

TONGA: FIRST AND LAST

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY

TONGA IS, FOR MY HUSBAND JOHN AND ME,

the first and the last of our great big cruising adventure. Tonga in 2011 was our testing ground to see if what we'd enjoyed separately about boating would be something we enjoyed together. More than a decade later, Tonga in 2022 is proof of that mutual passion, and all that lay between those years, created a rich tapestry of countless expeditions and unquantifiable experiences.

Our new boat became our permanent home and into that existence we brought our son and daughter, and over 11 years we visited 36 countries and transited three great oceans. Our Tongan trial had turned out to be a great success.

We feel fortunate that our very first destination country is also our last. Tonga was a busy tourist destination in 2011, both by land and by sea. It is a popular stop for cruisers on the route across the Pacific and part of the Western Pacific loop. In typical years, it also has an established tourist and charter industry, so sailing around the islands is often a bustle of movement and crowded anchorages. This is how we remember our first visit years ago.

In 2022, however, Tonga is a much different place. Due to the pandemic in 2020 and a tsunami in 2021, Tonga sealed its borders to the outside world for the past three years. October brought big changes: Land and sea borders opened, and international tourism resumed. For most cruising yachts, the timing was too late in the season to take advantage of the change in policy. For stragglers like us travelling toward the South Pacific later in the season, however, the timing was ideal.





on our first trip to Tonga, new boat-owners and newly pregnant with our son, Tonga, 2011






on her first trial season to see how well we liked the cruising lifestyle, 2011. Vava'u, Tonga



with ages nine and 11, sailing through French Polynesia. Maupiti, 2022



A peaceful anchorage in what is typically one of Vava'u's busiest anchorages. Port Maurelle, Vava'u

We sailed into Tonga on October 4. Rather than being one obscure yacht of many, this year we were one of few. Opposite to blending into the crowd, our AIS had been picked up and our arrival known before we even laid sight of land on the horizon. From that moment the effusive welcome began. “  This is Vava'u Radio. Welcome to  onga!”

As we pulled into the customs dock, locals came out to greet us, and as we cleared and set anchor, calls from the expatriate community welcomed us. The few fellow cruisers who proceeded us popped over to say hello. Tonga was a homecoming amongst total strangers.

Tonga is a relatively small country, broken up into three regions: lush limestone islands of Vava'u in the north, picturesque low-lying coral islands of central Ha'apai, and the densely populated southern capital island of Tongatapu. Yachts typically go to Tongatapu for no more than clearance, and the Ha'apai islands are generally underrated and

ignored. This leaves Vava'u as the popular destination for tourists and cruisers alike, because it offers dozens of small islands to explore in a large sailing area protected from the ocean swell by a surrounding offshore reef. The deep water between lush limestone islands brings a stark contrast of color in deep blues and greens, and moorings are available in designated anchorages for a small fee. What isn't available here is a more tropical setting of rich coral gardens and clear aqua waters. That's what the Ha'apais offer, and a trip to this neglected central group is well worth the effort.

In a normal season, the anchorages around Vava'u are crowded with tour boats, local charters and cruising yachts, all vying for available mooring. The yachting season runs from May through October, which fortunately coincides with the whale season when pregnant females come to deliver their calves and suitors follow to continue the cycle of birth for the next year.



View of the port and protected bay in main town, Neiafu



Easy sailing around the Vava'u group



The lush limestone islands that define the Vava'u group

We made Tonga our destination this year for the whales, more so than the sentimental appeal of “closing the loop.” I knew that all our other cruising friends were in Fiji, and the reunions and parties would be continuous, but Tonga held the chance of sighting whales. Choosing between nature or social, I picked the experience that would, for me, be irreplaceable. Tonga is one of the few places in the world where you can swim with these gentle giants, and the opportunity to be alongside them in the water is a rare one.

We were late in the season so the chance of seeing whales was low, but I wanted to make the effort if the possibility was there. I was well rewarded. A few mother and calf pairs and escorts remained in the protection of the sheltered waters. We could hear their calls as we snorkeled and watched them breach, roll and fin slap from our anchorage.

To swim next to them was a beautiful experience: Tender, graceful, curious and relaxed. Mother guided calf to her side with the nudge of a fin, calf rolling over and around her mother’s bulk, a small

body tucked under the massive head of its mother, and the intimate sight of a calf nursing as the two swam slowly in union. To be next to them, observer and observed, offered more than I could ever imagine.

When we weren’t with the whales, we were with the small community of cruisers who had quickly become good friends. Given the few boats visiting Tonga this year, every new arrival was celebrated by cruisers, expatriates and locals. We attended church on Sundays to listen to the wonderful booming song that marks a central part of the service, and we were invited to community meals that followed.

We developed a warm rapport with the local expatriates whose businesses had been closed for years and were taken under wing by a few who took us on a complimentary tour of the island and its landmarks. We joined forces as a cruising community, getting together for morning exercise, an early coffee, a lazy lunch and social dinners. We gate crashed private parties, where the hushed word of “pālangi ... pālangi ... pālangi” was



A small rural house



Remnants of an old fort. Vava'u Tonga





✘ taking a weaving course from a local in the market



A copra shed in the bush



A young calf enjoys a playful swim while her mother remains nearby

whispered, labelling us in the Tonga language as white foreigners, before the doors opened to let us in. Apparently, as outsiders we weren't on the invite list, but warm hospitality had us quickly included.

The main town of Neiafu is a small strip that runs one vertical street and one horizontal street along the waterfront. By the end of the first day, you see everything the town has to offer and know half the shopkeepers by name.

Outside the village, everything is a spread of simple houses, rural properties and noteworthy sights. Kilikilitefua is the "wall of rocks" that was the product of a census that recorded the birth of the firstborn son of every family by adding a volcanic rock to the pile. Remnants of an old fort once protected the community from attack by the warring tribes in the Ha'apai islands and Tongatapu. There are freshwater caves that supplied previous generations with drinkable water, ocean-facing caves where livestock was kept and sheltered, pinned in by the high tide, and saltwater caves that provide exhilarating deep underwater entrances. A trip around the island is both an education on current

culture and a lesson on its rich history. While the cruising grounds make Tonga a fantastic destination, the rich cultural heritage and shoreside services also offer much to explore.

We sailed into Tonga for the first time as a new couple on a new boat, and this year we sail out with a decade behind us and two kids in tow. The country symbolizes the first and the last destination of our great adventure. But I should clarify: Tonga is the first and the last of *this* adventure. A big change lays ahead of us as we pull into New Zealand and move ashore, and ✘ gets a long break from the continuous miles she has carried us over. While Tonga represents the end of our time as long-term cruisers ✘ the adventure is definitely not at its conclusion. If Tonga teaches us anything, it is that the world is both behind us and ahead of us, and we are only turning a page in this great big adventure called life. ✘

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An expatriate tour guide showing us freshwater caves that once were the drinking supply