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FRONTRUNNERS



SHELL BEACH

IF THE TURTLES are any indication, the Fairmont Orchid (808.885.2000, www.fairmont.com) may have the Big Island's best sunbathing beach. "There's a refuge for endangered Hawaiian green sea turtles at a neighboring hotel," says David Roberts, the resort's general manager, "but every afternoon they swim over to lie on our beach."

Since becoming a Fairmont property in 2002, the Orchid has undergone renovations that include the additions of an outdoor spa and a Gold Floor with a private lounge and elevator. The resort also features four of the island's finest restaurants, but the beach is its most enticing attribute. Most of the beaches on the Big Island are overrun with lava rocks, rendering them unsafe and uncomfortable, but the Orchid's has a sandy shoreline that abuts a cove teeming with yellow tangs, parrot fish, and precious corals. The Fairmont's Beach Boys supply equipment for those guests interested in snorkeling or kayaking, but, like the turtles, many opt just to lie on the sand. —SAMANTHA BROOKS

CARIBBEAN GEM

WITH THE RECENT addition of the final jewel in its trio of private villas, the Altamer resort (264.498.4000, www.altamer.com) in Anguilla is now complete. African Sapphire, a 14,000-square-foot manse with two master suites and six additional bedrooms, is the third Myron Goldfinger-designed estate on the 6-acre

property, joining Russian Amethyst and Brazilian Emerald, both of which have five bedrooms.

Conceived as an enclave for family gatherings or executive retreats, Altamer consists of the three villas, conference facilities, and a restaurant helmed by Maurice Leduc, formerly of Maxim's in Paris. African

Sapphire, the largest of the villas, can accommodate as many as 16 guests and offers such features as a private snorkeling pond, a home theater, and a digital sound system with more than 30,000 programmable songs. Rates for the villa begin at \$40,000 per week for the winter season.

—KAREN CAKEBREAD

AGUA EVERYWHERE

THE MARQUIS Los Cabos (877.238.9399, www.marquisloscabos.com) takes advantage of its beachfront setting on the tip of Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

The resort's open architectural style allows you to see and hear the Sea of Cortés from almost all public spaces on the property, while floor-to-ceiling

windows ensure that the water remains within view from the 209 suites and 28 casitas. A 36-foot waterfall provides a dramatic backdrop for diners at the resort's restaurants, but morning meals at the Marquis, which opened in 2003, are best enjoyed from the comfort of your suite: Hot coffee, fresh fruit, and pastries are delivered to a hidden niche in your room each morning. When you awake, you unlatch the compartment, grab its contents, and head for your private balcony to enjoy your breakfast with an ocean view.

—MARYANN HAMMERS

