Tonga

Location

Located in the very heart of the South Pacific lying east of Fiji and south of Samoa, Tonga (also called the Friendly Islands) is one of the most scenic and unspoiled of the Pacific island nations. Part of Oceania and archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean, the Kingdom of Tonga is located about two-thirds of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand. Tonga has a NNE/SSW orientation between latitudes 16oS and 23oS and longitudes 173o40 W and 175o20 W. Nuku’alofa, the capital, is located on the main island of Tongatapu. It is more developed than its neighbors but still maintains an unhurried and peaceful lifestyle.

Geography

Tonga is comprised of 176 coral and volcanic islands, thirty-six of which are inhabited. 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.

Climate

The climate in Tonga is basically subtropical with a distinct warm period from December to April, during which the temperatures rise above 32 °C (90 °F), and a cooler period in May to November, with temperatures rarely rising above 27 °C (80 °F). The temperature increases from 23 °C to 27 °C (74 °F to 80 °F), and the annual rainfall is from 1,700 to 2,970 millimeters (67 to 117 in) as one moves from Tongatapu in the south to the more northerly islands closer to the Equator. The average wettest period is around March with on average 263 mm (10.4 in.).[3] The average daily humidity is 80%. Cyclones are common between October and April and Fonuafo’ou experiences earthquakes and volcanic activity.

History

Polynesians have lived on Tonga for at least 3,000 years. The Dutch were the first to explore the islands, landing on Tafahi in 1616. The current royal dynasty of Tonga was founded in 1831 by Taufa'ahau Tupou, who took the name George I. He consolidated the kingdom by conquest and in 1875 granted a constitution. In 1900, his great-grandson, George II, signed a treaty of friendship with Britain, and the country
became a British protected state. The treaty was revised in 1959. Tonga became independent on June 4, 1970.

Government

Tonga unique among Pacific nations, never completely lost its indigenous governance. Tonga remains the only monarchy in the Pacific.

Important Holidays/Dates

Eua Tourism Festival - second week of June to coincide with commemoration of Royal Highness Prince Fatafehi Tu'ipelehake CBE honorary title.

Ha'apai Tourism Festival - coincides with Emancipation Day, the first week of June.

Crown Prince's Birthday - 4th May
King's Birthday - 4th July
Constitution Day - 4th November
Tupou 1 Day - 4th December

Population

There are approximately 108,000 Tongans living in the kingdom today. Almost all of them Polynesians, but there is a definite admixture with Fijians. Approximately 38% of the population are below the age of 15 and 8% are over the age of 60.

Currency

Tonga uses its own dollar and cent monetary system, the Tongan Pa'anga. As of today (3/13/09): 1 US Dollar = 2.07469 Tonga Pa'anga and 1 Tonga Pa'anga (TOP) = 0.48200 US Dollar (USD).

Education

Primary education between ages 6 and 14 is compulsory and free in state schools, resulting in a high literacy rate of 99%. Mission schools provide about 83% of the primary and 90% of the secondary level education. There is some higher education in teaching, nursing, agricultural and medical training but most higher education is pursued overseas.

Language
Tongans have their own language, derived from a proto-language which seems to have been one of the first groups to appear in the differentiation of the Polynesian language family. The Tongan language has its closest similarities with Uvean and Niuean. To be highly developed in the Tongan language is to be in a language of respect, words reflect societal ranking.

Religion

Religion closely follows the family in importance, and almost all Tongans are churchgoers. This staunchly Christian nation honors Sundays across every island group—the Sabbath is declared forever sacred in the Tongan Constitution. Almost everything (except bakeries, a few restaurants, and resorts) are closed. No sporting events take place, it is unlawful to work or trade, and most tours do not operate. Contracts signed on a Sunday are void. It is inadvisable to create any disturbance, operate noisy equipment, or be loud on Sundays.

Agriculture

In many villages, humans are outnumbered by domestic pigs, which range freely across the islands. People have their own small farms and raise their own animals and grow their own vegetables for food.

Economy

Tonga’s currency is the pa’anga, and its economy is a feudal system. GNP is approximately T$35 million but up from prior years. (Incomes average US$4,000 per year.) All land is property of the monarchy; nobles administer and allot it to the common people. No foreigner can own land, although with approval from the cabinet, anyone can lease property for up to 50 years. Many foreigners have taken advantage of this opportunity, and small foreign-owned businesses such as guesthouses, restaurants, and small resorts are prevalent throughout the kingdom. Half the population is involved in the cash economy, the rest live from subsistence agriculture, fishing, and collecting. Most Tongans grow their own food, build their own homes, and make their own woven handicrafts and various household products (such as tapa, handbags, baskets, place mats, and brooms). So much in Tonga is made by hand that the aggregate value of all these goods exceeds the total of all goods sold for cash. Food staples are yams, taro, manioc, and sweet potatoes.

Trade
The biggest cash crop is pumpkin squash. Introduced to the islands in 1987, it has become Tonga’s biggest export (shipped primarily to Japan). Tongan pumpkins supply about half of Japan’s requirements. During the harvest season in October and November, commercial vessels flow steadily in and out of port. Other exports to Tonga include: coconuts, copra, bananas, vanilla beans, cocoa, coffee, ginger, black pepper and fish. Tonga imports foodstuffs, machinery, transport equipment, fuels and chemicals mainly from New Zealand, Fiji and Australia. The amount imported is much greater than exported.

Food

Traditional Tongan foods include meat, vegetables and fruits, common meats in Tonga are pork, chicken and fish. Vegetables include tomato, carrot, spinach, cabbage, pumpkin, onion and taro (like potato). Usually vegetables are cooked by boiling, steaming or baking. Ko e Me‘atokoni ‘a Tonga is a traditional Tongan Food. The traditional Tongan feast gets cooked in an underground oven, umu, common throughout Polynesia. The most refreshing drink available is coconut juice. Kava, a mild intoxicant made from the roots of a plant in the pepper family, is widely used in ceremonial and social situations.

Holly Bacon