

Humpback whales in Vava'u.

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“Go! Go! Go!” shouts Captain Meki, gesticulating in the direction we should swim. Emerging from the cloud of bubbles left by the big outboards the ocean is stunningly clear. Our guide Meli swims ahead, glancing over his shoulder to get updates from Meki on the flybridge of *Proteus*. The water is like ink with shafts of light slicing deep into the blue. We see the white of her belly first, then the edges of her 5m long pectoral fins. But on this occasion she has no interest in us and rolls away and disappears into the light mist with a casual and effortless indolence.

Brief encounters like this are the usual fare watching humpback whales in Vava'u. But sometimes the whales will offer a beguiling interaction, approaching people in the water with relaxed curiosity and it's these magical extended encounters that draw so many visitors to Vava'u each southern winter.

Mind you, just getting to Tonga can be challenging, to say the least! Even before you arrive, comfortably sitting on the plane sipping a gin and tonic, you will be confronted by this, the Passenger Arrival Card. To quote:

“Personal Concessions:

Your personal concession allows you to bring into Tonga free of duty the following:

Other goods purchased overseas up to a value of TOP\$500. “Other goods” includes gifts, souvenirs, cameras, electronic equipment, jewellery, (sic) watches, sporting equipment.

N.B. Full customs charges are payable on goods which are not eligible for concessions or are in excess of the allowances.

Warning!

The importation of prohibited goods, smuggling and using false declaration or receipts, brings you at risk of loss of the goods, fines and/or a term of imprisonment.”

Welcome to %&\$@# Tonga! TOP\$500 is about £175 by the way; enough for a couple of memory cards. I suspect that Antipodeans fly up on junkets to teach the Tongans how to behave like ungracious policemen and customs agents. If you have ever been to an Aussie bar very early in the morning, you will know that they have no idea how to behave in civil society.

Fortunately, oh so fortunately, Tongans are Polynesian, so they can't help that they are affable and friendly to a fault (hence Captain Cook's term The Friendly Islands) and they don't care that your camera gear is worth half the Tongan GDP so long as you plan to take it with you when you leave. Suggestion for customs; just put something in your Passenger Arrival Card to the effect that, “Yes we know you will bring expensive equipment with you, since Tonga is the best place in the world to

photograph humpback whales, but please take it with you when you leave. If you leave any behind, whether you sell it or not, and we find out (and we will, because we are all related) you will be fined, painfully.”

That's all that is required. You will seem so much nicer and more richly deserve the moniker Friendly Islands.

Our flight from Sydney arrived in Tongatapu at 2am and our flight north to Vava'u was scheduled for 0700. So like twenty other deluded souls we elected to spend those few hours at the airport. How bad could it be?

The island of Tongatapu has two airstrips, for international and domestic flights, both at Fua'amotu. The international terminal has a cafe, a couple of shops, banking facilities, even internet. But we had to get a taxi to the domestic terminal for the night which had only a cafe. Which was shut.

So away from the vestiges of civilisation we arrived at a grey shed, the cafe not open for another five hours and no water anywhere. It was shockingly cold! So all and sundry tried to bed down for the night. The prescient, who had survived Tonga the previous year, had pillows and sleeping bags and teddy bears, and as they lay there dozing, exuded the hollow chatter of young Christians. My wife commandeered our only fleece and inflatable pillow. A woolly hat would have been useful. There was a toilet, but the spaces under the doors were so wide that every betrayal of my digestive system would echo amongst the twenty unfortunate prisoners. There was liquid soap at the sink! A small miracle. But no water to rinse it off... Dogs howled in the distance as the night wore painfully on. Outside it was black, the black of a forgotten island lost in the Pacific. They say dawn arrives quickly in the tropics, but these people had obviously never been to Tonga...

Eventually, staff arrived, but checking in was painfully slow and you knew the plane wouldn't leave on time. We didn't know until much later that the Chinese pilot was sick and that the Tongan pilot didn't have enough hours to fly the plane unsupervised.

