

Little Kingdom by the Sea

► has developed a theory of his own. He surmised that a V-shaped notch on the connecting stone served to identify the shortest and longest days of the year. Together with surveyors from the Ministry of Lands and Surveys, the king proved that the position of the sun on the shortest and longest days coincided with the arms of the V-shaped notch, enabling the ancient Tongans to establish festival days and periods of planting and harvesting.

At the western toe of this shoe-shaped island, in the village of Kolovai, we stare at the top branches of the casuarina trees, from where come eerie squealing sounds. What seems to be thick pendulous leaves of fleshy fruit dropping from the boughs are actually hundreds of "flying foxes" — fruit-eating bats with fox-like heads. These "sacred" creatures, who may only be hunted by members of the royal family, have a special place in Tongan folklore. It is believed that the appearance of an albino among them portends a royal death.

Heading back to Nuku'alofa, Hillart invites me to see his family's plantation. Beyond the scarlet bushes of hibiscus and flaming poinsettia are thickly-wooded groves of coconut, mango and papaya trees. In Tonga the king grants every 16-year-old male an allotment of 8¼ acres of farm land and a small plot in his village to build a home. The recipient is expected to plant 200 coconut trees within the first year. But with the population tripled in

the past 50 years, young Tongans have a long wait nowadays.

We make one last stop at Tokomololo village where Solomone Suka, a grizzled, 60-year-old carpenter, is single-handedly trying to change the style of 20th century transport. Solomone builds horsecarts, entirely out of local pine wood, adding only metal rims to the big, spoked wheels. He assembles two carts a week, sells them for 500 Pa'anga (\$US500), and has enough standing orders to keep him busy for a year. "Few Tongans afford cars or trucks," he gestures with calloused hands. "Tonga people understand that feeding a horse hay is a lot cheaper than filling a car tank with petrol." ☞

Right: Tongan men in tradition wear.

Below: The palms of Tonga welcome cruise passengers.



Photo: Jack Goldfarb



If one green bottle should accidentally fall, there'll be hell to pay.