

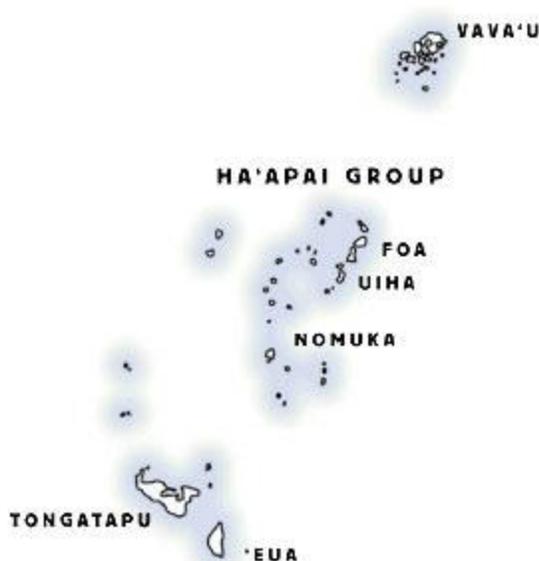
# Island of Tonga

## Overview

Tongans have a way of doing things whole heartedly, whether its talking among themselves or entertaining guests. For example, tables (or, traditionally, mats) at a Tongan feast are heaped high with food, and the enthusiasm with which the men and women perform their lakalaka, mauluulu and other dances is infectious with energy. As you'll quickly learn, it's easy to see that these culturally rich people come from the "Friendly Islands."

## Location

Tonga is located about two-thirds of the way between Hawai'i and New Zealand, southwest of Samoa and east of Fiji.



## Geography

The approximately 170 islands in the Kingdom of Tonga are divided among three groups: Tongatapu, which derives its name from the main island where the capital of Nukualofa is located; Ha'apai, a series of smaller islands to the north of Tongatapu; and Vava'u, the northernmost islands. Unlike the homes of their Polynesian cousins, most Tongan islands are relatively low-lying but very fertile.

## Population

According to WORLD BANK there were approximately 108,000 Tongans living in the kingdom as of 2017, almost all of them Polynesians. Roughly 60% of the population lives on the main island of Tongatapu, which means "sacred Tonga." In addition, there are significant communities of Tongans living in American Samoa, Hawai'i, California and Utah; and also in

New Zealand and Australia. Over the past centuries, Tongans spread widely over the western part of Polynesia. Additionally, many people in Samoa, Uvea, Futuna, and the Lau Islands of Fiji share Tongan blood.

## History and Discovery

Like all their Polynesian cousins, the Tongans did not have a written language to record their early history; but anthropologists recognize them as being among the most ancient of the Polynesians who probably migrated to their islands about 3,000 years ago.

Tonga's first contact with the western world came when Dutchmen Schouten and LeMaire came upon the islands in 1616. The Tongans called them palangi, which describes the white clouds of their sails "bursting from the sky." The Europeans found a socially advanced society which had already extended its influence beyond its own islands.

Over a century-and-a-half later, British explorer Captain James Cook was equally impressed in 1773 and again in 1774. When he returned for a final visit in 1777, he left two gifts. To the people of Tonga, their nickname - the Friendly Isles. To the paramount chief, or Tu'i Tonga, a turtle from the Galapagos Islands which roamed the royal palace grounds until it died in 1960.

Spaniard Francisco Maurelle sailed into the excellent anchorage at Neiafu on the northern island of Vava'u in 1781, claiming the islands for Spain. The intrepid Capt. Bligh and those cast adrift with him from the Bounty mutiny successfully passed through Tongan waters in 1789, though not without some fatal skirmishes. The Spanish king sent Don Alejandro Malaspina on a follow-up voyage a dozen years after Maurelle, but Spanish influence waned as other European sandalwood traders, whalers and Christian missionaries became more prevalent in the first half of the 19th century.

By 1845 the first Taufa'ahau Tupou united all of the Tongan islands under his leadership as the first undisputed Tu'i Tonga ("King of Tonga"). He took the name King George Tupou I. In 1875 King Tupou instituted a constitutional monarchy, which still reigns to this day. In 1901, the kingdom entered into an international protection agreement with Great Britain, which left the Tupou dynasty in power. The agreement was rescinded in 1970, but Tonga remains a member of the British Commonwealth.

