



The Niuas

The closest most people will ever get to the remote Niuas (meaning Rich in Coconuts), in Tonga's extreme northern reaches, is picking up a first-day cover of Niuafu'ou's decorative postage stamps. Tongan tradition remains very much alive on these three small volcanic islands. The highest-quality white mats are made in Niuatoputapu and Niuafu'ou, while Tafahi *kava* (an intoxicating drink made from the root of the pepper shrub) is renowned as the best in the island kingdom. The solitude of the environment has given the people a decidedly mellow attitude towards their world and visitors, and those venturing this far will have a truly rewarding cultural experience without distractions.

To most Tongans, Niuafu'ou is an enigma. They may have a vague idea of where it is but psychologically it is unimaginably far away. Perhaps for this reason, Niuafu'ou's inhabitants are credited with fortitude and often regarded with reverence by other Tongans. The people of Niuafu'ou are largely self-sufficient and fiercely proud of their lonely, comparatively sterile island with no harbour or landing place and a generally very turbulent sea. Many vow they will never leave – even if Niuafu'ou erupts again – 'because our fathers lived here before us and here they are buried'. Niuafu'ou is the only island in Tonga with a notably different dialect, closer to Samoan than Tongan, and very little English is spoken here. Despite a sultry climate the highly traditional and conservative culture requires modest dress (no short shorts or skirts above the knee, and baggy clothes for swimming) and minimal exposed skin.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring Niuafu'ou's lava fields, freshwater lakes and walking trails, and catching a glimpse of the **megapode** (p267)
- Cooling off in the fresh waters of **Niutoua Spring** (p267)
- Watching the precarious loading and unloading of supplies at **harbourless Niuafu'ou** (p270)
- Walking Niuatoputapu's inland **ridges** (p267) and combing its **beaches and water channels** (p267)
- Sighting Samoa from the cone-shaped peak of **Tafahi** (p268)

★ Niuafu'ou

Tafahi's Peak ★
Niutoua Spring ★
Niuatoputapu ★

■ POPULATION: 2168

■ AREA: 72 SQ KM

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Any trip to the Niuas should be approached with flexibility, as weather conditions often cause delays and cancellations of services. **Airlines Tonga Air Fiji** (Airlines Tonga; ☎ 23690; fax 23238; www.airlinestonga.com) flies from Tongatapu via Vava'u for Niutopotapu's Mata'aho Airport (one-way fare from Tongatapu/Vava'u T\$390/245) and Niufo'ou's Queen Lavinia Airport (T\$430/285).

The MV *Olovaha* travels the 240km distance north from Vava'u to Niutopotapu roughly once every six weeks (depending on government subsidies). It continues to Niufo'ou (640km north and slightly west of Tongatapu), returning a couple of days later on the long (2½-day) return journey to Tongatapu. Getting to Niufo'ou by boat is a fraught business as the island lacks a decent anchorage or landing site, leaving access to the mercy of wind and waves (see the boxed text, p270). And if the weather isn't at its best, the boat must turn around and leave without stopping. Always check the *Olovaha's* schedule in Nuku'alofa before you make any plans to

visit the Niuas by sea. See p286 for more information.