So finally after a few hours of being messed around, the flight was canceled and we were eventually bundled into taxis and taken to Black Pearl Suites on the far side of the capital, Nuku'alofa. The hotel was past its prime, with plumbing well past that but at least the beer was cold and the food edible. So we had two nights entombed there at Real Tonga's expense. Let's just say this. I have been to almost every capital in Polynesia, but Nuku'alofa takes first prize; for being lamentably grotty. Much of the CBD was burned down in pro-democracy riots in 2006 which targeted Chinese businesses in particular, but even when I first arrived in 1986 it was shabby and dysfunctional. Just one example; when I went to collect my mail from the post office they asked which country I was expecting mail from... they sorted poste restante mail by country of origin. Progress has not so much side-stepped Tonga, as walked a different road entirely.

At that time, Friendly Islands Airways was the local carrier and it too had a poor reputation.

Subsequent changes to the ownership of the local airline reads like a long litany of incompetence.

Chathams Pacific ran the flights for five years and was well regarded by locals. One of their aircraft was a vintage DC-3, nicely described by someone as a “collection of parts flying in loose formation”.

They withdrew their service in March 2013 in response to the Chinese government donating a 50 seat Xian MA-60 to the Tongan government which is now operated by the new airline, Real Tonga.

New Zealand quickly withheld aid money in retaliation claiming that the new plane was unsafe and “is not certified to fly in New Zealand or other comparable jurisdictions”. It's track record isn't entirely unsullied with 11 accidents since 2009. Personally, I was impressed by the plane.

Real Tonga is the 12th domestic airline to operate and they are maintaining the tradition of unreliability. When, eventually, we flew north to Vava'u, one of our bags remained behind, which entailed a £20 taxi ride to the airport to collect it from the next flight. But at least it arrived. For Tonga, this is a good outcome. We had to pay excess baggage of course, but it was a reasonable price. However, after you touch the deplorable bank notes in Tonga, you need to dip your hands in hydrofluoric acid briefly if you

ever want touch food again. Or anyone you love.

WHALE WATCHING

In spite of the difficulties getting there I had imagined that it would be busy; all the whale boats would be full all season and booking ahead would be essential. We did book ahead because we had a recommendation to use Endangered Encounters from professionals in the business whom I trust. But the boat was seldom full, which of course was hugely advantageous, as it allowed more time in the water. Only four snorkellers and a guide are allowed in the water at any one time.. So if the boat takes eight, you may be in the water for only half the encounters.

Many people pay to go on organised group trips with “celebrity photographers”, but unless you think you can learn something useful, I would advise simply organising your trip yourself. You are sure to meet interesting people whichever boat you go on, with grim survival stories about how they managed to get to Vava'u in one piece.

Here's what you need to know. Endangered Encounters is TOP\$300 per day per person for six hours, roughly £100. When you consider the cost of getting boat equipment to Tonga, and the price of fuel, it's actually very reasonable. They pick up at 8am and return to Neiafu harbour at 2pm. Often the sea is choppy so you may need sea-sickness medication. Being winter, it can blow 25 knot SE trades for days on end. A trough of low pressure passes about every 8-10 days bringing lighter winds, overcast skies and rain. But at least the islands provide some shelter from the wind and swell, not that the whales seek out calm areas for our convenience!

The water was about 26C. Some people wear a 3mm suit or sharkskin, but you are in the water so little I think you are better off without a suit. A windproof warm fleece and a hat when you come out, is much more useful. Obviously you need a mask, snorkel and fins. Long free-diving fins are not recommended. People laugh at my rubber fins (Eyeline, made in Malaysia), but laugh less when they only see my bubbles. They are the best fins I have used in 40 years diving, but no self-respecting diver would be seen dead in them. (You can buy them at Rebel Sports in Australia.)

You need sun protection, a tee shirt for your back, and if you will spend much time in the water, some leggings of some kind, otherwise the backs of your legs will get fried, like mine did. A hood or hat for snorkelling can be useful if your hair doesn't do the job. I wear a couple of weights to counteract fat. As the surface can be choppy, you are better off being below the surface to shoot. Nothing in the law says you can't snorkel down, but please be courteous to the whales and be especially mindful of shallow water blackout. For those less fit, over-exertion is a real danger and the outcome of any cardiac event here is usually final.

On the boat, I wear a bank-robbers hood much of the time. It's a cotton hood with cut-outs for sunglasses and breathing. I use lip-salve too, as reflected light off the water is unsparing. Most people slather up with sun screen, but I prefer clothing to the alarming list of esoteric ingredients in sun creams.

