground since a 1955 eruption. Itâ€™s been sluggish and somewhat cooler as a result, she said. But Kilauea could release hotter, faster-moving and more voluminous lava because magma has moving into the area from further up the volcano, she said.

The CEO of the Hawaii Tourism Authority, the agency that markets Hawaii to the world, said Kilauea is being monitored around the clock to provide the public with the best information. But George Szigeti noted that the Big Island is â€œimmenseâ€• and there are large parts of the island unaffected by the volcano.

Like the town of Kamuela which is home to vast cattle ranches and Hawaiiâ€™s own cowboys, called paniolo. The coffee farms on the Kona side of the island, which is more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) away from where lava is erupting. Thereâ€™s also the night sky visible from the 13,803-foot (4207-meter) summit of Mauna Kea, the islandâ€™s tallest peak and the location of some of the worldâ€™s most advanced telescopes.

Ross Birch, the executive director of the Island of Hawaii Visitors Bureau, said officials â€œwalk the fine line.â€•

â€œWe know what people are going through in Leilani Estates. And we donâ€™t want to seem callous and inconsiderate in our messaging and our promotion of the island,â€• he said. At the same time, tourism is the islandâ€™s biggest industry and peopleâ€™s livelihoods are dependent on visitors coming, he said.

â€œWe want to make sure that everybody is still working and people have jobs to go back to,â€• Birch said.

- AP