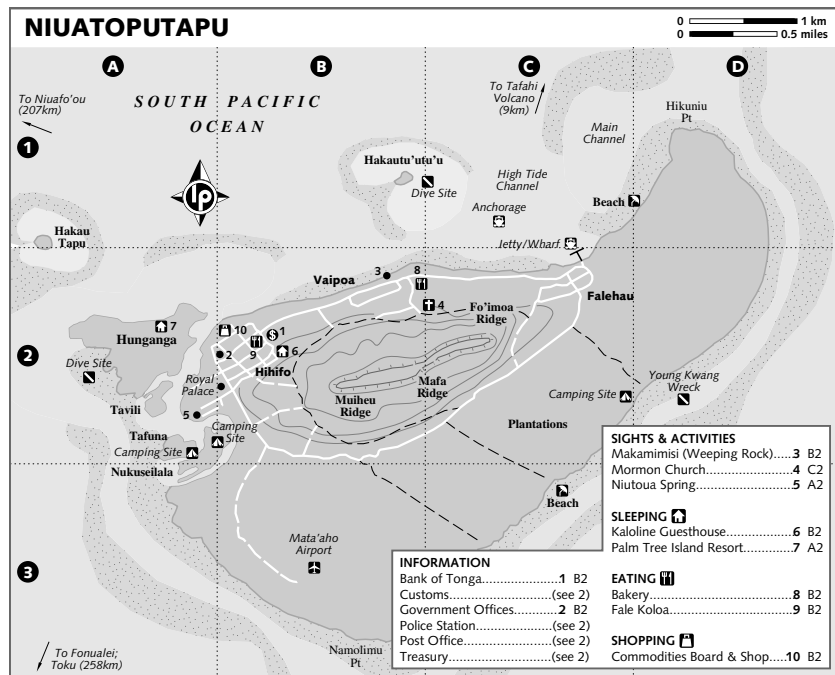
Most visitors to the Niuas arrive on the 100-odd cruisers that pass through en route to Samoa, Fiji and Tonga's Vava'u Group, generally between the months of June and September. During this season you may be able to join a crew on a yacht departing from 'Apia (Samoa) or from Pago Pago (American Samoa) for Niutopotapu.

NIUAOTUPUTAPU

area 18 sq km / pop 1283

The squashed sombrero shape of Niutopotapu (meaning 'Very Sacred Coconut') is made up of a steep and narrow central ridge 130m high, and surrounding coastal plains. Much of this is plantation land, with many archaeological sites hidden in the undergrowth waiting to be explored.

The north coast is bounded by a series of reefs, but there is a passage through to Falehau Wharf; yachts anchor just north-west of here.



THE NIUAFO'OU MEGAPODE

Niufo'ou's fascinating brown and grey Niufo'ou megapode (*Megapodius pritchardii*), locally known as *malau*, spends the day on the forest floor, subsisting on seeds, insects, worms, fruit and even small geckos, and roosts in the treetops.

Megapode pairs inhabit the shores of Niufo'ou's crater lakes, keeping track of each other with a sort of mating duet. When it's time to lay an egg, a megapode hen digs a burrow 1m to 2m deep in the loose volcanic soil near active steam vents (usually in the same place where she herself hatched). She deposits a disproportionately large egg and covers it with earth, leaving it to incubate unattended in the naturally heated volcanic environment. A hen may lay up to 10 eggs, normally at intervals of about two weeks.

The chicks hatch after around four weeks and are forced to make their own way to the surface over a couple of days, at risk from the long-legged ants that head for their eyes. When they finally emerge from this gruelling 'birth', they bear a full coat of feathers and are able to fly and fend for themselves.

Owls and domestic cats prey on adult megapodes, but the greatest threat is from humans. Habitat destruction and the local predilection for eggs and flesh are driving this incredible bird to extinction. A recent experiment saw the transplanting of chicks to the uninhabited volcanic island of Late, in the Vava'u Group.

INFORMATION

Sleepy Hihifo is the Niuas' 'capital' and boasts a police station, a post office and a couple of small stores.

Change cash and travellers cheques at the Treasury, though it sometimes runs out of cash so bring *pa'anga* (Tongan currency) from Tongatapu. You'll find the police station, post office and customs office all situated in the Government Offices.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Niutopotapu's most interesting sights can be covered over a couple of days' pleasurable walking; you'll be greeted by smiles and a 'What is your name?' from every child you meet (exhausting their English vocabulary in the process).

The island is surrounded by magnificent white beaches of remarkable diversity and is easily circumnavigated in seven to eight hours (an 11km round trip).

There's good diving outside the reef, and plenty of lobster, but no diving equipment is available on the island. Boat trips can be arranged with local fishermen for around T\$30 per hour.