## Languages

The two recognized languages of Tonga are Tongan and English. Tongan is a major western Polynesian dialect that is closely related to Samoan and several other smaller groups of Polynesians in the area, including Niue, Tokelau, Uvea and Futuna.

Historical and comparative linguists have basically determined that related languages which have descended from the same "family" tend to get simpler as time goes by. For example, younger languages in the same family might have fewer sounds. In this respect, modern Tongan has more phonological sounds than Samoan, but not as many as Fijian, prompting such linguists to theorize that Tongan is probably older than Samoan but not as old as Fijian. Of course, this is a simplification of a complex issue.

The sound represented by the letters 'ng' are pronounced, as in the English word 'singer' [that is, an unreleased 'g'], and never as in 'finger' [or a released 'g']. Unlike English, however, the Tongan 'ng' sound can come at the beginning of a word, but it's still pronounced the same way. Also, think of the single vowels as if they were Spanish.

## Village Life

The houses displayed in the Polynesian Cultural Center's Tonga Village represent traditional historical architecture.

**Fale Faka-Tu'i** - As with many chiefly Polynesian structures, the Fale Faka-Tu'i is built on a raised rock platform, but in typical Tongan architectural style, it is supported inside by four large ironwood posts. Similar to Fijian culture, cowry shells hanging throughout the interior mark the royal nature of the palace. The roof is thatched with sugar cane leaves. Both the interior and exterior of the building are decorated with braided coconut fiber — kafa or sennit lashings, fine reed walls, Tongan ngatu or bark cloth, and intricately woven mats.

Cultural tradition also requires that dried coconut leaves be placed on the floors and then covered with finely woven mats which add extra softness and comfort. Pictures of past and present Tongan royalty adorn the walls inside the Fale Faka-Tu'i: One shows King George Tupou I, who unified his people and established a constitutional monarchy based upon Christian principles, primarily the Ten Commandments. Another features King George Tupou II who followed in his father's footsteps, as did his daughter, Queen Salote Tupou III, who ascended to the throne in 1919 at age 18. She gained international recognition for her gracious role at Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth II coronation parade in 1953 when she ignored the rain while riding in her open carriage and continued greeting the cheering crowds. Of course, there's also a picture of the present king, who has visited Laie on several occasions.

**Fale Faka-Kolo** - Every Tongan village has a "meeting house" where all meetings and formal kava ceremonies take place. Ranking chiefs sit on the elevated platform while the lower section is for commoners.

Tongans play a type of shuffleboard called lafo in the "game house." Originally played only by royal family members, the object is for competitors sitting at each end of a long, narrowly

fold mat to slide lafo seeds along the length of the mat so that they come as close as possible to the end without falling off. The seed closest to the edge receives 6 points while the other seeds receive one. A player receives a total of 5 seeds, and the strategy is to knock the opponent's seeds off the mat. The game is played in the Fale Faka-Kolo to protect the mats, which are made with a finer weave than everyday household mats.

**Kava** - Which is called 'ava in Samoa, Tahiti and Hawai'i (where it's spelled 'awa), and yaqona in Fiji — is widely drunk throughout most of Polynesia. For centuries it has been a common tradition and is still often used today as a ceremonial drink before the start of important meetings and functions. Kava is made from the dried root of the piper methysticum plant, which is a member of the pepper family. Reports that it is mildly narcotic or intoxicating are not correct in reference to traditional, plain kava; although the beverage has a slight numbing effect, which is why it has been used in Europe and other places in pill form as a stress-reducing agent.

A recent scare that such kava pills could cause liver damage resulted from pharmaceutical companies including other parts of the plant in the mix, whereas Polynesians have only used the roots for centuries. Polynesian men would pull the root and branches from the ground and wash the dirt off, scrape off the outer skin and allow the plant to thoroughly dry out. On some of the islands, kava is so important ceremonially that certain dried roots were even given names, and/or they became the subject of significant oratory. In most cases a portion of the root would be ground up with the appropriate stone pounders until it is roughly in powder form.

