





SAILING
ON
TONGA
TIME

This island paradise dances to the beat
of its own drum

*STORY & PHOTOS BY
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I was trying to get a shot of the piglets running around outside while Kolo-maile preached at maximum volume, eyes closed and sweating through his black three-piece suit in the heat of the morning. It was Tongan Fathers Day and we had been invited to church on Nuapapu, an island of 82 people and five preachers. The one-room church had a few rows of pews, a bounty of synthetic flowers around the altar and one wall that looked like it was about to peel off and heave itself down the hill. This was no ordinary beaches-and-bars charter.

AT THIS POINT, we were a few days into our visit to Vava'u, a group of 40 islands and islets in the Kingdom of Tonga, deep in the South Pacific. These compact cruising grounds measure roughly 20 miles by 12 miles and you can easily criss-cross the whole thing in a week. Tonga is made up of three island groups: Tongatapu with the capital of Nuku'alofa, Ha'apai where the HMS *Bounty* experienced her tragic mutiny and Captain Cook very nearly ended up as the buffet, and Vava'u, the northernmost cluster where we found ourselves nearly, and blissfully, alone.

Our boat, a Sunsail 440 (Leopard 44 catamaran) named *Kepa*, had just been brought up from New Zealand and she looked none the worse for the wear. On our first afternoon, we reached down the Pulepulekai channel in a 15-knot breeze before tucking into the lagoon on Hunga Island. The only opening into the bay has a large rock in the middle and we just about kissed it as we slipped through the narrow entrance, then lined up on a course of 115° magnetic and picked our way through the reef to the anchorage.

ANCHORING IN Vava'u is an adventure. You're either in three feet of water or three hundred. Most times when I snorkeled on the anchor, I'd find it lying sadly on its side, the tip poking weakly into four inches of sand over a coral pan. Luckily, the nights were calm so there was no breeze to pull us off our precarious perches.

Most nights we settled into happy hour and dinner aboard. Provisioning had been tricky. Unlike the large supermarkets of the Caribbean and the high-end delis of Europe, provisioning in Vava'u is more of a hunt for the right stuff. It took five stores before we discovered a dusty bottle of olive oil and a trip to an open-air market yielded the only produce. A muddy parking lot served as the fish market where Igloo coolers full of still-moving seafood, were offloaded in the rain. Most packaged food is imported from China so reading labels is impossible and we had one or two surprises as we set about cooking that week. The shopping wasn't easy but it



certainly was interesting and about as authentic as you could want.

As a special treat, the charter base in Neiafu had set up a dinner with locals, which is how we met Kolomaile and his family. On Saturday evening, we pulled up on a beach set with tiki torches and a folding table heaped full of dishes covered in cellophane. It seemed the village had been cooking all day in anticipation of our arrival. After the meal, we were treated to dancing. With a single light provided by a generator

that hummed at the edge of the jungle, I saw Kolomaile pairing his cellphone with a speaker that played traditional Tongan music. It was a weird juxtaposition of old and new that sort of defines Tonga itself.

On the way back from church we were flagged down by a couple on a chartered monohull. Their windlass was out and I was asked to assist. After checking the breaker and getting the engine up over 1,500 rpm to raise the

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voltage, we still had nothing. I asked for a winch handle and gave the windlass two good whacks. It started to turn. The expression on the guy's face was priceless. I've found that a swat with a winch handle can fix most things, even unruly crew.

NAVIGATION AROUND Tonga isn't difficult but it has its exciting moments. The charts are sketchy and many places are simply labeled: "Inadequately Surveyed." The base distributes a chart that has numbers so visitors don't get tongue-tied trying to pronounce the Tongan names. As we made our way through two channels to get to Kenutu, the easternmost anchorage numbered 30, we were looking for "two green markers" that were supposed to guide us.

We never found them but we did arrive in Kenutu's lagoon without incident. Ashore, we found a very rough jungle trail that brought us to the top of the island for a spectacular view of the blustery windward side and were glad for the many islands that kept us in the calm lee.

With showers that come in quick but short bursts, Tonga births more rainbows than anywhere I've ever seen. They're so frequent and so spectacular that soon, ▶



The beautiful white sand at Nuky Beach.

instead of reaching for the camera, we grew jaded and started ranking them from one to 10. Tonga is also the land of the postcard-perfect white sand beach. An especially picturesque example is Ngau, or anchorage #23. We picked our way around coral heads into a lagoon near the beach that grew larger as the tide went out. Over a couple of hours, the sand surfaced enough to where we could walk from one island to the other. When I pulled the kayak up on the beach, there was nothing but my own footprints for company. Bliss.