Niutoua Spring

The cool, sparkling pool of Niutoua Spring flows through a crack in the rock just west of Hihifo. It's full of fish, though fishing here is banned (for reasons why, listen to one of the four versions of the spring's le-

gend). A swim here will take the bite out of a typically sticky Niuas day. The spectacle of *palangi* (foreigners) swimming will quickly draw an audience. Kids appear to ditch school and adults abandon their work, just to attend the free entertainment.

Beaches & Swimming

The most beautiful beaches are on the north-west side of the island and on Hunganga, an offshore islet. Near Hihifo, a maze of shallow waterways winds between the islets of Nukuseilala, Tafuna, Tavili and Hunganga. At low tide, they form vast expanses of sand and leaning palms, and you can walk anywhere in the area by wading through a few centimetres of water. At high tide the passages (especially between Niutopotapu and Hunganga) are excellent for swimming.

Makamimisi (Weeping Rock), right on the coast in Vaipoa, is the outlet to the sea for a spring that's a little way inland; when it's dry, you can pound on this rock with another rock to bring up fresh water.

Ridge Walk

The central ridge, comprising three smaller ridges, affords a grand view of the coastal plain and the multicoloured reefs of the lagoon. Reaching it requires a bit of effort. From the village of Vaipoa, take the route past the bakery and Mormon church, then continue upwards through the maze of trails until you reach a very steep taro

plantation. Once you've scrambled about 20m above the highest taro plant, you're on the ridge.

You can follow the ridge in either direction. The eastern route entails a near-vertical rock climb of about 10m but it's easy to do, with clear footholds.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are excellent camp sites to the west of Hihifo and on the beach along the island's south coast, though you need to get permission before camping (p271).

Fale (traditional thatched houses) on Hunganga beach front feature comforts such as baths, hot water and electricity, and provide a comfortable base for exploration or navel gazing. Meals at **Palm Tree Island Resort** (☎ 85090; fax 85123; palmtreeislandtonga@yahoo.it; s/d fale T\$180/220, half/full board T\$35/50) contain lots of fresh fish and organic fruit and vegetables, and the owners even bake muffins and cakes. There's a dinghy shuttle to Hihifo or you can walk across at low tide. Snorkelling, fishing and walking trips can be arranged.

Warm hospitality awaits in this Hihifo village home. **Kaloline Guesthouse** (☎ 85021; s/d T\$20/25) has a spacious lounge and neat rooms with mosquito nets over chintzy bed covers. Guests can use the kitchen or book meals in advance.

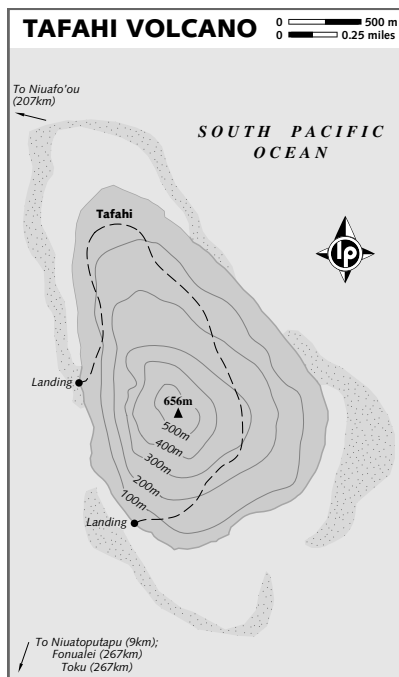
Take your own food to the island. Limited groceries may be purchased at *fale koloa* (small grocery kiosks) and bread is available at the bakeries in Hihifo and Vaipoa after about noon every day, including Sunday.

TAFahi

area 3.4 sq km / pop 150

Looming like the mythical Bali Hai (the island created by James A Michener in his 1946 short-story collection *Tales of the South Pacific*), the perfect cone of extinct volcano Tafahi dominates the view from Niuatoputapu's north coast.

On the right tide, you can cross to Tafahi (9km and 40 minutes north of Niuatoputapu by boat) in the morning and return in the afternoon. A 3½-hour return walk to the summit (656m) takes an intermittent trail, leading up the gradual northern slope and connecting the two landing sites on the island. At the crater on a clear day you can



see the 1866m peak of Savai'i's Mt Silisili (Samoa), over 200km away.

