

Tonga Snapshots

CURRENT EVENTS

Politically, Tonga is in the throes of change. Ruled by an absolute monarchy, recent wage strikes by the civil service led to unprecedented protest against the Tongan royal family. In July 2005, 3000 public servants went on strike. Schools closed and several incidents of vandalism occurred around the capital, including an arson attack on a disused royal residence. The vehemence of rallies in New Zealand and Tonga against the royal family resulted in an extraordinary address to demonstrators by Princess Pilolevu. On 6 September 2005, in the largest protest in Tonga's history, strikers called for the dismissal of Prime Minister Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata and his cabinet. After the six-week strike, wage increases of up to 80% were awarded to protestors. The fallout from these strikes continues, and on 11 February 2006, the Prime Minister resigned. People's Representative and Cabinet Minister, Dr Fred Sevele, was appointed acting Prime Minister, and many are hopeful that a more democratic Tonga is imminent.

The 2005 election also saw the re-election of seven candidates from the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement (THRDM). Tonga's first incorporated political party, the Peoples' Democratic Party, was registered in July 2005, further adding to the voices of dissent. Though THRDM faces resistance from outside and division within, the Tongan Parliament agreed to the formation of a National Committee for Reform, which met in December 2005. This committee will consider submissions from the movement for political change, and key THRDM activists are preparing proposals for alternative models of governance.

Aviation controversies have also plagued Tonga in recent times. After discontinuing flights to the Niuas and 'Eua due to insufficient aircraft, Royal Tongan Airlines crashed financially midway through 2004. Two operators, Crown Prince-owned Air Peau Vava'u, and FlyNiu, emerged willing to take over domestic routes, but some heavy politicking served to keep FlyNiu out of the aviation equation. Struggling with only two DC3s, Air Peau Vava'u has been unable to fly to the Niuas or 'Eua. In light of this, the airline monopoly has been halted and a new carrier, Airlines Tonga, has reinstated services to the Niuas. It also hopes to extend their services to 'Eua, resources and pigs on the runway permitting.

Tonga's sporting future is a bright hope for the nation. Tongans were thrilled in 1996 when Paea Wolfgramm won Tonga's first Olympic medal in Atlanta, a silver for boxing. Unfortunately this Olympic success hasn't been repeated, but Tongans have been prominent in other sporting arenas, particularly rugby. Players of Tongan origin such as Steve and Toutai Kefu, Willie Ofahengaue, Finau Maka and All Blacks winger Jonah Lomu have dominated the rugby field. Tongan players have also joined forces with islanders from Samoa and Fiji to form the Pacific Island Rugby team, due to tour Europe in 2006. Surfing is becoming more high profile in Tonga, with the western coast of Nuku'alofa renowned for its breaks. Brother and sister Michael and 'Anau Burling won or were placed highly in a number of surfing events in 2005, including the Oceanic Cup. Amongst the world's first surfers, early Tongan islanders used the sides of canoes for surfing and body boarding, and the present king surfed in his youth. Today, surfing is growing in popularity and profile in Tonga.

FAST FACTS

GDP: TS296 million

Major exports: squash, pumpkin, vanilla, kava and other root crops

Population: 101,700

Population under the age of 25: 55%

Midnight: the hour night-clubs close on a Saturday night, in preparation for the Sabbath

Literacy rate: 99%

Total Tongan land area: 747 sq km

1806: the last year a missionary ended up in a Tongan cooking pot

HISTORY

MYTHOLOGY

Tonga has a rich mythological tradition. The main deities of this mythology were the male gods Tangaloa and Maui, rulers of the sky and the underworld respectively, and the female demigod Hikule'o who ruled Pulumotu, Tongan paradise. Many ancient legends relate to the islands' creation. With characteristic humility, some say the Tongan islands were woodchips left over from the gods' workshop. In another tale, Tangaloa fished the islands from the sea with a tortoiseshell-and-whalebone hook. Perhaps not adept with the fishing rod, his line snagged on the island of Nuapapu, scattering into the sea the bits of land now known as the Vava'u Group.

Another story tells us that Tonga was the product of a successful fishing trip by Maui. Fishing with a hook borrowed from an old man called Tonga, Maui plucked all the islands from the ocean one by one, and called the largest Tonga to honour the old man and his miraculous hook.

FIRST SETTLEMENT

In the 1940s, eccentric Norwegian scientist, explorer and archaeologist, Thor Heyerdahl, theorised that Polynesians first migrated from Peru and Easter Island on balsawood rafts. This hypothesis was based on the fact that currents and winds were easterly, and that sweet potato, or *kumala*, was historically found in South America and the Pacific, rather than Asia. To prove his point, Heyerdahl built a model of these rafts, and travelled from Peru to Polynesia in the famous Kon-Tiki expedition of 1947.

Heyerdahl convincingly demonstrated that early travel from the Americas to the Pacific was possible, but it is more widely accepted that the Lapita people were of Southeast Asian origin and that these Austronesians migrated westwards to become the ancestors of present-day Polynesians. Experts estimate that the Lapita people arrived in the region between 3100 and 3000 BC, but the earliest date confirmed by radiocarbon testing is around 1100 BC. These earlier dates are based on a series of archaeological discoveries, which unearthed similar examples of Lapita pottery in the Bismarck Archipelago, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa.

It's believed that when the Lapita people arrived in Tonga they founded the first in a series of capitals at Toloa, near present-day Fua'amotu International Airport. The second site for a capital was Heketa, on the north-eastern tip of Tongatapu. Here, King Tu'itatui constructed the famous Ha'amonga 'a Maui Trilithon (p209), Tonga's very own Stonehenge.

Like at Toloa, the rugged coastline at Heketa offered no sea access or shelter for canoes, and finally the capital was moved to the more protected village of Mu'a (p199) by Tu'itatui's son Talatama. The pyramid tombs from this era have been excavated, and visitors to Tonga can now explore these significant archaeological sites.

EARLY ROYALTY

In between fishing trips, the god Tangaloa made a memorable expedition to Tonga that resulted in the birth of the first Tu'i Tonga (the royal title for Tongan rulers). He climbed down an ironwood tree from the sky to

Natural disasters were always attributed to the gods. It was said that Maui carried the earth on his shoulder. When he switched shoulders or fell asleep, the land would shudder with an earthquake.

Tupou Posesi Fanua has published an excellent, bilingual collection of Tongan oral stories called *Po Fananga: Folk Tales of Tonga*. It includes the coconut-tree legend and stories of the gods, spirits and first islanders.

CANNIBALISM

When the ample-bodied Queen Salote travelled in an open carriage through the streets of London for Queen Elizabeth's coronation with a diminutive sultan sitting next to her, Noel Coward famously quipped that this travelling companion was 'her lunch'.

A few missionaries might have ended up in the Tongan 'umu (underground earth oven) over the years but it's been a long time since the last guest of honour became the main course. Cannibalism was associated with absorbing the power of one's adversaries, and was not a remedy for a lack of protein!

the earth and had sexual intercourse with a beautiful local woman called 'Ilaheva. The product of their union was 'Aho'eitu, the first-born in a long line of Tongan royalty. According to oral history, this occurred around AD 950.

Early Tongan rulers sat at the top of a hierarchical pyramid similar to European feudalism. Strong distinctions were drawn between commoners, nobility and royalty, who were addressed with a deference otherwise reserved for the spiritual world. If chiefs became ill, commoners would self-mutilate and sacrifice fingers from one or both hands (an act known as *moimoi*) to ease the wrath of the gods.

Beneath commoners, Tongans also had a slave class called *popula*, many members of which were prisoners of war. Despite the existence of strong commercial and filial networks with Samoa and Fiji, the Tongans viciously pursued paramountcy in the region. They were great warriors, and, assisted by awe-inspiring war canoes (*kalia*), extended the Tu'i Tonga's empire so that it included part or all of Fiji, the Samoas, Niue and Tokelau at one point.

The Tu'i Tonga title passed down from father to eldest son, or to a brother if there was no heir. Interestingly, in the mid-17th century, the Tu'i Tonga created a political system with a conceptual basis akin to the present-day separation of powers doctrine. Authority was subsequently divided between the Tu'i Tonga, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua and Tu'i Kanokupolu.

EUROPEAN CONTACT

The first European arrivals in Tonga were the Dutch explorers Willem Schouten and Jacob le Maire in 1616. The duo navigated through the Niuaus without landing, although they managed to squeeze in a sailboat altercation with a Tongan canoe.

The next visitor was also Dutch: Abel Janszoon Tasman passed through the southernmost Tongan islands in 1643 with his ships *Heemskerck* and *Zeehaen*. Tasman stopped for water and traded with communities on the islands of 'Ata, 'Eua and Tongatapu, which he renamed with European sensibility Pijlstaert, Middelburgh and Amsterdam. He then sailed northwards, stopping at Nomuka (renamed Rotterdam!) in Ha'apai, before heading towards Fiji.

Over a century later came English explorers Captain Samuel Wallis in 1767 and, most memorably, Captain James Cook who first visited Tongatapu and 'Eua in October 1773. Cook, not short of talent nor ego, famously

When Cook was in Nomuka, he dined on locally prepared fish cooked in coconut cream with the Ha'apai Chief Finau. Cook was so impressed with the food that he ordered his own chef to try and cook fish the Tongan way.

TIMELINE 3100–3000 BC

Lapita people arrive in Polynesia

AD 950

First Tu'i Tonga, 'Aho'eitu, believed to be the son of Tangaloa

1616

First Dutch explorers arrive in the Niuaus

1773

Cook arrives in Tonga for the first time

declared that '...ambition leads me not only farther than any other man has been before me, but as far as I think it is possible for me to go.'

Cook and his men traded metals and weapons for food, water, bark cloth and other 'primitive curiosities' which were later marvelled over in European society drawing rooms on his return. Cook tasted *kava* and witnessed many local rites.