The islands are perforated with caves and you can swim or kayak through many. Swallows Cave is an opening into a sheer cliff face where just a few feet from the entrance the bottom plunges down hundreds of feet so you

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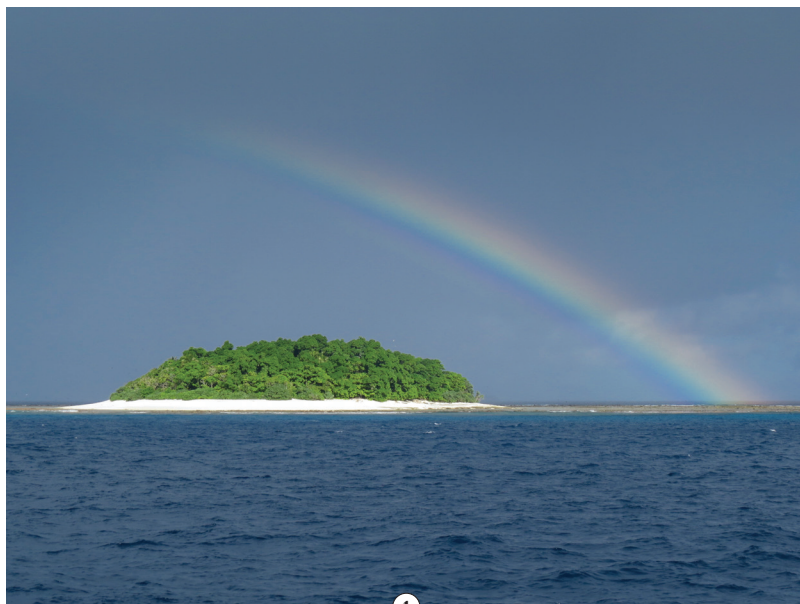
must anchor around the corner in Port Maurelle and dinghy back. Mariner's Cave was named for William Mariner, a sailor on an ill-fated ship that came this way in 1806. Mariner was the only one of his crew whose life was spared after a native attack and the 15-year-old spent four years living with Chief Finau before hopping a passing vessel back to England. Today, you can dive down and swim into this cave in calm weather, which we unfortunately didn't have.

One morning we woke up to hip-hop music coming from the beach, a sign that not all is as it once was even in Tonga. A small boat approached with a couple of kids in red school uniforms. We were offered coconuts and a guided walk. Due to our schedule, we declined but gladly offloaded the last of our provisions including sugar, rice and beans to the father who seemed happy to accept. When the scowling teenager on the bow saw a sleeve of Oreos coming her way, her eyes lit up and she finally cracked a smile. Oreos speak a universal language, it seems.

That day we sailed over to Nuku, a favourite beach of

the king of Tonga. Just a tiny spit of sugary sand, Nuku also serves as a destination for local school and church outings but that day, we had it all to ourselves, a highlight ending to the week. A relaxing afternoon of beachcombing, swimming and kayaking was upended by an email that our Real Tonga Airlines flight the next morning had been rescheduled to four hours earlier. Time travel does come with its inconveniences.

As I attempted to capture a photo of the surprisingly athletic pigs outside the church, I felt a finger on my arm. One of Kolomaile's daughters, who had danced for us, was



1. Rainbows in Tonga are a common sight.
2. Exploring Swallows Cave.
3. A Tongan family in their Sunday best in a one-room church in Nuapapu.



3

reaching out shyly, pretending that she was absorbed in her father's sermon. I thought it was the nylon of my shirt that enticed her but it seemed more the ability to touch the palingi (white people) that was her goal. Maybe she wanted to tell her friends that she had made contact with the woman with the yellow hair and green eyes.

The kids giggled when I took their pictures and then slyly showed them on the tiny screen. We bonded over being naughty in church and not listening—for them because they were used to the ritual and for me because I knew exactly two words of Tongan.

IT'S HARD TO fathom that a place like Tonga still exists. The people are lovely and fiercely proud of their home and their education system (98 percent of Tongans are literate). It's a land still bound by honour and throughout the week we never locked anything. Time hasn't exactly stood still in Tonga but it certainly has dragged its heels. This South Pacific hideaway is a flashback to when the first yachties of the early 20th century explored exotic lands. That Sun-sail has a base here is a special treat for anyone who wants to get off the beaten charter path and maybe challenge themselves to getting that perfect shot of a speedy pig. 🐷