Vanilla and some of Tonga's best *kava* are grown in small quantities on Tafahi.

The northern landing is the one to use, though you can only come in or out on a wave, and only at high tide. Arrange a price for boat transfers with local fishermen before departure (up to T\$80), or ask around for local boats heading out there. Carry food and plenty of water.

A similar legend to the one relating to Mt Talau in the Vava'u Group (p252) tells that the island of Tafahi is the mountain that was stolen from Niuafu'ou by ghosts who tried to pull it to Samoa.

NIUAFO'OU

area 49 sq km / pop 735

Remote Niuafu'ou resembles a doughnut floating in the sea, its water-filled caldera encircled by new lava flows. Its pseudonym, 'Tin Can Island', derives from the island's unusual previous postal service. Since there

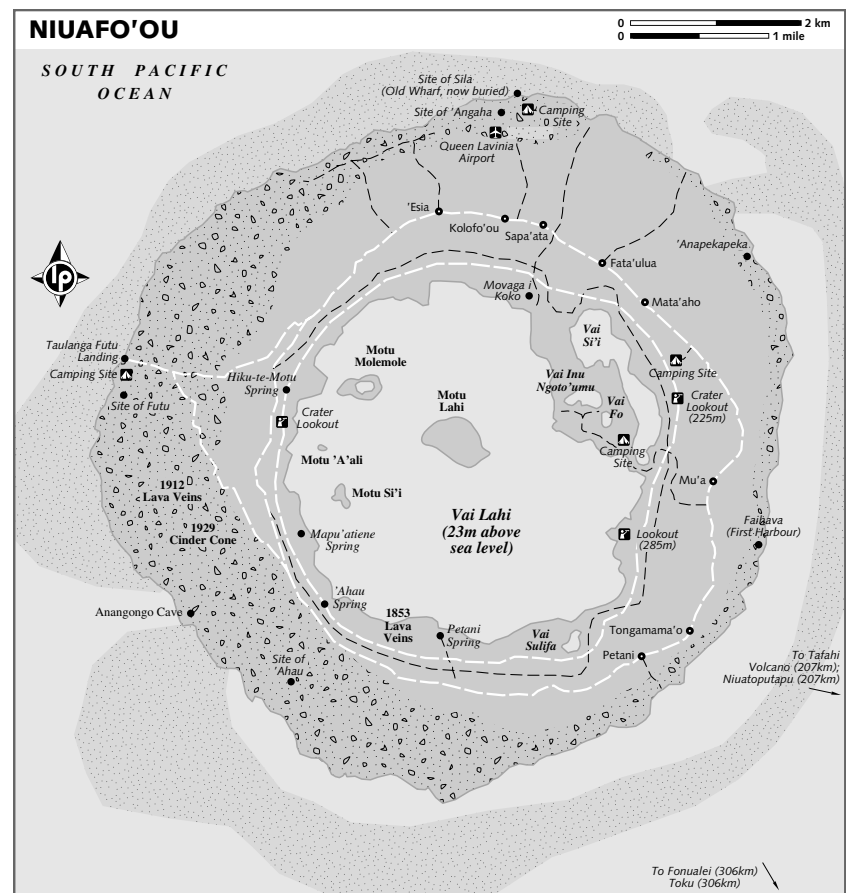
was no anchorage or landing site, mail and supplies for residents were sealed up in a biscuit tin and tossed overboard from a passing supply ship, then a strong swimmer would retrieve the parcel. Outbound mail was tied to the end of metre-long sticks, and the swimmer would carry them balanced overhead, out to the waiting ship. This method persisted until 1931, when the mail swimmer was taken by a shark.

HISTORY

Niuafu'ou's hot and shaky past 150 years have included 10 major volcanic eruptions and the destruction of three villages. Lava oozed over the villages of 'Ahau and Futu in the eruptions of 1853 and 1929, respec-

tively, burying them completely. In 1943 a particularly violent eruption caused a general famine, destroying plantations and decimating natural vegetation.