Cook returned to Europe via Nomuka in 1774, and then on his third voyage spent April to July 1777 again in Tonga. Cook befriended Chief Finau in Ha'apai, who encouraged him to go to Lifuka island for supplies. Cook and his men had such a good time being feted by the locals that he magnanimously named the region the 'Friendly Islands'. Ironically, this Tongan friendliness masked a plan concocted by Ha'apai chiefs to kill Cook and his men. A combination of 'Tonga time' and miscommunication saved the guileless Cook, who set sail before this plot could come to fruition and the islanders' reputation for hospitality remained in tact. See the boxed text on p233 for more.

European discovery of the Vava'u Group was left to the Spanish explorer Don Francisco Antonio Mourelle of the ship *La Princesa*, who came across the islands en route to Spanish America in 1781. Mourelle was captivated by Vava'u Island, naming its harbour Puerto de Refugio (Port of Refuge) and claiming the group for Spain.

Tonga eluded the grasping reach of French imperialism. Antoine d'Entrecasteaux of France stopped briefly in Tongatapu in search of the missing explorer Jean-François de Galaup, comte de la Pérouse, who had been sailing from Siberia to Australia, but this was the extent of a French presence in Tonga.

Meanwhile, Mourelle's accounts of Vava'u had created some excitement in Spain. In 1793, Captain Alessandro Malaspina was sent around the Pacific to survey it and investigate the feasibility of establishing a colonial presence in Vava'u. Allegedly, Malaspina annexed Tonga for the Spanish crown by burying a decree on the main island, although this was never found. Distracted by interests in South America, the Spanish soon relinquished their colonial aspirations in the Pacific.

The first Europeans to settle permanently in Tonga were six deserters from the American ship *Otter* in 1796. The following year, 10 lay missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived in Tongatapu. This was a disaster: three were murdered soon after arrival and six others remained in hiding until they could be safely removed to Australia

MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY

In April 1789, Tonga became the setting for one of history's most famous mutinies. Off the volcanic island of Tofua in the Ha'apai Group, trouble was brewing on the HMS *Bounty* which was returning from Tahiti to England. Deteriorating relations on board saw Captain William Bligh and 18 crew men involuntarily relieved of their duties and set adrift in an open boat with minimal supplies.

They landed at Tofua briefly, hoping to secure provisions, but local unrest forced them to cast off, having loaded only the most meagre of rations. Quartermaster John Norton was attacked and killed by islanders and the other English sailors only narrowly escaped. They reached Timor in the Dutch East Indies on 14 June, having survived the longest-ever ocean voyage in an open boat.

Captain Cook presented a Galapagos tortoise to the king of Tonga in exchange for *kava*. Named Tu'i Malila, the tortoise was a beloved royal pet for centuries until it died in 1965.

Tonga is the only South Pacific nation that was never colonised.

in 1800. The only one of the group able to survive in Tonga was George Vason, who assimilated, renouncing Christianity and marrying a Tongan woman. He was even tattooed in the Tongan way and was granted land by a Tongan benefactor. Vason later wrote an account of his experience that emphasised the lurid temptations present in the islands; he advised that future missionaries be already married and with children!

Trade negotiations between European vessels and Tongans became increasingly fraught and frequently ended in bloodshed. When the *Port-au-Prince* landed in Lifuka on 29 November 1806, the ship was ransacked and the crew massacred. The only one spared was the cabin boy, William Mariner, who was taken under the wing of Finau. He went on to write the now famous story of his four-year adventure in Tonga, *An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands*. See the boxed text, p236, for more information on William Mariner.

CHRISTIANITY

No-one visiting Tonga today could doubt the eventual efficacy of missionaries in the region. However, after the first, failed attempts of the LMS, the kingdom was free of missionaries until a Wesleyan reverend, Walter Lawry, arrived in Mu'a, Tongatapu. Lawry's stay was brief and greatly protested by traditional Tongan priests. Successive missionaries had more success, however, as a Tongan chief had become interested in Christianity in the wake of Lawry's departure.

The most influential convert was Taufa'ahau, who went on to seize control of Ha'apai from its rightful heir, Laufilitonga. Baptised in 1831, Taufa'ahau took on the Christian name of Siaosi, or George, after the king of England, and adopted the surname Tupou.

Under his influence, all of Ha'apai converted to Christianity. When George's cousin, King 'Ulukalala III of Vava'u, followed suit, so did the people of Vava'u. On Tongatapu, Wesleyan missionaries were gaining momentum, and secured the conversion of George's great-uncle Tu'i Kanokupolu. Upon his death, George Tupou assumed his title and became the sole king of a now united Tonga.

THE HOUSE OF TUPOU

Challenges for Tonga's King George did not end at the establishment of centralised Tongan rule. Tension between Wesleyan and Catholic missionary presences was escalating, and many traditional chiefs and nobles were still resistant to the new regime.

To address this problem, in the 1830s King George had started drafting uniform laws to govern the kingdom. The Vava'u Code was his first effort; it forbade the worship of old gods and prevented those in power acquiring property from the Tongan people by force. In 1853, King George travelled to Australia. He was sufficiently impressed by Australian governance arrangements to ask for assistance in revising his laws, and by 1862 he had developed a sophisticated new code that further consolidated his power in Tonga.

Wesleyan missionary Shirley Baker played a significant part in the drafting process, and was a trusted advisor to the king. Together they formulated laws that abolished serfdom and the sale of Tongan land to

The Other Side of Heaven is a 2001 film based on the trials and tribulations of Mormon Elder John Groberg who was in Niuaotuputu during the 1950s. It's a convincing, if clichéd, portrait of missionary activity in Tonga.

1789

Captain William Bligh and 18 crew men are set adrift off the volcanic island of Tofua after the crew of HMS *Bounty* mutiny

1806

William Mariner is spared in the *Port-au-Prince* massacre

1845

King George Tupou I rules over a united Tonga

1900

Tonga becomes a protectorate of the British Empire

foreigners. The revised code also mandated the distribution of land in the kingdom to male subjects over 16 years of age. Every man received a village lot and an *'api* (a plantation of 3.34 hectares) for an annual fee.

Baker and King George created a national flag, a state seal, a national anthem and a constitution, which mapped out legislative and judicial procedures and included a bill of rights and sections on land tenure and succession to the throne. This new constitution was passed on 4 November 1875.

Baker's royal patronage made him the object of jealousy in the Wesleyan missionary camp, which conspired to have him expelled from the church and Tonga on charges of adultery. This was unsuccessful, and Baker was unshakeable in his determination to shape the emerging Tongan kingdom. In 1876 he helped the King to conclude a treaty of friendship with Germany to deter French and British aspirations in the region.

In 1879, the church disassociated Baker from its mission and the king responded by cancelling Wesleyan leases; he appointed Baker prime minister of Tonga in 1880. Unheeding of criticism from various stakeholders, Baker created the Free Church of Tonga and the king urged all Tongan Wesleyans to abandon their church in favour of Baker's new one. Refusal was met with floggings, dispossession of property and dismissal from public office. Baker was nearly assassinated by the king's opponents, and six Wesleyans were executed in retribution while four others were sent into exile. Many remaining Wesleyans fled Tonga for Fiji.

This holy war of sorts attracted the attention of the British government, which had been keen to induct Tonga into its Pacific sphere of influence. Certain that Baker was exploiting his relationship with the King, the government sent an investigatory committee to assess the situation. Baker hit back and accused the British consul of having masterminded the assassination attempt. The British responded by convincing the aging king that religious freedom was necessary and that Baker had overstepped the boundaries of an advisor. After years of service to the king, Shirley Baker was deported. He eventually was allowed to return, and died in Ha'apai (p232).

King George died in 1893, and his great-grandson assumed the throne as George Tupou II. The new king lacked the charisma, character and fearlessness of his predecessor; he signed a Treaty of Friendship with Britain in 1900. This placed Tonga under British protection, and the British assumed control over Tonga's foreign affairs. Upon his death in 1918 King George Tupou II was succeeded by his 18-year-old daughter Salote.

Queen Salote was a passionate advocate of education, health care and the arts (p165). Of great stature, character and intelligence, she was well loved by subjects and foreigners alike. Her legendary attendance at Queen Elizabeth's coronation is one of the prevailing anecdotes of the occasion. On this rainy day in 1953, the queen proceeded through London in a covered carriage. Traditionally, Tongans show respect by remaining bareheaded in the presence of someone of higher rank. From her open carriage Queen Salote resolutely smiled at the crowds through the rain, paying homage to the newly crowned Queen of England. She won many hearts in the process, and the world mourned when she passed away in 1965.

In the book *Malo Tupou: An Oral History*, well-known Tongan personality Tupou Fanua Posei recounts her first 21 years (1913–34) to Lois Wimberg Webster. This is a very readable account of her life and of many customs still seen in Tonga today.

In 1932 Tonga's reigning king achieved the national pole-vaulting record in his age group, unbroken until 1989.

KING TAUFA'AHAU TUPOU IV

The present king is Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, Queen Salote's son. He'll perhaps be best remembered for his involvement in costly get-rich-quick schemes, including selling Tongan passports, satellite slots and even flags of convenience. In 2002, the Tongan flag was spotted on the Red Sea, emblazoned on a ship transporting armaments to the Middle East. American businessman Jesse Bogdonoff, not so affectionately known as the court jester, persuaded the king to invest over T\$50 million in offshore businesses; the money hasn't been seen since. In 2005, the king promised that millions of dollars would arrive in the Reserve Bank, courtesy of unknown foreign investors popularly suspected to be email fraudsters.

Still, King Taufa'ahau has been at the helm of Tonga's gradual modernisation. In 1970, Tonga recovered full sovereignty from Britain and was admitted to the Commonwealth of Nations soon after. Erratically forged diplomatic relationships with the Soviet Union, Taiwan and now China have kept this small Pacific nation in the regional spotlight. Chinese aid, trade and migration are having a profound influence on the kingdom, perhaps not least in encouraging Australia and New Zealand to step up their own Tongan aid programmes. Tonga joined the UN in 1999 and is presently negotiating membership to the World Trade Organization.

