

# Little Kingdom by the Sea

*Never colonised, the friendly people of Tonga have served their own kings and queens in unbroken succession for the past 1000 years.*

*By Jack Goldfarb*

Locating tiny Tonga on the global map requires a magnifying glass. But focus on a little cluster of coral and volcanic islands a thousand miles east of New Zealand — on the “tomorrow” side of the International Date Line — and you can pinpoint Tonga, the world’s smallest kingdom. For me the ultimate Polynesian paradise.

Micro in size, but long on history, the Tongan islands were inhabited by Pacific peoples 2000 years before Columbus stumbled on to the New World. For the past 1000 years an unbroken succession of kings and queens have governed the proud olive-skinned people of Tonga who have never been colonised by any outside power. Perhaps their hulking heavyweight physiques — the leading families are considered the largest human beings in the world, with men averaging 1.8 metres — frightened off conquest-minded invaders. Tonga remains the only independent kingdom in this part of the world. All but forgotten are the 19th century Polynesian sovereigns who once ruled in Hawaii, Tahiti, Samoa and Fiji.

King Taufa’ahau Topou IV, in his white wooden palace on the seafront in the quaint capital, Nuku’alofa, on Tongatapu island, continues the durable reign of the world’s oldest existing dynasty. The burly, imposing ruler of 100,000 Tongans, the first of his people to acquire a university degree (he has a BA and LLB), recently celebrated the 20th year of his reign as head of this uncommon but politically stable constitutional monarchy.

Tonga is unique and independent-minded in many ways. It has refused television — although it will probably be introduced in a year or so. Tongans are strict sabbatarians. Devout Christians, on Sundays their activities come to a hushed standstill. No commerce, public transport, sports or loud music. Only churchgoers sing out, chorusing resonant hymns, accompanied by tubas, French horns or *lali* drums.

Not that weekdays are much more bustling in these tranquil islands. On flat, coralline Tongatapu, largest of the 170 islands and islets, where most of the population lives, the palm-fringed beaches, lush greenery and cooling tradewinds foster a relaxed pace that goes under the name of “Tonga Time”. Freely translated, this means “any old time”, and has no relationship whatever with fixed appointments, deadlines or schedules. *Taimifakutonga*, the islander tells you, means “Time is your servant. not your master.” ▶