



Having spent the last few years enjoying relatively budget-conscious boating sojourns in Vanuatu, Australia's Whitsunday Islands and France's Vineyard region by canal barge, the search this year for a 'winter retreat' of equal intrigue and interest – centred back on the Pacific region. The Kingdom of Tonga was an area we had never been to before, plus it featured the added incentive of a substantial fleet of 'Mooring's' charter craft in Neiafu in the Vava'u

Group of islands in the north. The Kingdom of Tonga is an archipelago of 171 islands of which just 36 are inhabited by a population of around 105,000 who are staunchly Christian. Divided into three main island groups spread over 700,000 sq km of ocean, each has its own very individual attractions and charm. To the south is the more commercialised Tongatapu Group, the central Ha'apai Group is world-renowned for its fishing grounds and diving

sites, but for us the real Tonga was the northern Vav'au group of 50 pristine islands, which are tailor-made for waterborne debauchery. By that I mean the choices and options to occupy your time are without peer for it truly is a nature-lovers' cruising paradise. The only down-side – Neiafu is 240 kilometres north of Tongatapu and the 55-minute flight in an 18-seater Conair aircraft was what could only be described as interesting! Seemingly untouched



THE KINGDOM OF TONGA IS ONE OF THE MOST SCENIC AND NATURAL OF ALL THE PACIFIC ISLAND NATIONS, WITH GEOGRAPHY RANGING FROM LOW CORAL TO HIGH VOLCANOES. STAY IN A HOTEL AND YOU NEVER SEE IT, CRUISE IN YOUR OWN BOAT AND YOU COULD SPEND A LIFETIME EXPLORING THE NOOKS AND CRANNIES OF THIS REGION. IF YOU HAVE NEITHER THE TIME NOR A BOAT, THEN THE NEXT BEST OPTION WOULD BE TO CHARTER A 'MOORINGS' CATAMARAN IN VAV'AU AND APPRECIATE AT YOUR OWN PACE WHAT THE ISLAND, THE PEOPLE AND THE CULTURE ARE ALL ABOUT.

STORY & TEXT BY BARRY TYLER

A GREAT WAY TO SEE THE VAV'AU GROUP OF ISLANDS - OUR LEOPARD 43 CATAMARAN FROM 'THE MOORINGS'

by civilisation, our other reason for the well-researched decision to cruise and explore the waters of Vav'au was as stated earlier, the fact the charter company, 'The Moorings', had a base there. As such, we would have modern, relatively new and certainly well-presented vessels at our disposal.

Another benefit was The Moorings' service - complimentary pick-up from the airport, professional familiarisation with your boat and

the region, and provisioning of the boat to whatever level one might choose - full provision, semi provision or do it yourself. We chose to have them semi-provision the boat, for the girls had vacuum-bagged and frozen enough meat for us for the week, which we carried on the plane in two sealed polystyrene eskies (chilly bins for you Kiwis).

Not escaping our attention during the 'familiarisation' exercise at The Moorings HQ,

before we left, was the fact this island group was generally free from malaria, yellow fever and all those other diseases endemic in tropical countries. Also, the temperature was congenial (24-degrees Celsius average during the 'high' season from May to November), the fish were okay to eat and the fresh water was fine to drink.

Even better still, there were no spiders, snakes or flies to worry you; even the mosquitoes were by and large 'provided' in acceptable quantities.



VISITING BOATS MEANT NEIAFU WAS A BUSY PLACE DURING THE TOURIST SEASON OF MAY TO NOVEMBER.

The language was no problem either, as most of the kingdom speaks English as well as their local native Tongan dialect; all in all this idyllic island paradise was certainly most tourist-friendly!

Vav'au boasts a population of 6000 and while that is not huge what it did equate to was a reasonable infrastructure of restaurants, cafes, bars, shops, supermarkets, liquor shops, banks, duty free shops and on the outskirts of town, several accommodation lodges with their own accompanying charter boat. They will whisk you to fishing grounds literally on their door-step, where you can catch mahimahi, tuna, mackerel, wahoo or billfish (marlin or sailfish). Definitely the

congenial way to go game-fishing!