Unfortunately, King Taufa'ahau has been reluctant to embark on domestic political reform. The Crown Prince, Tupoutou'a, is the successor to the aging king, but is universally unpopular and considered to be pompous. The king's nephew, the reformist Prince Tu'ipelehake, is the people's favourite royal, well respected for his outspoken opinions and radical attitudes. The future of the royal family's rule in Tonga remains to be seen. With growing political unrest in 2005 and the resignation of Prime Minister Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata in February 2006, the royal family is under considerable pressure to abandon their political stranglehold and take on a ceremonial role instead.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMICS

Tonga is technically a constitutional monarchy, based on the British Westminster system of government. King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV has exercised absolute power, provided for by a constitution that has barely changed since 1875. The monarch is head of the nation and the government, which has a cabinet that consists of the prime minister and other ministers who are appointed for life. Until recently, cabinet comprised only nobles but in the 2005 election, two ministers were appointed from the popularly elected people's representatives. Significantly, one of these

Queen Salote of Tonga: The Story of an Era, 1900–65 by Elizabeth Wood-Ellem is an interesting written account of Tonga's most popular monarch, informed by the author's childhood experiences in the kingdom.

THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

The Tonga Pro-Democracy Movement began in the 1970s, initiated by a small group anxious to usher political reform into the kingdom. It advocated a constitutional monarchy without lifetime parliamentary appointments and absolute domination by the nobility. Since 1990, successive parliamentary elections have brought more supporters and a higher profile to the movement. In 1998, the group became the Tonga Human Rights and Democracy Movement (THRDM). Interested visitors will find its office on Fatafehi Rd in Nuku'alofa.

1965

Queen Salote dies, and King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV ascends the throne

1996

Taimi editors and a prodemocracy activist are jailed for reporting on an impending government impeachment

1999

Tonga joins the UN

2006

Prime Minister Prince 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata resigns

ministers was appointed acting prime minister when Prime Minister 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata resigned in early 2006.

The legislature is unicameral and is composed of an appointed speaker, the cabinet, nine nobles and nine elected people's representatives. The age of suffrage is 21, and elections are held every three years.

Tonga's highest judicial body is the Court of Appeal, composed of the Privy Council (king and cabinet) and the Chief Justice. Below this are the Supreme Court, the Land Court and the Magistrates Court. Local government consists of town and district officers who preside over villages and groups of villages.

Tonga tends to lurch from one economic crisis to another. GDP was T\$2936 per capita in 2002 and imports ran at T\$163 million, while inflation was around 11% in 2004. The national trade deficit figure for 2003 was T\$10.5 million. In 2004, Tonga's Reserve Bank held foreign reserves of T\$93.4 million, enough for just under six months' worth of imports.

Standards of living are generally dependent on remittances – money sent home from relatives living and working overseas. However, if family ties between Tongans at home and abroad become weaker and the money dries up, the Tongan economy will be in big trouble.

THE CULTURE

THE TONGAN PSYCHE

Tongan stereotypes are a mixture of truths, exaggerations, lies and statistics. Outside the kingdom, Tongans are perhaps most renowned for their girth, their musical talent and the nation's inimitable sense of hospitality.

Allusions to the larger-sized Tongan figure are founded in truth. While Tongan beauties are refreshingly voluptuous, along with fellow Pacific is-

TIPS ON MEETING LOCALS

- Ask permission. If you want to make sure that something is culturally appropriate, ask your hosts what they would do in the situation and act accordingly.
- Dress conservatively. This means sleeves, and shorts or skirts below the knee. Women in particular need to take care when sitting down to ensure that no-one can see up their skirts!
- Wear shorts and a T-shirt when swimming at a public beach. Skimpy swimwear is fine at the resorts, but most Tongans swim fully dressed.
- Take photos with the permission of the subject(s). Usually this won't be a problem; Tongan people (especially children) love being in photos and enjoy seeing the results, especially if you have a digital camera. If you promise to send photos, do so. They are enthusiastically received and placed in pride of place in people's homes.
- Be aware that solo women travellers can be vulnerable to excessive male attention. Caution at night-time is advised.
- Don't get impatient or try to cram too many activities into one day if you are spending time with locals. If things take a long time, meetings go for hours and feasts have an endless stream of speakers, you're getting a real insight into Tongan life.
- Don't refuse high table seats or front-row positions when offered. Again, this is a gesture of respect.
- Don't be surprised if you attract a fair bit of attention. Travellers are a novelty and your various habits and accessories will be foreign to many.

www.planet-tonga.com is a Tongan portal with everything from chat rooms to recipe-request services. It profiles a variety of inspirational Tongan community organisations, youth leaders and sport stars.

THE FAKALEITI

In a deeply Christian society like Tonga, there's not much tolerance for open displays of sexuality, rampant promiscuity or a tight pair of hot pants. Unless, of course, you are one of Tonga's *fakaleiti*. *Fakaleiti*, or *leiti* (ladies) as they call themselves, are men who dress and behave as women.

The most high-profile event in the *fakaleiti* calendar is the Miss Galaxy pageant. Taking place a week after the king's birthday celebrations, this is an outrageous display of pole dancing, high heels and costumes made out of everything from tulle to drinking straws. The participants display their talents, charms and dance moves to a highly appreciative audience, that always includes members of the royal family.

While most *fakaleiti* are probably gay, not all of them are; some are even married to women! Some *fakaleiti* grow up accepted, loved and without any experience of stigma. Others are not so lucky, and are cruelly persecuted as children and teenagers. Some church ministers are vehement critics, and Tongan fathers tend not to be particularly proud if one of their sons turns out to be a *leiti*.

However, the Tonga Leiti's Association is an active group, and Miss Galaxy attracts a huge amount of sponsorship. It's just unfortunate that Tonga's relative tolerance of transgendered creativity does not extend to gay men or lesbians.

land nation Nauru, the country recorded the greatest prevalence of obesity in a 2005 global study by the World Health Organization. An estimated nine out of 10 adults are said to be overweight. The Ministry of Health has responded with a public-health programme focusing on exercise, but as yet, few inroads have been made into promoting a leaner cuisine.

Having said that, Tongans are becoming more weight and health conscious. The king is renowned for having shed over 75 kilograms, and other members of the royal family have also become health role models, often spotted at the local gym. The annual Aerobics Extravaganza also attracts a huge number of entries from workplaces and community groups for its week-long programme.

Visitors drawn to Tonga by the promise of beautiful singing will not be disappointed. Tongans are exceptionally musical and will harmonise perfectly at the drop of a hat. Music is usually church centred, with most people participating in choirs that are linked to their place of worship (see p166). Although American hip-hop, rap and R&B are increasingly imported into the country and embraced enthusiastically by young people, local music and musicians prevail as one of the most popular sources of entertainment. The local TV station devotes half an hour of airtime every week to homemade music videos produced by aspiring Tongan pop stars, crooners with ukuleles and enterprising choral groups.

Like most Pacific islanders, Tongans have a deep sense of hospitality, reciprocity and community. They are undeniably generous with food and belongings, and will welcome you into their homes. However, tourists are less usual here than in places like Fiji and Samoa; you may be greeted with some initial reserve before being embraced more wholeheartedly.

This reserve is also related to ingrained traditions of respect and hierarchy. These customs and protocols can be difficult to negotiate and understand without spending a considerable amount of time in the country. Effectively, Tonga has three social tiers: royalty, nobility and commoners. Presently there are 33 noble families. Hierarchy is implicit even in the Tongan language, and the word for commoners, *me'a vale*, means 'the ignorant ones'. Commoners are required to address royalty in a special language and can only approach the monarch while crawling on their hands and knees. This deference is further evident in public life:

The word taboo comes from the Tongan *tapu*, which means forbidden or sacred.

Anthropologist Helen Morton went to Tonga for one month in 1979, and ended up spending three years in the islands. *Becoming Tongan: An Ethnography of Childhood* gives an excellent insight into the 'Tongan way'.

direct eye contact is disrespectful and people generally stoop or duck when passing a person of higher status.

Saving face is all-important, and Tongans do not like to disappoint or say no to anyone. Patience is a virtue and Tongan time is a flexible entity. Don't be surprised if you fail to receive straight answers, or are presented with directions and itineraries that go awry.

Much is unsaid in Tongan culture, and body language plays a huge part in day-to-day life. A common greeting is the raising of the eyebrows in passing. A more formal greeting involves shaking hands or an embrace, and the pressing of opposite facial cheeks while inhaling: it's meet-sniff-and-greet territory. While it's not uncommon to see same-sex friends holding hands or linking arms in the street, public displays of heterosexual affection are considered an affront to Tongan culture. Curiously, while you won't see couples holding hands or kissing in public, sexual innuendo plays a huge part in Tongan storytelling and the national sense of humour.

LIFESTYLE

Family is the central unit of Tongan life. An average family unit may comprise adopted children, cousins and other distant relatives, alongside the usual smattering of siblings and grandparents. Everything is very communal, from food to sleeping arrangements, although brothers and sisters always sleep under separate roofs in accordance with the Tongan culture of sibling separation and respect.

Chores are distributed according to gender: men tend the 'umu (underground earth oven), grow and harvest food, collect and husk coconuts and perform all manual labour. The women clean, wash clothes, prepare and cook food, and take on the lion's share of child-minding responsibilities.

The patriarch is generally the head of the family, and land passes down from a father to his eldest son. However women possess high (even superior) status in other facets of family life. For example, a brother's *fahu* (oldest sister) will be accorded the highest level of respect at all formal and informal occasions, from funerals to weddings and births.

Most Tongans have their own homes and a family plot of land from which at least some of their livelihood is derived. Self-sufficiency is a necessity given low incomes and the high rate of unemployment. Most civil servants and teachers would be lucky to make more than T\$70 a week, and the average salary is estimated to be less than T\$2 an hour.

