

# MAUNA KEA HAZARDS

PLEASE READ BEFORE TRAVELING ABOVE HALE POHAKU

## ALTITUDE

The summit elevation is 13,796 feet (4200 m), where the atmospheric pressure is 40% less than at sea level. Less oxygen is available to the lungs, and acute mountain sickness is common. Symptoms include headaches, drowsiness, nausea, shortness of breath, and poor judgment. The intensity of these symptoms may be lessened by spending at least 1/2 hour at the Visitor Information Station, 9,200 feet (3,000 m), before traveling to the summit. If these symptoms persist or become severe, immediately descend to lower altitudes. High altitude exposure is particularly hazardous for pregnant women, for persons in poor physical condition or with heart or respiratory problems, and for children and teenagers. Extended exposure to high altitude can cause permanent damage to younger persons whose bodies are still developing. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that none of these individuals (including children under the age of 16) travel above the Visitor Information Station.

**CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 16, PREGNANT WOMEN, PERSONS IN POOR PHYSICAL CONDITION OR WITH HEART OR RESPIRATORY PROBLEMS SHOULD NOT TRAVEL ABOVE THE VISITOR INFORMATION STATION.**

High altitudes can also cause the life-threatening conditions pulmonary edema (fluid in the lungs) and cerebral edema (fluid on the brain). Symptoms include severe headaches, vomiting, breathing difficulties, coughing, blue lips or fingernails, disorientation, and extreme drowsiness that may lead to coma. Immediate descent is essential if any of these symptoms appear.

**PERSONS EXPERIENCING ANY SEVERE HIGH ALTITUDE SYMPTOMS MUST BE TAKEN TO LOWER ALTITUDES IMMEDIATELY. IT CAN BE A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH.**

The summit is above much of the atmosphere that blocks the sun's ultraviolet radiation. This presents a risk of serious sunburn and eye damage, particularly when there is snow on the ground.

**USE SUNSCREEN, SUNGLASSES, AND PROTECTIVE CLOTHING**

High altitude causes impaired reason and drowsiness. Alcohol will further impair judgment and driving abilities.

**DO NOT DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES ON MAUNA KEA**

# MAUNA KEA HAZARDS

PLEASE READ BEFORE TRAVELING ABOVE HALE POHAKU

## DRIVING

The summit access road is approximately 10 miles long, with an altitude change of nearly 5,000 feet. There are numerous sections with a grade of 15%. The steep grades can result in brake overheating while driving downhill. Driving slowly, and in low gear, will reduce the chances of brake failure.

**ALWAYS USE LOW GEAR. 4 WHEEL DRIVE VEHICLES  
ARE STRONGLY RECOMMENDED.**

The first 5 miles of road is unpaved, with poor traction, narrow sections, blind curves, and rocks on the road. In some places, there may not be enough room for two-way traffic, especially when large trucks are involved. Slow speeds are essential to avoid road hazards.

**DRIVE AT SPEEDS OF 25 MPH OR LESS.**

## WEATHER

Weather conditions can be severe, including winds over 100 miles per hour, freezing temperatures, and snow storms. "White outs"(caused by blowing snow) can block all visibility. Deep snow drifts, freezing fog, and ice on the road can prevent passage. Visitors trapped on the mountain under these circumstances are in a life-threatening situation. Serious weather conditions can last for more than a week, preventing a "rescue".

**MAKE SURE THAT COLD WEATHER CLOTHING IS AVAILABLE. EVACUATE AS SOON AS  
HAZARDOUS WEATHER CONDITIONS BEGIN TO OCCUR.**

In the winter, ice can form suddenly, and without warning. The steep paved grades are dangerous with just a thin coat of ice or snow.

**EVACUATE IF ROAD ICE BEGINS TO FORM.**

## REMOTE LOCATION

Mauna Kea is a very remote location, with no public accommodation, food or gasoline service. The observatory buildings are usually not open to the public. There are no permanent restrooms above the Visitor Station. The only public telephone above Hale Pohaku is an emergency phone in the entrance to the University of Hawaii 88-inch Telescope. Vehicles should be in good working condition, especially the brakes, with sufficient fuel to return to Hilo or Waimea. Emergency services, including medical assistance may be 2 hours away. Safety precautions must be taken to prevent serious injuries.

**--BE PREPARED -- USE CAUTION -- TRAVEL AT YOUR OWN RISK--**