Up anchor – we're off

With all the formalities addressed it was time to set sail in our brand new and rather stylish 43-foot Leopard catamaran that came complete with every imaginable extra aboard to enhance our trip – maps, spare fuel, a tender with outboard, snorkelling gear, two kayaks, a well-equipped galley, plenty of refrigeration capability, plenty of room to spread out, and best of all, four cabins of equal dimension, ventilation and specification.

Out of the bay, around the corner and out into



the gulf proper and we very quickly appreciated why this region is so aptly described as the sailing and boating Mecca of the world – what lay before us was simply breathtaking. A look at our map suggested a lot of islands, sure, but upon first sighting them we were actually taken aback by the closeness between these islands; upwards of 50 of them all within a mile or two of each other. The hard part was deciding where to go first, but really it mattered not as long as we ticked off the five items on our 'must-do' list – the Swallow and Mariners Caves, the lagoon within Hunga Island, a Tongan feast and a church service.

Day one was spent trolling, in between that is a



IN EVERY DIRECTION WE GAZED WERE ISLANDS AND MORE ISLANDS – THERE WAS ALWAYS PLENTY TO SEE AND DO!



PRISTINE WHITE SANDY BEACHES AWAIT YOU ON THE MANY ISLANDS WE EXPLORED.



SWALLOW CAVE IS NOT AS INTIMIDATING AS MARINERS COVE, BUT THE EXPERIENCE IS NONE THE LESS MOST IMPRESSIVE.

quick look at Swallow Cave (Kapa Island) from the outside, an initial fruitless search for the entrance to Mariners Cave (Nuapapu Island) and a whale-watching experience (conveniently the whale-watching season is from June to November) off Hunga Island – before anchoring at Kalau, in Hunga Lagoon, for our first night at sea. While the entrance was narrow and certainly tricky (there was a rock smack in the middle), it opened out into an expansive yet well protected lagoon perfect for overnight anchoring and in no particular order, a swim (beautiful water temperature – virtually air temperature), a snorkel, a kayak or a walk or fossick around the shore-line.



THE LOCAL MARKETS PROVIDED FRESH CHICKEN, FISH, FRUIT AND VEG – AND AN INSIGHT INTO THE LOCAL CULTURE.

The days went very quickly and despite the unseasonal winds, with careful planning we managed to find sheltered areas to boat in. Number one on our list of visitation priorities was Nuapapa Island and in particular the world famous Mariners Cave. Our advice was; 1.4km down from the northern tip of the island, find a yellow cross on the bank just above sea level, then below that and underwater you will find the entrance to this cave.

That is the theory, but it took us a while to actually locate the rather obscure yellow cross on the bank. A quick perusal by Jim the dive-master confirmed a dive two metres down would be

followed by a swim along at that level for about nine metres – then you could swim up again and into what was a huge blue room. They say it was an awesome experience, but it was definitely not for the faint-hearted or the inexperienced!

Swallows Cave, at the top end of Kapa Island, was another great snorkelling experience that this time everyone could enjoy for it had an open, easy accessible entrance. A limestone cave which extended a good 15-20 metres above and below water level, the underwater view here, diving down and looking from the cave and out through the stalagmites to the direction of the open sea – on its own made the trip well worthwhile.



PROOF THE SAILS WERE NOT JUST AN ADORNMENT – ON ONE OCCASION WE DID ACTUALLY SET SAILS, CRUISING 'STEALTH-LIKE' AT 10 KNOTS.



OUR 'FISHING FRENZY' WAS OVER QUICKLY – ONE DAY – ONE HOUR – THREE FISH!



THE DESIGNATED COOKS SERVED UP SOME OUTRAGEOUSLY DELIGHTFUL GASTRONOMIC TREATS FROM THE COMPACT YET WELL SPEC'D GALLEY.



