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► When a local taxi driver deposited me and my luggage in the lobby of Nuku'alofa's main hotel at midnight, this jet-weary stranger was greeted with smiles, cheerful shouts of welcome and offers to help with the luggage. A hotel dance was just breaking up and the good-humoured crowd were moving their rhythmic gyrations out through the lobby to continue them in the road under the starry sky. The merriment, escorted by mellow Polynesian chanting, was a befitting overture for my Tongan stay.

In the days that followed, wherever I wandered on Tongatapu I felt the good-naturedness of these lighthearted people, as warm as the seabreezes that caress their gentle islands.

Dangling my bare feet over a rough-hewn pier at sunset, while the sound of harmonising voices drifts across the water from somewhere, I watch a little red and white fishing skiff dock alongside me. Two tawny young fishermen debark with their day's ample catch. "You are from New York?" one says in disbelief after we have chatted for a few minutes. "All my life," he says with a distant stare, "I dream of going there." I grin, and ask, "Do you know how many millions of people in New York dream of coming here?"

Blended into the Polynesian population are about 1000 part-Europeans and a few hundred Westerners who have found the lifestyle irresistible.

There is the middle-aged German civil engineer and his wife who came here as tourists. They never looked back on the *Sturm und Drang* (read: rat race) of their life in Wurttemberg, and opened a tidy little tearoom around the corner from the royal palace. Two throne-like wicker chairs marked "Reserved" stand permanently on the terrace, just in case their majesties should drop in for tea.

There is the Dutch ex-beauty shopowner who had played nightly chess in Amsterdam with a Tongan expatriate who painted glowing verbal pictures of a Pacific Arcadia. Resigning his stalemated existence with one bold move, the hairstylist and his family flew off to Tonga, where he and his wife now comb the beach for black coral which they fashion into ornamental jewellery.

Though the outlying Vava'u and Ha'apai island groups possess the unspoilt beauty of coral sand beaches and fragrant wildflowers, Tongatapu holds the sites of special interest.

Hillart Killifi, who helps out in the Tonga visitor's Bureau, wants to show me these interesting sights. But first I take a stroll around the perimeter of the royal palace. Only a slender yard-high wall separates me from the green lawns and tall pines that shade the old Victorian building with its scalloped eaves and balustraded balconies. A solitary unarmed sentry stands guard over the royal family's residence, which says much about this peaceable kingdom.

Hillart's tour takes me to the royal tombs where rests the late Queen Salote, mother of the present king. The much-beloved Salote is warmly remembered by the British public for riding in an open carriage through the streets of London in a heavy downpour to attend the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. Queen Salote had insisted on the uncovered carriage out of respect for the British monarch and the huge crowds which had turned out to view the procession.

Along the island's winding main road we honk our way through drowsy villages, past scores of bicycle and horseback riders. In fact, in our three-hour journey we never encounter another motor vehicle. Blue-uniformed schoolchildren unfailingly wave greetings; women wearing traditional *kiekie* sashes over ankle-length skirts look up from weaving pandanus baskets or pounding Hiapo bark into tapa cloth to smile as we roll by.

On the edge of a serene blue lagoon where Captain Cook came ashore two centuries ago we inspect the venerated Ovava tree under which the doughty mariner was said to have snoozed. This Ovava tree seems far too young to have shaded Cook. But were he to return today, he would no doubt recognise the pristine beauty of this landscape.

Near the island's eastern tip we contemplate a mysterious landmark, the Ha'amonga Trilithon. Three slabs of coral rock — two pillars and a connecting stone — weighing 35½ tonnes each, form what looks like a Greek letter Pi (π). Archaeologists have differed over the Trilithon's purpose and meaning. Some believe it was a gateway to an ancient royal compound. Others say a 12th century king erected it to symbolise to his two sons that they remain united in brotherhood.

King Taufa'ahau, however, an enlightened man of scholarly interests,