TONGAN FUNERALS

Funerals are of enormous cultural significance in Tonga. In contrast with the taboos regarding death and dying in Western society, death in Tonga is met with matter-of-fact acceptance and a highly ritualised grieving process.

Mourners are easy to spot: custom requires that Tongans dress in black and wear *ta'ovala* (waistmats). Visitors might observe some locals in particularly tattered *ta'ovala*, some of which almost reach the neck and face. These signify the death of an immediate family member, and are also worn in the case of a royal funeral. Certain female relatives also cut off their hair, while men grow their beards.

Funerals last up to 10 days, and require enormous preparation. Streets are cordoned off, choirs sing all night and neighbours and relatives all bring bark cloth, mats and quilts to present to the deceased's family, after which they are bestowed with the honour of kissing the dead body.

Funerals are a quintessential example of the extent of Tongan *fatongia* (duties and obligations). Families can spend thousands of dollars on catering, gifts and even filming the proceedings for family overseas.

Following a traditional Tongan wedding, the bride's bloodstained sheets will be presented to the groom's family in a ceremony called *'api*, as proof of her virginity.

The book *Voyages by Cathy Small* charts migration between Tonga and California. One striking image of cultural difference is the father who travels to Salt Lake City to buy a pony, and then, in front of the seller, kills it for his daughter's birthday celebrations.

Tongan society is devoid of materialism; personal possessions are shared communally and 'borrowing' is a way of life. Visitors staying with a Tongan family might expect some of their belongings to go astray. It's usually not malicious. Confrontation of the issue is best done with a sense of humour and the understanding that this is how Tongan society operates.

Substance abuse is a big problem in Tongan households. *Kava* is heavily used by most men, and alcoholism is increasingly widespread. Alcohol consumption is a major contributing factor to domestic violence in Tonga, which is rife but largely unreported. Use of substances like marijuana is not unheard of, but harder drugs are rarely encountered.

POPULATION

Tonga has a population of about 101,000. A little over a third of that number live in the capital, Nuku'alofa, while another third live in outer villages on Tongatapu. Vava'u is the kingdom's second-most populated region (20,000), followed by Ha'apai (10,000 approx), 'Eua and finally the Niua.

Many young people are leaving the outer islands in search of better work and educational prospects and other opportunities. The destinations of choice are Tongatapu and overseas, where increasingly rigorous immigration laws in Australia, New Zealand and the US allow Tongans are prolific travellers, and it is estimated that over 100,000 Tongans live overseas: more than 83,000 of these live in New Zealand, Australia and the US.

Tonga has the usual quota of temporary and permanent expat residents – often humorously dubbed 'misfits, mercenaries and missionaries' – who predominantly reside in Tongatapu and Vava'u. Australia, the US and Japan operate volunteer programmes throughout the Tongan islands, and Australia, China, Sweden, the UK and New Zealand all have a consular presence in the capital.

Other migrant communities (predominantly from China, although there are also smaller groups from India, Europe and Southeast Asia) are most prominent in Nuku'alofa and Neiafu. Generally, these groups live at arm's length from the Tongan population. While European migrants and visitors are usually accorded a high level of respect, racism towards those of Asian background is rife. While some Tongans tolerate the growing Asian presence, incidents and attacks stemming from racial hatred, financial insecurity and xenophobia are on the increase.

SPORT

Tongans are certainly avid spectators of sport. Rugby is the national favourite, and while the national team, *Ikale Tahi*, have experienced some spectacular defeats, they have been selected for every World Cup since 1999.

Touchingly, sports enthusiasm is extended equally to amateur and school sports, with village rugby tournaments and interschool sports days attracting huge turnouts. In terms of local male participation, rugby, soccer and even Australian Rules football are played. Sports options are limited for girls, but netball dominates in winter. The *fakaleiti* (men who dress as women; see boxed text, p161) community also has a netball competition, and even won a gold medal in the 2002 Gay Games in Sydney. Volleyball is played by both men and women, and competitions frequently take over the otherwise unused (and ubiquitous) Mormon school basketball courts.

MEDIA

Tonga is notorious for being the Pacific island with the most repressive approach to the media. The Government has waged a long battle against *Taimi 'o Tonga*, the often critical, biweekly newspaper published by

Tongans Overseas: Between Two Shores, written by Helen Morton Lee, is an extremely topical account of Tongan migration. The book has a special focus on youth identity and (now defunct) Internet forums like the Kava Bowl.

Kalafi Moala is one of Tonga's most outspoken journalists, and he has been jailed, censored and sued for his efforts. His book *Island Kingdom Strikes Back* outlines his experiences at the helm of Tonga's most controversial newspaper.

Kalafi Moala, which is often critical of the government. In 1996, its editors Moala and Filokalafi 'Akau'ola, and People's Representative 'Akilisi Pohiva, were jailed simply for reporting the impending impeachment of the Tongan Minister for Justice.

In 2003, the Government amended Clause 7 of the Constitution, effectively giving it the power to ban or restrict certain media outlets. Fortunately, this amendment was thrown out by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional. The worst affected publications, such as *Taimi 'o Tonga* and *Matangi Tonga*, are now back on Tongan shelves.

Publisher of *Matangi*, Pesi Fonua, received a Pacific Island News Association Media Freedom Award in 2005 for his efforts in upholding freedom of speech and the media, and Kalafi Moala has previously been a recipient of this award. *Kalonikali* and the Tonga Broadcasting Commission (TV and radio station) are government-owned and -run, and tend to be very conservative, censored and self-censoring as a result. The Oceania Broadcasting network, *Tonga Star*, politically radical *Ko e keke'a* and a number of religious publications make up the remaining media outlets in Tonga.

RELIGION

Tongans are extremely religious, at least in theory. More than 99% of the country identifies as Christian; 41% of these ascribe to the Free Wesleyan Church, 16% are Roman Catholic, 14% belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and 12% to the Free Church of Tonga. The remaining number of Tongans are Anglicans, Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, and minority faiths include Baha'i, Islam and Hinduism. Missionaries in Tonga are prevalent and mostly well-respected, and local church delegates are frequently setting out or returning from missions in various parts of the Pacific, America, New Zealand and Australia.

The most prestigious local school is the government-run Tonga High School, but students who do not win a place here are dependent on the privately run church schools for their education. Of these, the Mormon schools are renowned for having the best-quality teachers and facilities, and many families convert to Mormonism in time for their children's education.

Faifekau (church ministers) are highly respected in Tonga, and are dutifully taken care of by their religious constituents. Churches rely on donations and fundraising both in Tonga and from overseas, and this often places a large burden on Tongan families who can ill afford to give more money. Many families end up taking out hefty loans or selling heirlooms in the markets around the time of annual church donations and church conferences.

Formal church occasions aside, all meetings and events in Tonga are opened with a prayer and or sermon, and religious iconography, memora-

CHURCH ON A SUNDAY

No visitor to Tonga should miss the cultural experience of attending church. Besides, on a Sunday, that's where all the action is. Outside of the churches, the streets are empty, all businesses bar those for tourists are closed, sports events are prohibited, planes don't fly, and people are fined for swimming or fishing, although this is slowly changing.

Whether you are religious or not, you'll find that Tongan church architecture is spectacular, the singing is world-class and it's a great opportunity to see the locals in their Sabbath finery.

Most Tongans attend two worship services: the main one begins at 10am, but others are also held at dawn and in the evening. It's important to dress respectfully and to remember that church is the one place in Tonga where punctuality is important!

www.matangitonga.to provides excellent coverage of all Tongan happenings, from visiting Hollywood stars to political and social justice issues. It is widely read in Tonga and overseas.

Tongans invest great energy and creativity into decorating graves. Visitors passing cemeteries will spy embroidered quilts, beer bottles, plastic flowers, pictures of Jesus Christ, shells, rocks and soft toys marking burial sites.

abilia and billboards are everywhere. You'll see more than a few baseball caps with GAP on them (For 'God Answers Prayers', rather than an advertising slogan for the American clothing company) and biblical citations are the T-shirt slogans of choice.

Premissionary religions have a minimal public profile, but many superstitions still hold strong. *Tevolo* (devils) are feared and graveyard protocol retains the trace of ancient rituals. One such belief is that if a family member is suffering from a terminal or chronic illness, it is because the bones of their ancestors have been disturbed. Many will return to old family burial sites, dig up remains and rebury old relatives to remedy their own ill health. *Faito'o* (traditional Tongan medicine) is also practiced in every village, and for many it is the preferred alternative to Western medicine.

WOMEN IN TONGA

Tonga has a Government ministry devoted to women's affairs, and there is a healthy Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) presence that focuses on the advancement of women's rights. The Catholic Women's League has a particularly strong record, as does the Centre for Women and Children. While many women hold important roles in business, the public service and local NGOs, their representation in the political realm has been scant and women have significantly less legal and economic rights than their male counterparts, especially in relation to land. Despite growing public information campaigns, Tonga is yet to ratify the Cedaw (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women). However, in the 2005 by-election, Lepolo Taunisila was elected People's Representative for the Niuaus and became the first female Tongan parliamentarian for 10 years.

ARTS Dance

Captain Cook was awed by the sight of Tongan dancing when he stopped in Ha'apai in 1777. On the request of the Tongan chief, Cook and his men had performed a poorly executed series of military exercises, which ended with gun fire. The Tongans responded with a considerably more polished traditional dance performance, and Cook noted in his diaries that this 'far exceeded anything we had done to amuse them'.

Dance in the Friendly Islands is still an impressive sight to behold, and is performed regularly: for tourists certainly, but also for special occasions, feasts and fund raisers.

Tongan dance is a fascinating step away from the swaying hips of the Hawaiian *hula* and the *kastom* dances of Melanesian nations like Vanuatu. While many of the male dancers possess the vibrant energy evident in other Pacific dances, female performers favour subtle movement, with an emphasis on the arms and hands.