On the foredeck, spray can drench your camera. We had a dry bag in which two cameras could nestle but still be readily accessible.

Bring a towel or two and tissues for your lenses. A sandwich lunch and drinking water are provided. Being in the water offshore in Vava'u is fairly safe. A whale watching guide was bitten by a tiger shark many years ago and a young Peace Corps volunteer was killed by a shark while swimming off the village of Tu'anuku in 2006. Seeing any kind of shark (or even large edible fish) is rare. If you want to be fairly certain of having a good encounter, book a week of whale watching. We had four days on the water, and were lucky to have one great encounter. If you want to be sure of whales breaching, book for longer.

In the summer, southern hemisphere humpback whales feed on krill in Antarctica and then migrate to

the tropics to mate and give birth in the winter, June to October. The round trip is about 13000km, at least as the crow flies. Maybe whales swim differently. At birth the calf is 6m long and about two tonnes. Adults are 15m and 35 tonnes. In contrast, the northern hemisphere humpbacks feed largely on fish and have much less white on their undersides. (And if you jump in the water with them in Hawaii, you are liable to a \$25000 fine.) There is virtually no mixing of populations across the equator. The total world population is thought to be about 80000, having recovered somewhat since the moratorium in 1966. Gestation is 11.5 months but giving birth on sequential years is rare. Normally females breed every two to three years.

Usually a mother with a calf offers the best chance of a rewarding encounter. When the mother is relaxed, the calf can be playful and curious around snorkellers, occasionally bumping them. Our best encounter was a sublime hour spent with a mother, calf and escort in the lee of Hunga island..

Everyone on the boat had several close encounters, the whales were relaxed and the water was clear. Approaching an adult whale from behind is risky as they are adept at side-swiping that huge tail without warning. Generally, they are careful to avoid contact, lifting a 5m long pectoral fin over a snorkeller with ease.

Above the surface you can expect to see tail-lobbing, pec slaps, head lunges and if you are lucky, breaching, which is utterly exhilarating. Tip: have your camera pointing in the right direction before the whale emerges from the sea.

Single males will often be singers. They dive to about 20m where they hang motionless, tail elevated, singing their geographically unique song for 10-20 minutes. I think it's best to remain motionless in front of them, at the extreme limit of the visibility, so that as they surface, they will be curious enough to investigate. Pretend to be a jellyfish.

WHAT ELSE TO DO

Vava'u offers so much more than whale watching, but all else is overshadowed by whales in the winter. Even the dive companies split their time between whales and diving in the winter. There are excellent dives in Vava'u and pretty much all the best ones are within a few miles of Neiafu. The limestone is riddled with caves (of which Swallow's Cave is the most famous and the best for photography) and there are big caves to explore at the islands of Kitu and Tu'ungisika. The pinnacle rock of Fotula is one of my favourite dives, with a small tunnel at 30m, its entrance crowned with black coral where long-nose hawkfish perch. Diving at the Fish Aggregation Devices (FADs) offshore in almost a kilometer of water I have seen schools of mahi-mahi, silky sharks and oceanic white tips. Diving there doesn't make you popular with the sport fishermen. There's great sailing in Vava'u of course, but for the hundreds of yachties that visit each year, it's the short distances between anchorages in sheltered water that is the draw. Because then you can motor, guilt-free, between anchorages, rationalising that it isn't worth setting the sails for such a short distance, and anyway, you need to charge the batteries. (I speak from experience!) You can charter a yacht easily enough. There are also kayaking/camping trips for which Vava'u seems tailor made, since there's 60 islands spread over 25km square. The population of 20000 is spread over only a third of them, leaving most uninhabited.

Sustained fishing pressure has had an impact on the local fishery. Deep water snapper are fished, but further and further offshore. Various aquaculture projects have come and gone, seaweed farming, clam breeding circles (Methodist conventions were their biggest predator) and now some black pearl farming. The lack of seafood means that imported junk meat from New Zealand is popular. By meat, I mean tinned corned beef, and frozen lamb flaps which are largely bone and fat, used for Lu Sipi, a dish made with taro leaves, mutton and coconut milk.

