



# Eye to eye

**Tonga** On a sightseeing cruise in the remote South Pacific archipelago, Paul Miles went swimming with humpback whales and found that he himself was the object of curiosity

**T**HE WHALE RESTED motionless about six metres down in the deep-blue water. Its grey skin was graffitied with the scratches of fights and ships' propellers it had survived. It was so still and so large that it looked like a Damien Hirst exhibit suspended in acrylic. Its playful, three-metre calf had long pectoral fins, giving it instant baby-appeal. It swam upwards to breathe, twirling and rolling gracefully before lying belly-up on the surface like a puppy.

I was swimming with whales in the South Pacific Ocean – I, a puny, flippered human, ungainly in snorkel and mask. On one ascent, the calf looked right at me with a big, doleful eye, gazing at the strange, goggled intruder who spent most of the time floating on the surface. I remembered what someone had said when I voiced concerns about getting thwacked by a tail or even being swallowed like Jonah: 'When you look into the eye of a whale, you'll know that there's no reason to be afraid.' I began to understand why people have been moved to tears by the experience; and I could almost believe stories that whales are so in tune with humans that they are friendliest with children and pregnant women. Is it a

yearning for our evolutionary ancestors' freedom in the easy weightlessness of the deep that makes us sentimental about dolphins and whales?

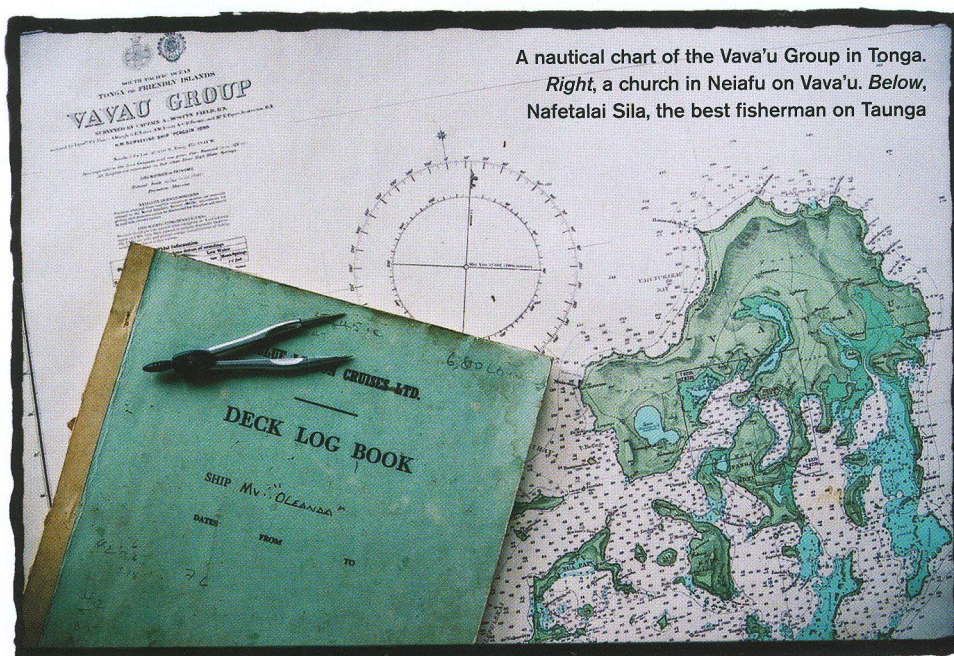
When I had joined a cruise in Tonga, I did not specifically plan to swim with whales; but it happened to be the season



The *Oleanda*, top, and some of its crew, above

when they visit these warm waters, and swimming with them was a bonus. We were cruising the islands of the archipelago, which lies south-east of Fiji not far from the International Date Line. According to legend, the powerful Polynesian god Tangaloa fished up the 170 or so islands of Tonga from the bottomless sea with a whalebone hook on his fishing line. Tonga would have been larger, says the legend, but the line broke and some of the islands fell back into the sea. Tangaloa must have had a long line; the waters around Tonga are some of the deepest in the world. The famous Tonga Trench plunges to a depth of 10km, its currents sending up cold water – and the occasional prehistoric fish – from many fathoms down.