Through songs and choreographed performances, Tongan dancers tell important cultural and historical stories. These movements are known as *haka*, and are choreographed and composed by a *punake* (the composers and choreographers of Tongan dance). *Punake* are highly regarded in Tongan society, and one of the most esteemed of these was the late Queen Salote, whose arrangements continue to shape the face of Tongan dance.

Most dances are performed in groups, like the *lakalaka*, a formal, standing dance which can require the participation of an entire village. Men and women perform together, although each performs different movements. The men and women placed in central positions are the highest-ranking villagers, known as *vahenga*. Their costumes are the most spectacular, but all the performers don impressive sheaths of *tapa* (mulberry bark cloth) or

Patricia Ledyard Matheson was one of Tonga's most famous foreign residents. She has written a brief but informative history of Tonga called *The Tongan Past*, as well as an entertaining autobiography called *'Utulei, My Tongan Home*.

finely woven pandanus, shells, flowers, leaves and feathered head dresses. Many of the outfits are heirlooms, passed down through the generations.

The *ma'ulu'ulu* is also performed for festive and state occasions. It is performed in three rows, and performers sit, kneel or stand accordingly.

Men also occasionally perform the *kailao*, or war dance. This is a dramatic display, with wooden clubs, rapid pacing, war cries and fierce drumming. Fire dancing is less common, but occasionally performed for visitors. It involves fire-stick juggling and vigorous movements to a drum beat.

The *tau'olunga* is predominantly a solo dance for young women. These dancers excel at the small, graceful movements synonymous with Tongan dance. They must keep their knees together and the lower half of the body still, unless they are moving around the dance space. The mark of a good *tau'olunga* is said to be in the dancer's smile and head tilt (*fakateki*). Performers are usually accompanied by background singers and musicians playing the guitar and ukulele. The dancers are also doused in coconut oil, which must glisten and drip, or superstition holds that the young woman in question is not a virgin. Many chaperones and accompanying relatives swirl the oil around their mouths before spitting it on the dancers to ensure that they are appropriately shiny!

Oiled skin also facilitates traditional tipping of Tongan dancers, known as *fakapale*. Spectators always slap one and two *pa'anga* notes on the bodies of performers to show respect and express gratitude. Visitors are expected to do the same. If you're attending a Tongan dance performance or cultural display, it's worth carrying a wad of smaller notes with you in preparation for the inevitable *tau'olunga*!

Literature

Eveli Hau'ofa's satirical *Tales of the Tikong* and *Kisses in the Nederends* are highly recommended for anyone travelling to Tonga. Renowned for his sharp wit and poignant Pacific commentary, Hau'ofa has written more than a dozen stories which unpack development, culture, foreign aid and other taboos in Tiko and Tipota, mythical nations that bear more than a passing resemblance to Tonga. Hau'ofa is also famous for his more academic essay 'Our Sea of Islands', a paper that challenges narrow constructions of the Pacific and its people. This can be read in *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*.

Konai Helu Thaman is another highly respected Tongan writer and academic, and she has published many acclaimed books of poetry. The most famous of these is her first collection, *You, the Choice of My Parents*, but others include *Langakali*, *Hingano*, *Kakala* and *Songs of Love* (in English) and *Inselfeuer* (in German).

Pesi Fonua, award-winning Tongan journalist and editor, co-owner and publisher of Vava'u Press, has penned a collection of short stories called *Sun and Rain/La'a mo 'Uha*. These stories were written in Tongan and translated into English, and many of them explore the impact of migration, tourism and the English language on Tongan society.

Written for young adults, Brendan Murray's *Teu* is a coming-of-age story about a Tongan-Australian teenager who visits Tonga for the first time in fifteen years. He arrives just in time for Christmas with the cousins and cyclone season. It's a sensitive and appealing novel about Tongan families, customs and cross-cultural adjustment.

Music

Visitors in search of Tonga's famed a cappella music should go to the nearest church. Practice sessions are always held on Sunday evenings, and

occasionally during the week. While the Pentecostal and Mormon churches increasingly incorporate electric guitars and brass bands into the proceedings, most church choirs and congregations sing unaccompanied. Church music protocol varies according to the denomination, but a soloist will usually sing the opening refrain, and then the choir or congregation will join in. Hymns translated from English into Tongan predominate, but there are also *hiva usi* – more traditional chants – which can be heard at the Free Church of Tonga and Free Wesleyan churches. The Royal Maopa choir based at the king's church (Centenary Chapel in Kolomotu'a, Nuku'alofa, p188) is well-respected, and often perform at state and royal occasions.

Apart from church music, string bands with guitars, ukuleles and sometimes a bass or banjo are well-loved, and often feature at parties, feasts, *kava* clubs and bars. Traditional instruments, such as the *fangufangu* (nose flute), *mimiha* (panpipes), *nafa* (skin drum) and *kele'a* (conch shell blown as a horn), are not often sighted, usually only on significant occasions.

Alongside local content, Tongan radio stations are dominated by the likes of UB40, 50 Cent, Bob Marley and Eminem, whose songs are often remixed with Pacific string-band melodies and reggae beats. Locally, DJ Darren produces the most popular remixes and mash ups of this ilk, and bootleg copies of his CDs can be found in most Tongan homes.

In terms of live contemporary music, rock concerts per se are rare, although reggae giants Lucky Dube, Maxi Priest and UB40 performed to sell-out crowds in 2005–6. Locally, the biannual hip-hop nights organised by Kool90FM are very popular. And no doubt inspired by the success of Islander contestants in international reality TV music shows, *Tongan Idol* has also taken off in Nuku'alofa. Due to budgetary constraints at the Tongan Broadcasting Commission (TBC), however, this is a live rather than televised spectacular.

Handicrafts

Tongan handicrafts are well respected in the Pacific for their use of patterns, textures and techniques. They also play an important cultural role in the community. Traditional Tongan wealth is measured in terms of *tapa*, pigs and mats. These items form *koloa*, offerings given out of respect and to mark important occasions like births, marriages and funerals.

TAPA

While *tapa* is the name commonly used overseas to describe Pacific bark cloth, in Tonga the elaborately decorated, finished product is actually called *ngatu*. The longest and most elaborate pieces of *ngatu* are reserved for the most important occasions. At the 2003 royal wedding of Princess Salote Lupepau'u Salamasina Puaea Vahine Arii 'o e Hau Tuita to the more humbly titled Matai'ulua-'i-Fonuamotu Fusitu'a, some villages donated lengths of *ngatu* reaching over 100 metres in length.

Making *ngatu* is an extremely involved process. The cloth is made from the branches of Chinese paper mulberry trees, known as *hiapo*. *Hiapo* stems are cut before the tree has matured, usually about one year after planting. The rough, green outer is peeled off with a knife, leaving a smooth, white inner layer of bark. This is then twisted inside out and left to dry in the sun for one or two days, then wrapped into coils. Later, these dried strips are soaked in water and beaten with a flat wooden mallet (*ike*) over a long wooden anvil (*tutua*). The narrow ends of the strips are overlapped and then beaten until the fibres merge. This creates a single length of cloth, called *feta'aki*. More and more *feta'aki* strips are then pieced together in layers with root vegetable glue.

Enthusiastic about Tongan dance and its storytelling implications, Adrienne Kaeppler spent considerable time studying the technical and aesthetic elements of traditional dance for her book *Poetry in Motion*.

Tonga's national anthem is called *Koe Fasi Oe Tu'i Oe Otu Tonga*, which is a prayer of thanks to God for watching over Tonga and its monarchy.

Pacific Pattern was put together by Susanne Küchler and Graeme Were, and is a beautiful photographic collection of textiles, textures and materials from all over the Pacific. It includes a detailed section on Tongan art techniques.

In *From the Stone Age to the Space Age in 200 Years*, well-respected anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler reflects on Tongan art and its role in society. Of particular interest is the section on gender-based specialisation.

Designs are created using a *kupesi*, a stencil made out of local materials. Geometric patterns are common, as are animals, traditional flowers and the Tongan coat of arms. Some designs also commemorate historical events, like the installation of electricity and the passing of Halley's Comet. These are handpainted, using a dried piece of pandanus fruit as a paint brush. Paints tend to be earthy reds, browns and black. The inner bark of the mangrove tree (*tongo*) is used to make a glossy red-brown dye, and black dye is made from burnt candlenuts. Darker brown colours are also created by boiling up the dyes with pieces of scrap metal.

Ngatu is both decorative and functional. It can be worn, used to wrap corpses, sat upon, given, received, used as collateral for a bank loan and adorn walls in Tongan homes.

WEAVING

Pandanus mats are the most highly regarded examples of Tongan weaving, but weavers also make baskets (*kato*), belts, hats, trays and other trinkets, toys and souvenirs. In times gone by, traditional Tongan boat sails were woven from pandanus leaves while ropes were made from the interwoven fibres of coconut husks.

Different varieties of pandanus plants are used for different colours and textures. The *kie* pandanus gives the finest mats, which are creamy white. White pandanus is also derived from the *tapahina*, *tofua* and *tutu'ila*. Off-white comes from *fa*, yellow from *totolo* and reddish brown from *paongo*. The leaves are buried in mud for several days to make black pandanus, while bronze colours require an involved process of smoking over a fire.

Pandanus requires considerable preparation before it can be used for weaving. The leaves must be cut and stripped of thorns, which are plentiful. The next stage of preparation depends on the type of pandanus. Cut *paongo* and *tapahina* leaves are placed under a mat for a few days and turned every day to allow air to circulate between them. These are then laid into tight curls (*fakate'ete'epuaka*) and left to dry inside. *Tofua* plants are boiled for an hour or two and then left in the sun to dry.