Both obesity and feasting are culturally important in Tonga. However the modern diet of junk food, fat and carbonated drinks has resulted in 90% being overweight and 69% being obese. Incisive leadership is required to reduce the burden of obesity along with targeted taxation to make crap food unaffordable. In the absence of real democracy, these things are still possible. Diabetes is rampant, affecting 20% of

the population, compared with, say, Sweden, with less than 5%. The cost burden on the health service is considerable.

There are a few restaurants in Vava'u; currently The Aquarium is the most popular, but don't expect to get breakfast there before 10 am. It has free WiFi but it is excruciatingly slow. I had one of the worst meals of my life at Tropicana restaurant; ostensibly fish and chips but it was more like balsa wood and battery acid. Some of the restaurants are open on Sundays, but pretty much everything else, including all water activities like whale watching, are forbidden on Sundays. The predominant religion is Wesleyan Methodist (and rugby). However, the churches are allowed to do a roaring business on Sundays. Income from the whale watch industry and all the foreign yachts must enter the economy, even through the fresh food market where fruit and vegetables can be stunning prices. But in the 27 years I have been visiting, it's hard to see where that money is reflected in the general well-being of the Tongan people. There are more cars, but many of them are held together with prayers and string, literally. Our final taxi to the airport had doors held closed with string, and coasted down the hills in neutral to save petrol.

Tonga time - where time stands still, or the clock needs fixing - is relaxing on holiday but unfortunately connecting flights run on normal time. So having completely lost faith that Real Tonga could ever connect us with our flight to Sydney the same day, on our return we flew to Tongatapu a day early and stayed at the Emerald Hotel on the waterfront in Nuku'alofa. This cost \$250 (£90) but was perfect with good internet (and plumbing) with an excellent, inexpensive Chinese restaurant downstairs. To save yourself stress, book a night in Tongatapu on the way out, particularly if there's only a few hours between Real Tonga's optimistic scheduled arrival in Tongatapu, and your international flight departure. This suits the people who matter in Tongatapu very well. One reason there's no incentive to allow direct international flights to Vava'u is that people of influence in Tongatapu benefit financially from all the people forced to stay a night or two in Nuku'alofa. Upgrading the airstrip in Vava'u to take direct flights from New Zealand, Australia and Fiji could transform the tourism industry. Tonga has the rare privilege of being an undemocratic Kingdom, so there's no reason why better access to Vava'u need necessarily result in the trashy overdeveloped resort towns found elsewhere.

Tonga has a unique and valuable natural resource. Vava'u is beautiful in the way that Palau is beautiful; high limestone forested islands, most of which are uninhabited, with deep, clear sheltered water between. It's a paradise for all the visitors that arrive by yacht or by air. Rather than trying to attract more visitors, it would be simple to encourage existing visitors to stay longer. And the resource of swimming with humpback whales is almost unique. I see opportunities for offshore shark feeds, blackwater diving, diving at the FADs and trips to snorkel with other marine mammals. It's a rare resource which could be better leveraged with direct international flights.

If people had a choice, almost no one would voluntarily spend time in Nuku'alofa, including many people born there. Half of all Tongans live overseas, mainly in the USA, Australia and New Zealand. Foreign aid and remittances are a major source of income with remittances comprising about 50% of GDP. Nice work if you can get it.

But high quality visitors need at least the basics of infrastructure. As one of the top underwater photographers in the world said, "bring your own accommodation, food and internet." To that he could have added "transport". The people we saw on a couple of 50m superyachts didn't seem to be slumming it too badly. The best way to arrive is from upwind, with a well-stocked yacht with food, fuel and water with satellite internet, and to leave going downwind on the three day passage to Fiji. This will isolate you from many of the inconveniences of Vava'u. You will still need to use a commercial whale watch boat if you want to see whales up close; doing this on your own yacht is now prevented by law, but in the old days I had some wonderful encounters from my own boat. And usually a pretty girl to drive it while I was in the water!

PHOTOGRAPHY

I used a Nikon D800e in a Nauticam housing with the 9" glass dome and the 15mm Sigma fisheye or Nikon 16-35mm (with a 70mm port extension). I'm not fond of the fisheye look but really the 16-35 didn't seem wide enough. I think the 10-17 Tokina fisheye zoom on a crop sensor camera is probably the best lens for humpbacks, although with a D800 you can crop radically and still have a useable file.

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