It is to these waters that, each year, humpback whales migrate 9,600km from their feeding grounds in the icy Antarctic to breed and give birth. The humpback is a discerning species: the butterfly-blue sea and the sheltered, sandy coves are romantic boudoirs and secure nurseries. The islands of the Vava'u Group, a short hop by plane from the ramshackle Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa, are particular favourites with the humpbacks, and it is here that ➤



A nautical chart of the Vava'u Group in Tonga. Right, a church in Neiafu on Vava'u. Below, Nafetalai Sila, the best fisherman on Taunga

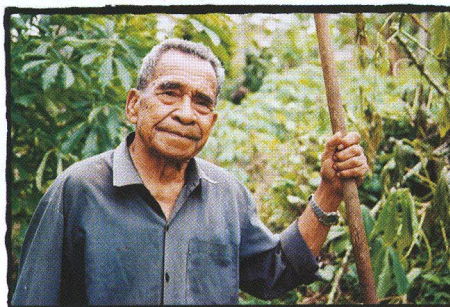


➤ tourists and whales converge between June and November each year.

The same qualities that make the islands popular with mating whales also make them superb for sailing, cruising or just passing the days on beaches of fine sand. In Port of Refuge, the quiet, palm-fringed anchorage below the one-street town of Neiafu, most of the yachts were available for charter. But for those who preferred a bigger deck on which to sip their sundowners there was the *MV Oleanda*, a small cruise ship that made leisurely trips around the islands. I joined the 39-metre ship and settled into my tiny cabin just as a rainbow appeared over the town and the afternoon sun shone low and golden through cool, crystal rain.

There were fewer than 20 of us on the cruise, mostly Australians. My fellow passengers had all come primarily to swim with whales, a fact I should perhaps have borne in mind when I mentioned during introductory cocktails that I had once eaten whale blubber in the Faroe Islands.

The humpbacks that visit Tonga have the King to thank for the fact that they are no longer hunted, eaten and turned into fish-hooks. In 1978, His Majesty Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, the South Pacific's only monarch, decreed that the whales should be spared the harpoon and become a tourist attraction instead. It was one of the portly ruler's more sensible, albeit small-scale, moneymaking plans. Since then, he and his government have been the subject of several scandalous stories: there was the proposal to earn millions for the country by dumping other nations' nuclear waste in the Tonga



Trench; the sale of surplus satellite space to overseas phone-sex lines; and, most recently, the squandering of US\$26 million of the kingdom's wealth on investments in 'viaticals' – high-risk, ethically dubious schemes whereby investors gamble on the early demise of terminally-ill patients. That it was the King's newly appointed court jester who lost the money made the episode even more bizarre. How the older generation must reminisce about the halcyon days of the King's late mother, the towering Queen Salote, whose only escapade worthy of mention in the international press was when she happily chose to get soaked to the skin as she rode through London in an open carriage at Queen Elizabeth's coronation. This memory still attracts some older British visitors to these far-flung 'Friendly Islands' – the name Captain James Cook bestowed on them (not realising that the Tongans were

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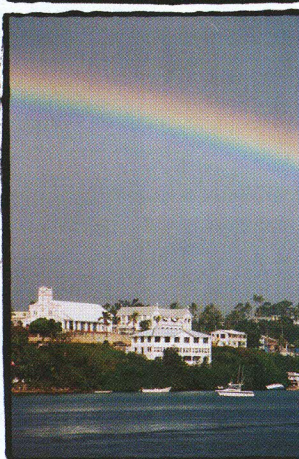
planning to murder him and his crew at the feast they held for him). Modern-day travellers need not worry. A highlight of the *Oleanda* cruise was the friendliness of the crew, who were always there with a smile and a helping hand.

In the cliffs around the volcanic islands of Vava'u there are caves where swallows nest. In one, you can swim through an underwater passage and reach a grotto eerily lit by the sunlight shining through the water. You can go ashore on a skiff, find a deserted beach and spend the afternoon snorkelling over coral gardens as the long, high-pitched notes of faraway whale-song pierce the water.

Many islands have ancient burial sites and villages to explore. I went to Taunga village, on an island of the same name, with Masi Uta'atu, the *Oleanda*'s skipper and my guide for the afternoon. On the rickety wooden wharf where we docked were piles of fishing nets with floats made from cut-up flip-flops; they seemed to symbolise Pacific island life. After five minutes' walk, we came across an old man hoeing a patch of the root vegetable cassava. His face was weather-beaten and kindly. He proudly declared that, at 81, he was the oldest man in the village. His name was Nafetalai Sila, but he had an official name, too: in honour of the fact that he was the village's best fisherman, the chief had renamed him Moana Lea Mei Vaka, which translates as 'the ocean talks from my boat'.