Earthquakes and lava flows on the northern slope destroyed the erstwhile wharf and capital village, 'Angaha, in September 1946. Although a quick evacuation prevented injuries, Queen Salote decided to evacuate the island as future eruptions could render the place uninhabitable. Beginning in late October, the reluctant islanders were shuttled by boat to Tongatapu, then resettled on 'Eua. The 22 recalcitrant inhabitants who refused to leave during the general evacuation were forcibly collected in October 1947, leaving the island uninhabited.



LANDING AT NIUAFO'OU

Niufo'ou has no anchorage and no wharf, and the entire island is exposed to the full wrath of the sea. Ships stop about 150m offshore; the crew drops two lines into the water, which are retrieved by swimmers and carried to the cement platform that serves as the landing site. Passengers, luggage and cargo are literally dropped or thrown into a wooden dory at an opportune moment and ferried ashore, where hulking Tongans wait to pluck them out of the rolling and pitching craft.

Returning craft are filled nearly to the gunwales with copra. Oil drums and pens of squealing pigs are thrown (again, literally) on top of the sacks, and assorted produce is tucked in wherever there's space. Finally, passengers are balanced on top. When only a few centimetres of freeboard remain and the centre of gravity of the whole mess hovers at least 1m above the gunwales the boats are shoved off through the surf. Passengers must constantly lean in one direction or another to prevent what would appear to be the imminent capsizing of the vessel. On arrival at the ship, all cargo is rolled, herded and pitched aboard.

In 1958, after many petitions by homesick islanders, resettlement of Niufo'ou was allowed, but government aid was refused to anyone who returned. Two years later the island had a population of 345, which has since doubled.

It is thought that the volcano once reached an altitude of 1300m, but these days the highest point is only about 285m above sea level. Although there's been no obvious volcanic activity since 1946, the volcano is still classified as active.

INFORMATION

Boil all lake water before drinking; locals are generally happy to fill your water bottles from their rainwater tanks when asked.

Money can be changed at the Treasury.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Niufo'ou has no coral reef and no sandy beaches, just open ocean surrounds. People swim only in the lake, if at all. The lack of a wharf makes the precarious loading and unloading of goods from MV *'Olovaha* a fascinating spectacle.

A track (taking approximately six hours) leads right around the doughnut-shaped volcanic cone and its splendid freshwater lake, **Vai Lahi** (Big Lake), which nearly fills the island's large and mysterious crater.

Inside the lake are four major islands: **Motu Lahi** (Big Island), **Motu Si'i** (Small Island), **Motu Molemole** (Smooth Island), which has its own crater lake, and **Motu 'A'ali** (Low Island), which appears above the surface only when the water level is low. The *lapila* (telapia) fish of

the crater lakes are a staple of the local diet. Three smaller lakes in the northeast corner of the crater are separated from the big lake.

Niufo'ou's southern and western shores are a vast, barren moonscape of **lava flows**. On the north shore, mounds of volcanic slag, lava tubes, vents and craters are accessible from the main road. Beneath this flow is the village of 'Angaha, a sort of Tongan Pompeii without the bodies.

Between Mu'a and Mata'aho, a trail leads up to a magnificent **viewpoint** looking out over Vai Si'i, Vai Lahi and the islands. Between Futu and 'Esia, another trail affords a view of the entire expanse of Vai Lahi. From Mu'a, a rough road crosses the sandy isthmus between the two major lakes, leading to the shore of Vai Lahi. Other trails lead to a bubbling sulphur spring and lava vents.

The sulphur lake, **Vai Sulifa** (also called Vai Kona, or Poison Water), is best reached from Petani village.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are numerous excellent camp sites on the crater (especially on the lake shores). A handful of village houses offer guestrooms; contact the Tonga Visitors Bureau (p187) in Tongatapu for details. Expect to have solar-powered lighting, communal cold showers and no refrigeration. Many local people would be happy to take you in for a night; a gift of corned beef or the like – even such staples as flour – is appropriate.

Several small shops are scattered through the villages. Scant supplies make it wise to bring all your food with you.

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