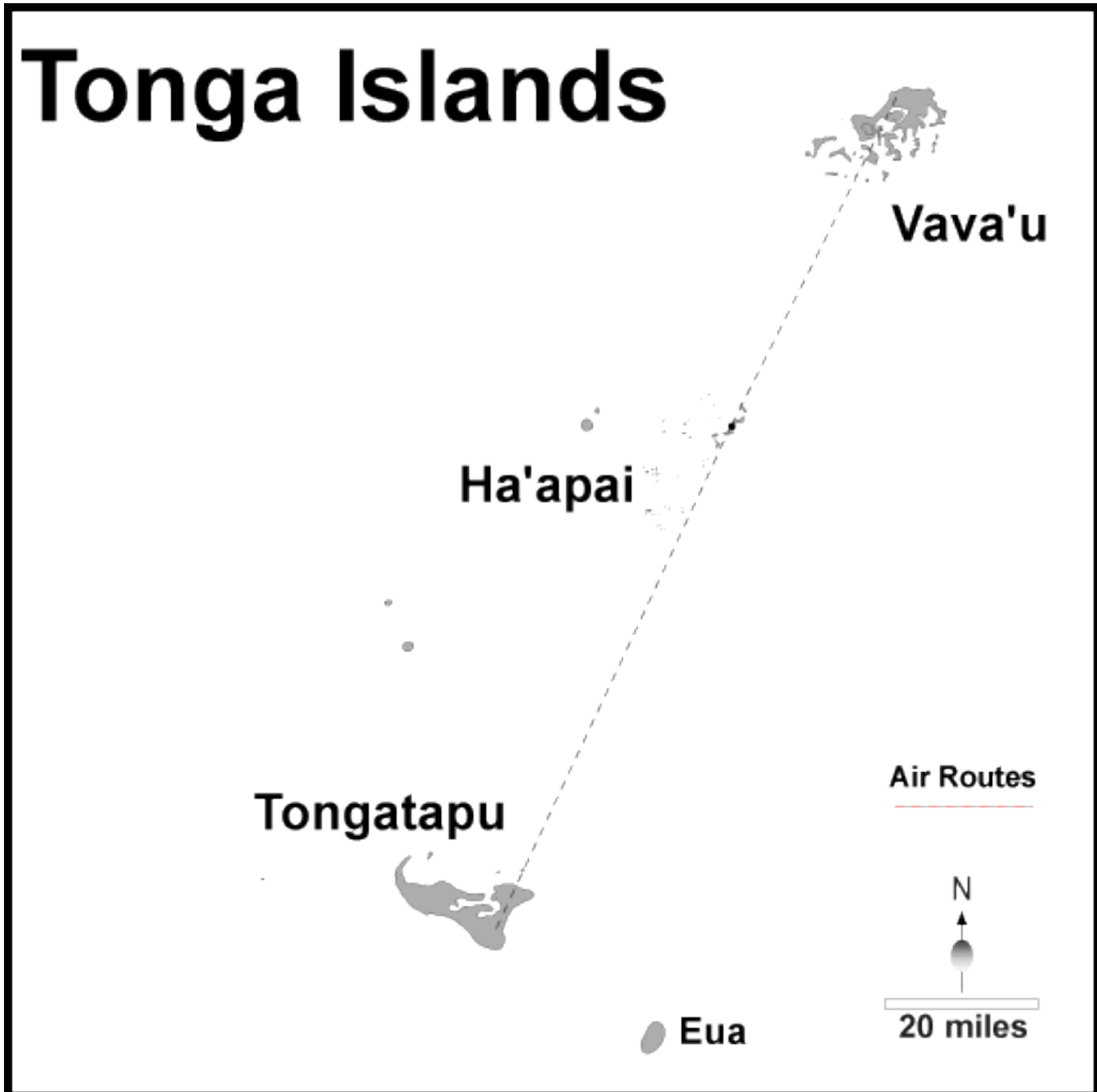


# Beautiful Pacific

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## Tonga Travel Guide



# Tongatapu Island

Tongatapu is the main island in Tonga. It's a large yet flat coral island, over 250 sq. km in size and uplifted on its southern side with almost 20 metre high coastal cliffs. Tongatapu has several nice beaches, wild coastal scenery and some of the most extensive archaeological sites in Polynesia. Nukualofa is the capital about 30 minutes from the airport. The most unique attraction is the Royal Palace in the heart of downtown. Although not open to the public, you get a good view from the waterfront of the colonial wooden building which was built in 1867. If you want to get close to Royalty, attend the Centenary Church on Sunday - this is where the King and Queen worship.

The capital Nuku'alofa on the north shore of the island is the main centre with half the island's population. The majority of hotels and guest houses on Tongatapu are based in or around town. Nuku'alofa Town is the capital of Tonga, sitting on a narrow isthmus facing the outer island and offshore islands to the north, and the inner turquoise lagoon to the south. With a population of just 30,000, it is a quiet, sprawling and functional town with few tourist attractions except for the Royal Palace and bustling market, few shops and lots of accommodation mostly aimed at business people and Tongans visiting from their new-found homes overseas.

Outside of Nuku'alofa, the flat land is almost entirely covered in plantations. A confusing patchwork of roads meander around the entire island with small villages and plantations strung out along the roadside but in few places are there coastal views. The eastern half of Tongatapu is less developed with miles of deserted white sandy beaches, limestone coves and deep caves along its coast. The ancient settlement of Lapaha is scattered in relics - large royal tombs (langi) shaped like an elongated pyramid line the road. On the northern tip of the island is the impressive trilithon of Ha'amonga 'a Maui believed to have been erected in the 13th century.

At the western tip of the island at the village of Kolovai, large Casurina trees line the road for almost a kilometre. At dusk, these trees are alive with flying foxes. Beyond Kolovai, are two lovely beaches, Masi'ata and Ha'atafa. Both are of slightly coarse white sand and stretch for more than a kilometre and there are several small budget beach resorts. Snorkelling is good off Ha'atafu and there's also good surfing offshore.