Preparing *kie* is more involved again. Established leaves are boiled, then the soft fibres are peeled from the coarse side, tied into bunches and left in carefully marked zones in the ocean for a fortnight to bleach and soften. They are retrieved and washed to remove the salt, then dried in the sun. When dry, women work each leaf between their finger tips and a piece of metal to make them more malleable, until they are cut into fine, threadlike strips and woven into the most valuable waistmats (*ta'ovala*). These can take thousands of hours of weaving and are family heirlooms. For weddings, they are often embroidered with parrot feathers, wool and shells.

Everyday mats (*fala*) are woven out of pandanus strips about 1cm to 1.5cm in width. Chiefly mats are known as *fala'eiki*, and are double regarded and a specialty of weavers in Niufo'ou. The base mat is made first from *tofua*, and then a finer layer of the darker coloured *paongo* is threaded through. Many floor mats are patterned with diamond or floral designs, which are embroidered on top rather than interwoven from the beginning.

CARVING

Carving and wood turning have a more functional than decorative purpose in traditional Tongan society. *Tufunga* (specialist carvers) were always men. They made neck rests (*kali*), *kava* bowls (*kumete*), canoe paddles, fly whisks (*fue*), war clubs (*kolo*; *povai*) and, sometimes, figurative sculptures.

The most famous historical carvings are of female goddesses. Known artefacts have largely been attributed to artisans from the Ha'apai Group. Made from wood and ivory (more accurately, whale tooth), these carvings are eminently voluptuous with almost triangular features. Originally

The Art of Tonga is an outstanding historical portrait of Tongan arts and material artefacts. After considerable travels through the Pacific, the author, Keith St Cartmail, became passionate about the longstanding Tongan culture of handicrafts.

they would have been hanging from the rafters of religious houses, or worn by chiefs and others of high status.

Modern carving is less traditional and greatly influenced by the ubiquitous *tiki* motif. Although well made and often quite beautiful, they are designed with the tourist market in mind. Common carvings are of pigs, whales, turtles, masks and miniature war clubs.

ENVIRONMENT

THE LAND

Tonga is made up of 171 islands, scattered over 700,000 sq km of ocean. The kingdom lies where the Pacific tectonic plate slides underneath the Indo-Australian plate. Here, the continental crust forms and materials are melted and recycled into the earth's mantle. This occurs at the Tonga Trench, which is 1375km long, 80km wide and reaches a maximum depth of 10,882m. Plate convergence occurs at around 24cm a year, making Tonga a particularly volatile area renowned for volcanic and earthquake activity.

Geographically, the kingdom is divided into five island groups, which from south to north are 'Eua, Tongatapu, Ha'apai, Vava'u and the Niua (Niuafo'ou and Niuatoputapu, which are closer to Samoa than Tongatapu). Minerva Reef, 350km southwest of Tongatapu, is Tonga's southernmost reach, and renowned for its wrecks and colourful snorkelling.

'Eua is the most dramatically different landscape of all the Tongan islands, with steep cliffs leading down to stunning beaches, and ancient forests. 'Eua receives a higher rainfall than the rest of Tonga, and significantly cooler temperatures all year round.

Tongatapu is the largest island in the country and is approximately 34km from east to west. Most of the land mass is less than 17m above sea level. The island peaks at 65m near the southern cliffs, between the villages of Fua'motu and Nakolo. Tongatapu's impressive geological features are well worth a visit, particularly the dramatic blowholes (p211) at Houma and the underground limestone caves.

Ha'apai is a collection of low-lying coral atolls, renowned for beautiful beaches and postcard-perfect aquamarine waters. The reefs make for difficult sailing for novices, but the brave are rewarded with island paradise. Sparsely populated, Pangai on Lifuka provides the region with an administrative centre. To the east is the volcanic cone of Kao, Tonga's highest peak, reaching 1100m. Southeast of Kao and near the site of the *Bounty* mutiny

If Mt Everest was placed in the deepest part of the Tonga Trench, there would still be over 2km of water on top of it.

Siosiane Fanua Bloomfield includes detailed information about traditional Tongan medicines and plant uses in her book, *Illness and Cure in Tonga*.

GLOBAL WARMING

Global warming promises dire environmental consequences for Pacific nations like Tonga. While conservative politicians reluctant to sign the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change have seized on research that debunks the theory, it's widely accepted that the increased level of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere are having a warming effect. The earth's temperature only needs to rise by a few degrees to affect the frequency and severity of droughts and storms, melt the polar ice caps and dangerously increase the volume of water on the planet.

The worst-case scenario forecast by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is that by 2070, Tonga, along with Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Cook Islands, Palau and French Polynesia could be under water. A 1m rise in sea level will result in the loss of over 10km of land on the island of Tongatapu alone. It is expected that at the current rate of temperature and sea-level increases, some Tongan communities will be forced to relocate, coastal erosion will dramatically increase and the warmer waters will result in widespread coral bleaching.

THE COCONUT TREE

Throughout the Pacific, the coconut tree is revered as a life-giving force. This is evident in Tongan mythology, and one of the legends goes something like this. Hina, one of the less committed virgins in oral folklore, was meeting her lover at the pool in which she bathed. They were interrupted midcopulation by her father, and the handsome man in question transformed into an eel and disappeared into the water. Her father ordered that the eel be killed. Just before it died, however, the eel spoke out and promised to provide for the community. He requested that his head be planted close to the surface. The villagers did as he asked, and the first coconut tree grew from this place.

And just as the eel promised, the coconut still sustains every part of Tongan life. The leaves are used for thatching in houses and to make baskets to carry food, and the husks are used as firewood. Green or new coconuts are punctured with a bush knife, and drunk straight away. When the coconut gets older and drops to the ground, it is split in two and the insides are scraped out. The shredded coconut meat is then squeezed to produce the coconut cream used in most Tongan food.

(p156) lies Tofua, the region's other volcano. A trip to Tofua can take up to eight hours by boat from Lifuka. Featuring a crater lake and a fascinating array of flora and fauna, Tofua is a must for intrepid travellers to Tonga.

Vava'u comprises over 50 islands, the largest of which is Vava'u Island which hosts the region's capital, Neiafu. The famous Port of Refuge features dramatic peaks rising straight out of the water, and is home to a significant number of yachts all year round.

Despite being grouped together, Niuafu'ou and Niuatoputapu are distinctly different landscapes. Despite its volcanic core, Niuatoputapu has many white, sandy beaches. Volcanic activity is more likely to occur at the neighbouring cone, Tafahi, which is about 656m above sea level.

Niuafu'ou is Tonga's most northerly island and it consists of a volcanic cone which erupted as recently as 1946. The beaches are black volcanic sand, and there is just one road that rings around this doughnut-shaped island. In the middle of the island are two spectacular crater lakes (p270).

WILDLIFE Animals

The only land mammals native to Tonga are small, insect-eating bats and flying foxes (*peka*). The flying fox has a wing span of 1m and a large group of these can be easily spotted on the main road through Kolovai. The banded iguana (*fokai*) lives in Tongan bushland, but its green colouring makes it extremely difficult to spot. It is believed the iguana arrived in the Pacific from Central America some 1 million years ago.

The brightly coloured red and green parrot is found in 'Eua. The parrot's feathers have been used traditionally in ceremonial mats and clothing, but unfortunately the bird is increasingly rare. Other birds include the crowned lorikeet (*henga*) and the Tongan whistler. The Sopu mudflats in Tongatapu are good place to see the white-collared kingfisher and a variety of mangrove-dwelling birds. Niuafu'ou is also home to the rare Polynesian megapode (*malau*). A critically endangered species, the *malau* has recently doubled in numbers due to conservation efforts and the relocation of some eggs from Niuafu'ou to the uninhabited island of Fonualei.

Plants

Of course, the most prevalent plant in Tonga is the coconut tree (see the boxed text, above).

Tonga's national flower is the *heilala*, a reddish flower that blooms with small balls of colour during the winter months. Highly prized, it is even more difficult to come by these days as it is thoroughly picked out during the Heilala festival for the king's birthday in July. Other flowers include several species of hibiscus, frangipanis and fabulous specimens of the bird of paradise flower. Most indigenous plants have cultural significance and are used in local medicines, but several introduced plants like *kava*, breadfruit, yam and *tuitui* (candlenut) also have uses in Tongan custom.

Under the Sea

Tonga's oceans abound with beautiful coral gardens, providing fantastic snorkelling. There are hard and soft corals with electric blue, red and green colourings. Endangered black coral is also found around Tonga.

Visitors will certainly sight a variety of colourful tropical fish and over 150 species have been identified in the area. Easy to spot are the black and yellow angelfish, the red-lipped clown fish and the apathetic sea slug. Tonga is also home to the banded sea snake, which fortunately is tolerant of curious snorkellers. Flying fish are frequently spotted from the beach, as are dolphins and porpoises. Less commonly sighted is the sea turtle, many of whom have ended up in Tongan cooking pots (p172).

Humpback whales arrive in Tonga between June and November and generally breed in Tongan waters. They are known as the 'singing whales' because the males sing during courtship, and their low notes reach a shattering 185 decibels and carry up to 100km.

Humpbacks are notoriously playful, and their antics are spectacular. They breach (throwing themselves out of water, landing with a huge splash), spyhop (stand vertically upright in the water), slap the water with their tail flukes or pectoral fins (flippers), and generally perform acrobatic feats.

A mature male adult is about 16m long and weighs about 40 to 45 tonnes. The calves are around 4m at birth and weigh up to 2.5 tonnes. They gain approximately 25kg a day – about a kilogram an hour – on their mother's milk. When the calves have put on about 10cm of blubber, the whales return to the Antarctic summer-feeding grounds, and calves stay with their mothers for two years.

Humpbacks feed by straining small fish and crustaceans through hundreds of keratin plates – keratin being what hair and fingernails are made of. Humpbacks live in several parts of the world, but their populations do not mix. Southern-hemisphere humpbacks are distinguished by a white belly, while the undersides of the northern-hemisphere humpbacks are dark. The two never cross paths.