THE COCKPIT SEATED ALL EIGHT OF US WITH EASE; UNDERSTANDABLY MOST MEALS WERE CONSUMED OUTDOORS.

Mingling with the locals

Port Maurelle on Kapa Island became somewhat of a trap for us, a nice trap, for the bay lent itself so well for overnight shelter as well as a perfect playground for our daytime activities and adventures. The caves were close by, plus we conveniently timed it right to coincide with a local Tongan feast that was planned for that particular Saturday night.

Incredibly, 35 people, all cruising folk or charterers like ourselves, appeared out of the woodwork to join the locals of Falevai village for their weekly feast, cooked in the traditional 'umu' earth oven. Local delicacies included beef, chicken and raw

fish marinated in coconut milk and wrapped and cooked in taro leaves, talo (taro), manioke (cassava), mei (bread-fruit) and ufi (yams), and bowls of fresh fruit. The cooking was done outdoors but served on one big long table inside their ceremonial eating house. Resplendent on this table also was the whole piglet that was cooked on a separate 'spit'.

Tonga is a traditional country, the pace is slow, money is not a motivating factor and certainly family and the church are the two single-most important aspects of Tongans' lives. Where best then to glean an 'up close and personal' insight into the locals, than the most humbling

experience of joining them in a Sunday church service – conveniently just over the hill from our 'feast' venue the night before!

Replenish, replenish

Well into the trip by now and it was time for the scheduled topping-up exercise back at Moorings HQ. Fuel was okay (huge diesel tank capacity), the batteries were fine (the engines had to run for three hours anyway, to charge the batteries), but as predicted we were running dangerously low on refreshments plus we didn't have enough water left to cover our intended trip around to Ofu Island the next day.

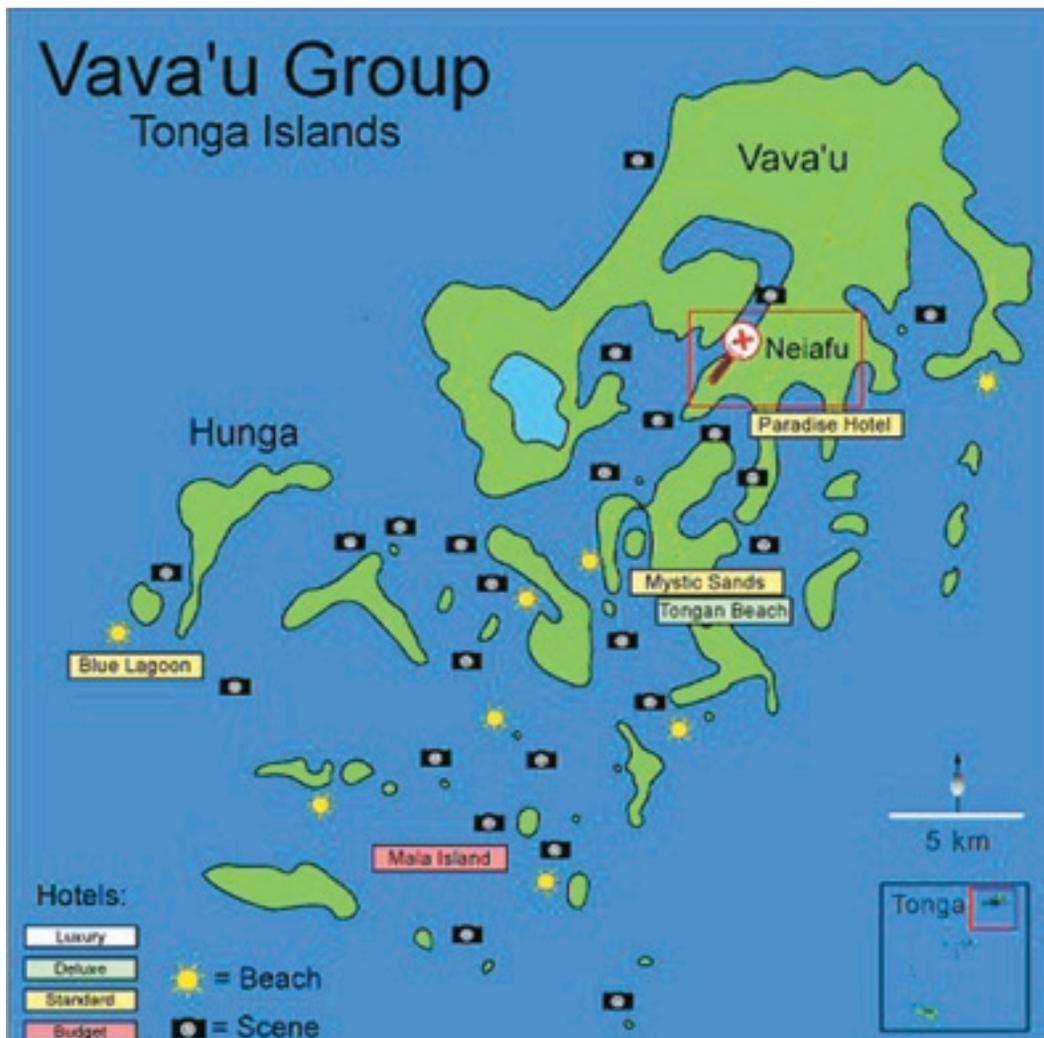
The girls decided we needed some fresh fruit and veg and the boys wanted to address the beverage situation, so off to town we went. Fortunately, the liquor store was close by, so with a little time to spare, the boys ducked into a local Neiafu bar – definitely we discovered, not a good career move – once the girls tracked us down an hour or two later!