The southern coastline is more wild. At Hufangalupe there's a lovely coastal walk along high sea cliffs with an impressive natural coral bridge you can walk over. Another attractive coastal walk is from the Tongan Wildlife Centre (small bird park and botanical garden), half way along the south coast. The coastline here is uplifted with sharp jagged rocks and are lots of small white sand cove beaches between. Still further west, at the village of Houma, are the hugely impressive blowholes. Come at high tide on a windy day and walk along the coastal path to see a long succession of blowholes. There are almost 100 in all, the largest plumes reaching up to 30 metres high.

Whilst the main island of Tongatapu has some lovely scenic attractions and historical sites, the most appealing tourist attraction is the wonderful collection of 20 coral islands within the main lagoon directly offshore from Nukualofa. These islands are picture postcard images and can be reached within 30 minutes by small boat from Nuku'alofa Harbour. These islands are very similar to the popular Mamanuca Group in Fiji but are far less commercial with few tourists making it feel like a undiscovered haven.

The majority of islands remain entirely uninhabited and only a couple have accommodation including the gorgeous Fafa Island Resort being Tonga's nicest resort. Guests here have access to great snorkelling, game fishing and secluded beaches. Also worth considering is the budget Royal Sunset Resort on Atata Island. Pangaimotu Island can be visited on a day trip and has basic accommodation for backpackers. The island has good snorkelling and is entirely circled by a sandy beach taking about half an hour to walk around.

Boat trips to the uninhabited coral islands and to the stunning Nuku Island (location of the original UK Shipwrecked television series), can be arranged from Nuku'alofa or from Fafa Island Resort and cost about T\$150 for the boat for four hours. Don't miss the exquisite sand bank which makes a picturesque picnic location in the middle of the lagoon. These islands are not to be missed and its fine white sand beaches and turquoise lagoons are the archetypical dream vision of the South Pacific where the only footprints will be yours, the birds and the crabs.

## 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, overlooking 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.