During July and August, visitors can go whale-watching or even swimming with these magnificent creatures on an organised tour. See the Activities section in the destination chapters for more details. However,

WHALING POLITICS

Tongans have hunted whales for centuries, consuming whale meat and using whale bone in numerous traditional instruments and artefacts. Up until a royal decree in 1979, around 10 humpback whales were caught every year. Today, however, much of Tonga's tourist industry depends on the protected and migrating humpback whales. Although Tonga is not a member country of the IWC (International Whaling Commission), delegates have voiced their concern at Japan's attempts to reintroduce and increase commercial and scientific whaling. In June 2005, the bid by Japan and other countries to have the existing moratorium lifted was defeated by a narrow margin at the IWC.

The Tonga Visitors Bureau website (www.tonga.holiday.com) is a little difficult to navigate, but click on 'things to do' on the home page, and there is an informative section devoted to bird-watching in Tonga. The section on whale-watching also has some good information.

Snorkelling enthusiasts will find *Reef Fish Identification: Tropical Pacific* by Gerald Allen, Roger Steene and Paul Humann to be a useful photographic guide.

Dick Watling's *Birds of Fiji, Tonga & Samoa* is an excellent ornithological guide to this region. It features useful maps and identification guides.

The *malau*, Niuafu'ou's famous megapode, is unique in requiring hot volcanic ash to incubate its eggs.

Tuitui or candlenut can be used as a face or body cleanser. The nuts are chewed and then rubbed over the skin to form a lather. It is Tonga's favourite natural moisturiser.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

- Tonga has limited facilities for waste, so try to minimise the amount of packaging you consume.
- Most land in Tonga belongs to someone, so ask permission before you create your own tracks.
- Don't purchase items or souvenirs made of endangered resources like black coral or sandalwood.
- Never fish, or collect shells or other specimens in any of Tonga's marine reserves or national parks.

some local providers still question whether this is safe or ecologically sound. Calving whales have been known to draw sharks and an attack on a Tongan guide swimming with whales has been recorded. While sharks are generally not abundant in Tonga, there have been attacks and snorkelers might well spot nonaggressive reef sharks and leopard sharks.

CONSERVATION AREAS

Tonga currently has seven marine reserves and three national parks.

The marine reserves are mostly around Tongatapu island. Hakaumama'o Reef Reserve is situated 14km north of Nuku'alofa, while Pangaimotu Reef Reserve lies on the eastern edge of Nuku'alofa Harbour, and Monu'afe Island and Reef Reserve is just over 6km northeast of Nuku'alofa. Malinoa Island Park and Reef Reserve features numerous varieties of marine life, including octopuses, and is about 7km north of Nuku'alofa. For further details, see p213. Ha'atafu Beach Reserve, on the western tip of Tongatapu features a reef and 100 species of fish (p212). Other marine parks include Mounu Reef Giant Clam Reserve and Muiphopohoponga Coastal Reserve. Ask at the Tongan Visitors Bureau for further details.

On the east coast of 'Eua is the 449-hectare 'Eua National Park (p220), a tract of untouched tropical rainforest. On northeastern Tongatapu is the Ha'amonga 'a Maui Trilithon National Historic Reserve (p209) while the Vava'u Group offers Mt Talau National Park (p252).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Environmental activism has a long way to go in Tonga, although a newly established government ministry and an increasingly active NGO presence may go some way in improving this situation.

Deforestation is of high concern. Tongan agricultural lands are very fertile, but slash-and-burn farming and European-encouraged clearing has made lands vulnerable to erosion.

Waste management is also a high priority in the Tongan islands. Traditionally, locals have always burnt off excess rubbish, but the introduction of heavily packaged Western goods, technology and a culture of consumption has left the islands with ongoing problems of air and water pollution. Many beaches are heavily littered with household waste. Fortunately, beach clean ups are becoming more common, often taken on by youth, church and community groups.

Careless treatment of Tonga's reef has resulted to irreparable damage in some parts of the archipelago. Many sea creatures are becoming increasingly rare and endangered. It is prohibited to collect endangered giant clams and trident shells. Trident shells are the natural predator of the crown of thorns starfish, and their over-collection has made the reef vulnerable to extensive starfish damage. Also of concern to conservationists is that the ban on turtle killing has recently been lifted, allowing them to be hunted for food and shells between March and August.

The Tongan Wildlife Centre operated a successful captive breeding programme for native birds. However, a misguided tourist recently ransacked the enclosure and set the birds free, undoing years of hard work. The centre is now closed.

Visitors interested in assisting sustainable farming initiatives can contact the Tonga National Youth Congress in Fasi (☎ 25 474) or Tonga Trust in Kolofa'ou (☎ 23 478).

FOOD & DRINK

At its best, Tongan food is superb. Visitors can expect a wide variety of fresh fish, coconut-based products, free-range chicken, pork, lobster, breadfruit, root vegetables such as yam, sweet potato and cassava, and seasonal tropical fruits like bananas, bush oranges and almonds, papaya, pineapple, guava, passionfruit and watermelon. Eating food fresh from the bush (albeit with local guidance), markets and with local families can be the highlight of a trip to Tonga.

However, some epicurean experiences in Tonga are less enticing. The ubiquitous tinned beef (*kapa pulu*) and the greasy mutton flaps (*sipi*) aren't to every visitor's taste. This national preference for fatty meat products over fresh produce, as well as the prevalence of soft drink, confectionary and fast food, has caused alarming rates of diabetes and obesity in the kingdom.

Markets can be found in Nuku'alofa, Pangai and Neiafu but in the outer islands the availability and diversity of fresh produce can be erratic. Most villages have *fale koloa* (corner shops) that are open all hours with milk, bread and other nonperishables. Major towns have supermarkets, but the quality and variety of goods varies from place to place. It's worth shopping around and checking the expiry dates on all food purchases!

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Without a doubt, Tonga is a nation of meat-eaters. The roosters you hear at the break of dawn, the chickens scratching across the road and the pigs snuffling in the bush may just be your next dinner. Roasted suckling pig is a national favourite, although it is usually reserved for important occasions. Local eggs are as freerange as the chickens, and are often boiled and sold as snacks from corner stores.

Not surprisingly, many of Tonga's other signature dishes come fresh from the sea. There's nothing quite like a whole, local lobster marinated in coconut cream, or lightly grilled snapper, tuna and mahimahi.

Raw fish salad (*'ota ika*) is also a popular delicacy. Fish fillets are cubed, and then soaked for several hours in lime juice. The marinated fish is then combined with fresh coconut cream, chilli and chopped vegetables like cucumber and tomato. The resulting salad is served with plenty of root vegetables handy to soak up the juices.

DRINKS**Nonalcoholic Drinks**

On a long walk or a day out in the sun, you can't go past a green coconut. You can often buy them from the roadside, but if you're feeling limber, try scaling a coconut tree to fetch your own. Always remember to ask permission from the local landowner first.

TONGA'S TOP FIVE RESTAURANTS

- Seaview Restaurant (p195)
- Mariners Café (p234)
- Mermaid Restaurant (p254)
- Akiko's (p194)
- Waterfront Café (p195)

The American Peace Corps put out *The Niu Idea Cookbook*, which has a host of innovative recipes using local ingredients, and can be bought at the Friendly Islands bookshop.

When old coconuts are left on the ground for long enough, they sprout and grow a fungus on the inside known as *'uto*. This is a Tongan delicacy, and has a musky meringue flavour.

Those addicted to their morning espresso might have some problems in Tonga, but places like Friend's Café do a mean cappuccino and even a chai latte! Ask for Royal Coffee – it's locally produced and tastes great.

Tongans make a great nonalcoholic cocktail called *'otai*. Made from freshly made coconut milk, it's combined with a small amount of sugar and shredded watermelon or mango.

Alcoholic Drinks

In terms of locally brewed beverages, the Royal Beer is a tasty drop. The Royal Beer Company was initially formed in conjunction with AB Pripps Bryggerier in Sweden. You can choose between Premium, Draught and Ikale. You can tour the Royal brewery in Nuku'alofa, and on request they can also organise tasting sessions on site.

A limited range of imported beers, wines and spirits are available in bars, supermarkets and convenience stores. Some spirits are also being produced locally by the Billfish Spirits and Liqueurs Company.

While the relatively high price of alcohol means most Tongans stick to *kava*, alcohol has become increasingly popular. This has also led to a small but thriving (and illegal) home-brew market. Under-age and binge drinking is an increasingly big problem in Tonga; violent brawls and sexual harassment have become commonplace in night clubs and bars. The police do not use breathalysers and drink-driving is prevalent, so it's worth exercising extra caution if driving at night.

Kava, of course, is Tonga's most renowned drink. See the boxed text, p176.

CELEBRATIONS

Celebrations in Tonga revolve around food, and Tongan feasts (*kai pola*) are renowned throughout the Pacific. You're sure to spy or attend at least one during your time in the kingdom. Feasts are held for all occasions of note: weddings, funerals, church conferences, village clergy ordinations, first and 21st birthdays, Easter, Christmas, public holidays, arrivals and farewells. For noble and royal funerals, coronations and birthdays, villages will spend days and nights preparing food to feed a cast of thousands.

The Tongan feast itself is a marvel in terms of size and local protocol. Huge trestle tables will be set up in an assigned area under marquees, heaving with plates and plates of traditional food and whole roasted pigs.

SUNDAY LUNCH

Sundays have a more distinct culinary tradition. For nearly all Tongans, the Sabbath is a day of prayer, eating and sleeping. Most people attend church, but a few relatives will always be left at home to tend the *'umu* in preparation for Sunday lunch.

The *'umu* is an underground earth oven, similar to the Maori *hangi*. The traditional *'umu* dish is *lu*. Fresh from the *'umu*, *lu* is a tasty dish with an interesting, smoky flavour. It's made from taro leaves, which are wrapped around corned beef, mutton flaps (*sipi*), fish or chicken mixed with coconut milk and onion. This is then wrapped in taro leaves or aluminium foil, and accompanied by whole root vegetables. Making an *'umu* is relatively simple. A hole about 25cm deep and 1m wide is dug in the ground, and a large fire is lit inside. Once the fire is ablaze, rocks are thrown on top and once they are hot enough, the remnants of burning wood are removed. The food is then placed on top of the rocks, with a layer of bark in between. Sticks, banana leaves and hessian sacks are placed over the top, and this is all covered with soil and left to cook for about two hours.