Special carved wooden bowls, such as the ones displayed at the Polynesian Cultural Center, would be used to mix the kava with water. To obtain the clearest liquid possible, a strainer made from the tangled fibers of wild hibiscus bark is used to filter the particles. The strainer is squeezed dry and shaken outside to remove any unwanted particles. The process is repeated until the kava is ready to be served in a half-coconut shell cup.

Medicinally, Tongans would use kava as a headache remedy, to alleviate pulmonary pains, to treat diseases such as gonorrhea, blackwater fever, tuberculosis, leprosy, cancer, asthma, stomach upsets and insomnia. Kava also helps fight contagions to minimize the risks of infections.

Due to the ceremonial importance of kava, there are several important myths related to it, one of which goes like this: One day the king of Tonga went fishing with his men. They did not catch anything and were hungry. They stopped at an island where a couple and their daughter named Kava lived. The girl had leprosy. Because there was a famine in the land and there was nothing for the king and his men to eat, Kava suggested to her parents that they kill and bake her for the king and his party. After feasting and then discovering this sacrifice,

the king was deeply moved. He instructed the parents to bury their daughter's remains properly. They did so and two plants grew on the grave: a kava plant grew from the head and sugar cane grew from the feet.

One day a Tongan hero by the name of Loau came to the island and the couple told him all that had happened. Loau told them to take the two plants to the king, who would instruct them what to do with the kava...which is how the kava ceremony came to Tonga. Keeping the myth in mind, we can now understand that kava symbolizes sacrifice, diplomacy, and renewal to the Tongans. Kava was willing to die to save her parents from the needs and demands of the king. Her body represents its use as a medium for making peace. It is interesting to note that in Tonga today, the kava ceremony represents the best way to bring together families and groups in times of contention.

In Tongan protocol, a formal kava ceremony can be utilized as an opportunity for Tongans to forgive, save face, and re-establish respect. When kava is first tasted, it is bitter; but soon the effects of the roots bring calmness, which also represents renewal. Tongans recognize the importance of kava: It is a tradition which the Tongans, from royalty to commoners, appreciate and practice knowledgeably and respectfully.

**Fale Hanga** - The Tongans always assign a special "work house" for the women to weave and make bark cloth, which they call ngatu. Each of the Polynesian islands makes bark cloth with their respective traditions. For example, some Polynesians make it out of breadfruit tree bark or banyan tree bark. In Tonga ngatu is almost always made from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree.

While making ngatu is the traditional work of women, Tongan men have the responsibility to grow the plants. During the growing period they will carefully prune excess leaves and branches in order to eliminate notches which may mar the overall quality of the tapa. It takes approximately two years for the trees to reach the best height and width for ngatu making.

Once the branches are cut, they are left in a shady place for up to a week. Then the bark is carefully nicked and slowly stripped from the branch. The outer bark is peeled away leaving the creamy-colored inner bark, which is soaked in water for up to a day according to the desire of the crafter. After a bark strip has been stretched to its maximum width, it is laid aside and pounding begins on another two-inch-wide length of bark.

In order to have a bed-sized piece of ngatu, quite a few strips must be glued together. A small tapioca root is used to make the glue: Tongans harvest the right-sized roots, boil them until they are half-cooked and let them cool. The women lay all the pieces of the first layer in the same direction, then they gently rub the tapioca over the layer. When it is completely

covered, a second layer is placed over the first, but with the new strips running cross-wise. This strengthens the ngatu by giving it a warp and woof. This process is continued until the desired size is reached. Sometimes there are holes in the ngatu where knots occurred in the tree branch. The women eliminate these by cutting little patches and gluing them over the defects.

Once the ngatu is glued together and patched, the women prepare it for imprinting traditional Tongan designs using a clever die, or a design mat called the kupesi. The women make the stiff base of the kupesi from a fiber-like part of coconut blossoms to which they have sewn coconut leaf midribs in the desired pattern. Because they use kupesi over and over again the edges are nicely finished. To imprint the design, they place the kupesi underneath the blank bark cloth. Then the women dip a specially folded wad of ngatu into a container of natural dye, and lightly paint the surface of the new ngatu, which the coconut rib pattern of the kupesi presses upward so it catches the dye first.