On with the trip, and one of the good things about the Vav'au Group is the proximity of the islands to each other. The trip from Neiafu around to Ofu Island took just a morning's motoring, yet we had travelled a virtual lifetime in terms of culture, for while Neiafu was commercialised and well 'used', conversely the main village on Ofu Island was so simplistic and virginal, yet immaculately presented.

We went ashore, took some photos, met the children from the local school then met one of the local families. Simple folk living in what we perhaps would describe as third-world conditions, yet they were demonstrably happy people who were obviously completely oblivious to the pressures and expectations of the outside world. Yet another humbling experience for us!

The homeward run

Did I mention fishing? Ah yes, everywhere we went we had a couple of lines over the back, when we stopped we dropped



WE CHOSE TO TAKE THE ADVICE OF THE LOCALS AND EXPLORE THE ISLANDS IN A CIRCULAR ANTI-CLOCK-WISE DIRECTION.

lines over the side too – but not a bloody thing! But all that changed on the way back from Ofu. The lines were over as per usual and just as we were searching for the all-important markers off the end of Fanuatapu Island (off the end of Tapanu Island), away the lure went and in came a respectable Spanish mackerel. We had just tidied all that up, laid the lines again and so help me, away they went again, both of them this time, and in came two respectably-sized 'skippies'. Needless to say, all fish were bled, filleted and enjoyed with a salad, that night.

Back into civilisation again, so to speak; what an absolute contrast it was to leave the innocence and laid-back nature of Ofu Island and then pull up at the opposite end of the culture spectrum, to the opulence of the Tongan Beach Resort on Utungakei Island. Ostensibly we had just called in to have a last-night farewell 'Tongacolada' cocktail before we found an overnight anchorage.

That was the theory, but one cocktail became two, then three, then before we knew it we were booked in to attend a 'feast' that was most conveniently and coincidentally being held that night. We were cooking on gas this time though, for this version was definitely my kind of feast (plenty of meat and some western food to complement the Tongan cuisine) and with a few wines to wash it down, provided the perfect finale to a perfect few days in the Kingdom of Paradise!



THE BEAUTY OF THE SHEER CLIFFS WAS THE DEEP WATER; YOU COULD NUDGE VIRTUALLY RIGHT UP TO THE WATER'S EDGE.

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