Tongan families will return from church, often with extended family, eat from the *'umu*, and then retire for a lazy afternoon sleep. Later in the afternoon, the village bakeries become the place to see and be seen. Loaves of bread, generously smeared with butter, usually suffice as the Sunday evening meal for most Tongan families.

Tongans don't cook with a lot of spices. Chilli and garlic are both grown and sold locally, but are rarely used. Other spices and flavourings have to be imported, but curry powder is becoming more popular.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

There are plenty of interesting foods to taste on your trip to Tonga. Some of these are:

- *feke* – octopus marinated in coconut cream
- *lomu* – pickled sea cucumber
- *nonu* – this fruit is eaten or juiced, and is said to be extremely beneficial to those suffering high blood pressure and digestive problems.

We Dare You

Shell fishing is an important local tradition. Just before sunset, visitors taking a leisurely walk along the waterfront in any part of Tonga will see families or lone divers collecting an assortment of crustaceans and molluscs for the dinner table. Buy or ask to try some of the shell fish.

If you're lucky, you may be able to join a fossicking expedition – just watch out for coral cuts, stings and things that bite!

Trays of fresh fruit, cans of soft drink and packets of chips and sweets then decorate the entire gastronomic affair.

Once everyone is seated, a minister will be called on to say grace and the eating begins. Like most events in Tonga, feasts are a hierarchical affair. The high table with nobles and most important guests is often decorated with *tapa*, and features the best of the available food. There are usually two sittings, and visitors, nobility and invited guests eat first.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's an ever-increasing number of Western-style cafés, restaurants and bars in Tongatapu and Vava'u, but options are limited or nonexistent on Ha'apai, 'Eua and the Niuaus. While there are plenty of sticky tables and linoleum floors to be had, some of the country's upmarket restaurants boast amazing ocean views, tropical gardens and serve delicious and fresh produce at very reasonable prices.

European and Chinese influence is discernible in the limited international cuisine on offer. Several Italian residents have set up thriving pizza businesses and much of the Chinese food is well priced and tasty, if a little heavy on the MSG. There are also Indian, German, Japanese and modern cuisine options for restaurant goers.

Most Tongans cannot afford to go out for food. The result is a decided lack of restaurants selling traditional food, with the exception of the Tonga National Centre (p189) and the Good Samaritan Inn (p212) who put on Tongan feasts for visitors and locals.

Opening and closing times can be erratic in some establishments, but most advertise business hours and stick to them. Generally, solo travellers will feel safe and comfortable in cafés and restaurants in Tonga, although women travelling alone may receive some unwanted attention when dining in establishments that double as bars.

Tipping is not part of Tongan culture, but certain bars and restaurants will give you an opportunity to include a tip in the final bill.

Quick Eats

There's a variety of options for a comparatively quick bite to eat. For the health conscious or those on a budget, the markets are a virtual tropical fruit salad, with plenty of bananas, papaya and other seasonal fruits. Visitors with a sweet tooth can also purchase inexpensive bundles of *faikakai*

It's all about take-away. Tongans always leave feasts with containers of food, piles of fruit and cans of soft drinks for friends and family at home.

Tonga is one of the few countries in the world without a McDonald's or any other transglobal fast-food chain.

TONGAN KAVA CULTURE

There's nothing quite like the first spicy slurps of *kava* from a coconut shell. Your tongue and lips feel numb, the body relaxes and your mind feels hazy. It's certainly an acquired taste, and even local *kava* drinkers are known to follow a cup with a chaser of lollies, bananas or manioc chips. *Kava's* denigrators liken it to dirty dishwashing water, but there's no doubt that this murky, peppery liquid is a central part of social and cultural life in Tonga.

Kava is made from the ground root of the *kava* plant (*Piper methysticum*). The active ingredients in *kava* include 12 to 14 chemicals of an alkaloid nature. *Kava* is both anaesthetic and analgesic, high in fibre, low in calories, and serves as a mild tranquiliser, an antibacterial agent, a diuretic, an appetite suppressant and a soporific. Its more unfortunate side effects for committed drinkers are scaly and yellowing skin, excessive fatigue and a decreased blood-cell count. *Kava* is legal in North America, Europe and Australia, and frequently packaged and sent by Tongans to family living overseas.

Although widely consumed throughout the Pacific, the Tongans are extremely patriotic when it comes to *kava* and prefer to drink home grown Kava-Tonga. The best, most potent local *kava* is said to come from the volcanic islands of Tofua in Ha'apai and Tafahi in Niuatoputapu.

Traditionally, the ground-up root is mixed with water and then strained through coconut husks, although today muslin and other thin cloth are more commonly used. It is then served from a wooden *kava* bowl, which is placed at the head of the circle. Each man in turn claps and receives a coconut shell of *kava* from the server. He'll drink it, spit or pour the remaining dregs on the ground or in an ashtray, and scuttle the shell back to the server. Those in attendance will talk, tell stories and sing, often accompanied by a motley collection of guitars and ukuleles. A *kava* session can last from late afternoon until the early hours of the morning.

Drinking *kava* is extremely popular and a predominantly male activity, although it is traditionally served by young, unmarried women (*tou'a*). This makes for a fascinating study of male-female interaction in Tonga. The *tou'a* is accorded great respect but there's always plenty of flirting, and sexual innuendo is flung wantonly around the circle causing much amusement.

Kava is used in both formal and informal settings. It is drunk before and after church on a Sunday, during the conferment of nobility, at village meetings and in the negotiations of contracts and other agreements. All villages have at least one *kava* club (*kava kulupu*) where some local men might be found every night of the week. Big, intervillage *kava* parties are also a popular and common fundraiser.

Kava is also an integral part of the courtship process in Tonga. A male suitor will ask the girl in question's family for permission to hold a *kava* circle in their house, where she will serve them. If the *kava* circle lasts until day break, the suitor and his friend must bring a roasted pig and other offerings of food to the girl's family. In a traditional Tongan wedding ceremony, it is also customary that the groom serves his bride half a coconut shell of *kava*. Once she drinks the cup, the couple are wed.

Male and female visitors are usually welcome at *kava* clubs. You may be formally invited, but otherwise just ask any local taxi driver to take you.

(pudding with a coconut syrup) or *keke* (deep fried cakes occasionally flavoured with banana). Makeshift stalls usually sell barbecue plates of meat (chicken, fish, *sipi* and sausages) served with a side of root vegetables.

Bakeries also stock a selection of breads, meat pies and cakes of varying quality. For those who like fast food, there's an array of establishments selling local versions of hamburgers, chips and fried chicken.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarians may struggle with traditional Tongan food, where nearly every dish involves meat. Even if you request meat-free food from stalls, take-away stands and locally run restaurants, your food is likely to be cooked with other meat products. It's harder again for vegans.

Self-catering is probably the only option in many places, although most Western-style cafés and bars have a limited array of vegetarian options.

EATING WITH KIDS

Families dining out are unlikely to encounter any problems. Although accoutrements like highchairs and baby change rooms are rare, kids are likely to be affectionately greeted by owners and workers and often get free reign of the premises, much to the horror of their parents!

If you are going to a resort-operated or upmarket restaurant, however, it might be worth checking their policy on children.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Sharing food is one of Tonga's cultural cornerstones. While tolerated in foreigners, eating alone or failing to share is an affront to local custom. Visitors who offer and share food with Tongans in their midst will be heartily embraced by locals. The same hospitality is almost always returned and exceeded.

If you pass a Tongan house during meal time, don't be surprised if you are asked to come and eat! (*Ha'u kai!*) The invitation is genuine, so feel free to accept it. Eating with a local family will give you an amazing insight into family life and Tongan culture.

Tongans traditionally sit on the floor to eat, without cutlery. A member of the family always gives a prayer of thanks. Tongans are self-deprecating, and will probably offer an apology for the food you are about to eat, even it's a plate laden with lobster and other delicacies.

FOOD GLOSSARY

faikakai – sticky dessert made from dough or sweet potato cooked with sugar and coconut

faina – pineapple

fingota – shellfish

fisi – spicy

ika – fish

inu – drink

kai – eat

kapa pulu – tinned corned beef

keke – deep-fried cake

kumala – sweet potato

DOS AND DON'TS

- Stand up and give a formal thank you to hosts for their hospitality.
- Bring a gift of food or other presents from home for your hosts. The culture embraces reciprocity, and Tongan people are often far more hospitable and generous than they can afford to be.
- Don't be offended if you are invited for a meal and not joined by the whole family. Chances are you will eat alone in the presence of a designated relative, while the rest of the family watch from a distance. This is a gesture of respect.
- Don't feel like you have to finish everything on your plate. Eat as much as you can, compliment those who have prepared the meal and explain that you are full.
- Don't get angry if service is slow in a café or restaurant. Everyone is on Tonga time after all, and you should be too! If you are in a hurry, simply smile at a waiter or waitress and ask politely about your food or drinks.

One of the greatest insults in Tonga is to accuse someone of selfishly sneaking off and eating on their own (*kaipo*).

A common joke is that *palangi* (foreigners) eat until they are full, and that Tongans eat until they are tired!

laise – rice

lu – taro leaves wrapped around meat cooked with coconut cream and onion

ma – bread

me'akai – food

meleni – watermelon

melie – sweet

moa – chicken

niu – coconut

niu fo'ou – new coconut

niu mata – old coconut

'ota – raw

'ota ika – raw fish salad

'otai – drink made of fruit and coconut milk

pia – beer

pulu – beef

siaine – bananas

sipi – mutton flaps

'ufi – yam

'uo – lobster