

Beautiful Pacific

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Tonga Travel Guide

Ha'apai Group

The wonderful Ha'apai Group is Tonga's best kept secret. There are 60 small islands in all, only 17 of which are inhabited and of these, only 3 offer accommodation. Easily accessible yet with virtually no tourism, these small islands with traditional fishing villages, living culture and fantastic beaches are truly enchanting. Here you can explore at will, interact with the ever so friendly locals and experience life of the old South Seas. Spend a few here and you'll doubtless be invited to a local feast or dance at the town hall. Daily flights to Lifuka, the main island in the group, take just 30-minutes from Tongatapu. The easiest way to get about is by push bike and fishing boat.

Lifuka is a flat island, barely 11 sq. km in size with the group's main village, Pangai. This charming village set mid way on the protected west coast has almost 3,000 inhabitants, a bank, post office, a few small stores, couple of restaurants, half a dozen guesthouses. It's a typical Tongan village with pigs wandering about the streets, small plantations at the back of the house and fishing boats in the lagoon. At the northern point of Lifuka Island is a causeway to adjoining Foa Island which has the groups only up-market place to stay, Sandy Beach Resort, a collection of 12 bungalows. Horse riding tours and scuba diving are one of the few arranged activities.

Vava'u Group

Vava'u is one of the most idyllic destinations in the South Pacific for adventurers. The islands attract not just sailors and kayakers to its shores in the winter sailing season between June and October, but also humpback whales come to the protected waters to give birth to their calves. This high season for tourism is in stark contrast to the summer months between December and April when few visitors visit and many tour companies and restaurants close down for the season. But if you are not too interested in sailing or whale watching, this can be the best time to visit with no crowds.

Neiafu Town is the centre of all activity in Vava'u. Sitting on the southern prominence of the main island, the ramshackle town has an attractive harbour setting alongside the Port of Refuge. This is the administration centre of the group with banks, schools, tour companies and lots of good restaurants, cafes and bars by the waterfront. Neiafu doesn't have a beach and there are only a couple of nice beaches on the main island with most of the coast being limestone cliffs. However, the town makes an affordable base to explore the islands on a day tour and there are several good places to stay including Paradise Hotel overlooking the Port of Refuge.

There are some great walks around Neiafu with attractive coastal scenery, notably the hike to Mt. Talau (131m) with its excellent views over the Port of Refuge. Another good hike from Neiafu is to Toafa Church on Vava'u's west point with its splendid views of the Hunga Cliffs and offshore islands. For the most spectacular views on Vava'u, visit Utu'alina Point on north Vava'u. The second largest island in Vava'u is Pangaimotu, seen across the water from Neiafu Harbour and connected by land bridge at Vavau's southern point. The beaches on Pangaimotu are much nicer and there a small resort at the Tongan Beach Resort, ocerlooking the passage to Port of Refuge.

The surrounding islands (over 50 in all), are a mix of limestone uplifts and flat coral atolls. The many channels and bays make this the ideal place for sailing and there are hundreds of protected anchorages. If you are not on a yacht, the best way to see the islands is either by sea-kayak or by joining an overnight sailing trip or small boat day cruise. Small boat tours cost from just T\$50 for a day of cruising, lunch, snorkel gear and towels included, while a sailing tour can cost from T\$100 per person depending on the number of passengers. Highlights of these tours include a visit to Swallows Cave, snorkelling in the Coral Gardens and anchoring at one of the many secluded beaches.

Vavau is the best place in the South Pacific to watch humpback whales. The whales visit every year between June and October, resting in the deep protected bays to give birth to their calves and to mate. It is not uncommon for up to twenty whales to be playing in and around the bay at any one time. Whale watching tours by boat are available during this time and any charter must follow strict guidelines set out by the Ministry of Fisheries and include a 100m exclusion zone and no direct or rear approach. Diving is banned around whales, although it is possible to swim or snorkel within 30 metres and listen to their unusual eerie songs.

It is possible to stay at a handful of these offshore islands from basic guesthouses to the up market beach bungalows of Blue Lagoon Resort situated on a stunning uninhabited island. Camping is prohibited by law unless part of an official tour. The islands in the south of Vava'u are much flatter and here you'll find several gorgeous uninhabited coral atolls surrounded by reefs, many of which are home to thousands of nesting sea birds including frigates, and boobies.