Tongan dyes are made according to old traditions: Brown dye is obtained from either the bark of the mangrove tree or the kukui nut tree, and black dye by boiling brown dye with red hibiscus flowers. The women continue imprinting the design until all of the large ngatu is covered with the basic design. To complete the process, the women outline larger design elements in black, using a paintbrush made from a dried segment of pandanus fruit. It's not unusual for Tongan women to make a ngatu 50 yards long, which is called a launima which usually takes a whole day to imprint. Of course, a 100-yard-long ngatu, or a lautefuhi, takes twice as long.

Before European fabrics were introduced, Tongans used ngatu for clothing, blankets, wedding costumes, dancing costumes, gift exchanges, and interior house decorations. There are specific ngatu for special occasions: Black ngatu uli, for example, is used for funerals, while ngatu with certain designs reflect high rank.

**Pandanus weaving** - Two plants are very important to the craft of weaving in Tonga and the rest of Polynesia: lou'akau or pandanus (*Pandanus odoratissimus* Linnaeus) and louniu or coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) leaves. Lou'akau leaves are favored for weaving fine household items such floor mats, bedding mats, storage baskets, table mats, and fans. They are also used for special needs such as canoe sails; and for personal items such as fine mats for clothing and waist skirts (ta'ovala), hats, bracelets, and slippers.

Lou'akau leaves are cut when they are still green. They are then laid out to dry in direct sunlight, except when it begins to rain at which time they are quickly brought inside for protection. There is a particular kind of pandanus which is edged with short prickly thorns. These are trimmed off before the drying process. When whiter colored leaves are desired, the freshly-picked leaves must first be parboiled in a large pot before they are laid out to dry.

Some Polynesians also bleach them in sea water. When the leaves are dry approximately two weeks later, women smooth them, and roll them into larger “wheels” about one foot in diameter. They are then secured, stacked and stored for future use.

When a weaver starts a project, she unrolls the leaves carefully, and using a smooth shell such as a pipi, she rubs the leaves until they're flat and pliable. Using a different shell (perhaps a clam shell), she then strips the leaves according to the widths required for the completion of the desired project. The thinner the strips, the more important and valuable the project, because weaving thinner strips takes longer and more skill. Tongan women basically use an interlocking weaving method, or they use a binding technique using strips which are wound around and around coconut midribs.

Tongans treat items made from lou'akau respectfully. For example, they take their shoes off before walking on most mats. This custom also has a modern form throughout Polynesia today, where many people observe the custom of taking their shoes off before entering a house, even if there are no pandanus mats in the house.

**Coconut Leaf Weaving** - The easy availability of fresh coconut leaves makes them the most important weaving material in Polynesia, especially for everyday use. The leaves are chopped off the trees and particularly used for outside needs. They also have the advantage of being disposable.

Once a green coconut frond is cut, it's relatively easy for a person to split off one side along with a thin piece of the mid-stem. The piece of mid-stem, which is more woody, can be easily made into a circle, secured at the ends, and formed into the rim of a basket. Weaving the individual leaves now hanging below the rim follows the usual alternating over-and-under pattern. When the basket is sufficiently deep, or the leaves almost all plaited, the ends are clumped into three strands and braided into a long line across the bottom. Finally, the three strands are tied into a knot, sealing the basket.

Tongans and almost all Polynesians frequently make such baskets and use them to carry coconuts from the plantation, carry food, hold materials for crafts and many other uses. Coconut leaves can also be woven into interesting toys for children, such as a windmill, ball, fish, grasshopper, bird, pineapple, or musical instrument, or a three-leaf piece from one side of the frond can be quickly braided into a cool coconut headband. Polynesians will also use coconut leaves to quickly finish off a house: For example, they can be layered to make a roof, woven to decorate walls, used to screen out the wind and rain, or made into mats to line floors over which finer mats would be placed.

The traditional craft of weaving is also enjoyed for the companionship it promotes among women, as well as the creative pleasure it gives, and the comfort and utility woven goods provide. Finally, in the islands weaving materials are a free part of nature's bounties.

### Interesting Facts

Named the "friendly" people of Polynesia by Captain James Cook, who was impressed by the warmth and kindness of the islanders.