A walk around the village revealed snapshots of island life: a woman weaving a pandanus mat; the cement water tanks that collected rain from the church ➤

View from Mounu island. Right, a man in Tongan national dress, the *ta'ovala*. Below right, the town of Neiafu on Vava'u



➤ roof, inscribed with the names of the labourers who built them and the words 'Christ, our perfect pattern'. There were stores selling only soap powder, tins of mutton and enormous ceremonial yams costing a small fortune. I asked Masi what the people did. 'Sleep,' he replied succinctly. 'People don't need money – just a little to build their houses, and that is sent to them by relatives overseas.'

On board there were games of Scrabble, books of Tongan myths and a small deck with wooden loungers where you could sit with a cocktail and admire the view. Many of the islands have sheer cliffs undercut by the waves so that they seem to hover above the sea. Food was plentiful and unpretentious, mostly fish and fruit bought from villages along the way. When I asked what the cream sauce was that accompanied the grilled mahi mahi, the waitress went to enquire and came back with the answer: 'Whipping.'

We went to an anchorage on an island called Tapana for some evening entertainment. There is a small seaside bar and restaurant called La Paella, a wacky, driftwood cabin of a place built by a couple of eccentric Spaniards, Maria and Eduardo. They serve paella, have live music and invite customers – mostly passing yachties who are eager to

socialise – to join in with the percussion, while Maria, in a flouncy dress, does a spot of flamenco dancing.

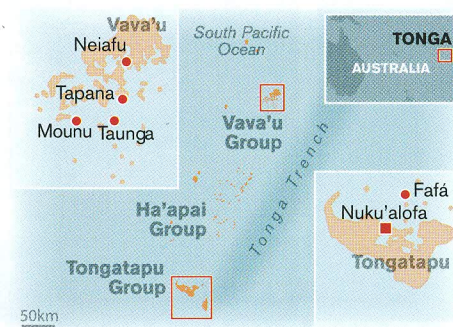
It's not only the women who wear dresses in Tonga. If you visit the islands in August, as I did, you may catch the Miss Cosmos beauty pageant for the *fakaleiti* community of Vava'u. *Fakaleiti* – as I learned from the *Oleanda's* cocktail menu, where it was a sweet but potent concoction of bourbon, vodka, coconut milk and cream – means 'like a lady'. Across the whole of Polynesia, but especially in Tonga and Samoa, it has long been the tradition for some men to dress and live as women. A common explanation is that if a family had only male children, one of the youngest, or the one who showed most inclination, was brought up as a girl to do what were

considered girl's chores. Nowadays, it is many men's only expression of a gay identity, and one that is completely accepted by society. The beauty pageants at which the 'girls' parade in their finest are raucous and sometimes a little lewd, but they open with a 10-minute prayer and are attended by all the family. On the opening night of Vava'u's Miss Cosmos, the contestants were resplendent in marine-themed frocks; but a long fishing-net cape and four-inch stilettos are a perilous combination, as 'Vanessa' found out to everyone's amusement.

There are other, more sombre Tongan traditions to do with dress. Something that sets Tonga apart from its Polynesian neighbours is the wearing of the national dress – the *ta'ovala* – especially at church. The *ta'ovala* is a mat woven from pandanus or hibiscus and worn around the waist. Each different shape and style of mat has its own particular meaning. There are formal and informal styles, for example; and there are mats that are worn only during mourning. I saw a young man in a black shirt with a huge, brown pandanus mat folded around his waist and reaching up to his armpits so that he looked like a corn dolly. All his family were in black and also wore large mats. They were mourning the death of the young man's father. He would be wearing that mat for a year, however hot the weather.

In winter (June–August) temperatures are usually a pleasant 23°C or so, with lots of sunshine. The week I was there, it was cool enough to require a pullover in the evenings and was overcast most of the time. It didn't help to hear everyone saying that it was the coldest winter they could remember.

Not that it bothered me: I had swum with whales. I had come to Tonga to enjoy the sun and sea, the village life, the tropical scenery and the people. But now a humpback had looked me in the eye. It was something I would never forget. I had no reason to be afraid.



## Getting to Tonga

★ The *MV Oleanda* no longer operates in Tongan waters, but **Transpacific Holidays** (01293 567722; [www.transpacificolidays.com](http://www.transpacificolidays.com)) organises trips to the archipelago. A 13-night holiday including Air New Zealand flights from London to Tonga

via LA, seven nights at Fafá Island Resort, six at Mounu Island Resort and a whale-watching excursion costs from £1,765 per person sharing in November. ★ **All Ways Pacific Travel** (01494 432747; [www.all-ways.co.uk](http://www.all-ways.co.uk)) offers tailor-made itineraries.