

Nine of Cups – 45' Liberty Cutter – 7' draft – October 2009
Subject area: **Tonga**

The decision to leave Niue for Tonga didn't take very long...minutes in fact. We were up early thinking about leaving when we heard the tsunami warning on the VHF from Niue Radio. The dink was hauled and the mooring was cast off before you could say "big, big wave" and we were en route to Tonga. The tsunami that devastated American Samoa and subsequently the Niuas was nary a ripple at Niue.

Tonga is unique among Pacific nations. It never completely lost its indigenous governance. The island groups were united into a Polynesian kingdom in 1845, became a constitutional monarchy in 1875 and a British protectorate in 1900. It withdrew from the protectorate and joined the Commonwealth of Nations in 1970 and to this day, Tonga remains the only monarchy in the Pacific.

The archipelago of Tonga, dubbed the "Friendly Islands" by Captain James Cook, consists of 169 islands, with only 36 inhabited. There are four main island groups including the mostly low-lying and southernmost Tongatapu group; the volcanic and coral Ha'apai group; the flat coral islands of the Vava'u group; and the volcanic Niuas group in the far north which had just been seriously damaged by the tsunami when we arrived.

Our quick departure gave us an early morning start for the short ~250 mile run to Neiafu, Tonga in the Vava'u group. Light winds and a greatly reduced (but still intact) mainsail had us arriving at the back of the pack, but arriving nonetheless. We had lost 24 hours (one day forward) by crossing the International Dateline which juts east to accommodate all of Tonga's islands. Check-in at Neiafu was easy and relatively quick at the crowded Quarantine Dock.

We picked up a mooring and enjoyed the sights and sounds of Neiafu for more than a week. The fresh market and crafts market are excellent and after the poor fresh produce pickings in both Niue and the Cooks, it was a pleasure to have fresh veggies and fruit again at bargain prices. The crafts market adjoining the fresh market is open daily and offered some of the most unique and inexpensive crafts we'd seen in the South Pacific, especially basketry, tapa, carvings and jewelry.

Neiafu and its residents have had a tough time of it this past year. Last December (2008), a fire ravaged through the old wooden buildings along the waterfront and totally destroyed eight buildings. In August 2009, an inter-island passenger ferry headed north from Nuka'alofa sunk losing more than 60 passengers, mostly women and children who were below decks, many of whom were from Neiafu. Most recently, in October 2009, the tsunami that hit Pago Pago, Samoa (and chased us out of Niue) also hit the northernmost Niua Islands of Tonga and wiped out 90% of the island. Many of the people in the Niuas have close relatives in Neiafu and a huge relief effort was mounted by both the local community and the cruising community to send more than two tons of food, clothing and supplies to those in need.

Though we enjoyed Neiafu, it was quite commercial. The waterfront is primarily lined with restaurants and yacht charter companies owned by ex-pats. After nearly 10 days of "civilization", we opted to head out in the Vava'u group and do a bit of exploring. As usual for us, we didn't get far before we found a place we liked...Matamaka... and ended up staying longer than planned.

The reason for staying was not the scenic vistas or the snorkeling or diving...though all were great...it was the people and our ability to interact with them. We met Fa'aki, her husband, Ben and their six kids and we just bonded. Fa'aki's excellent English allowed us to learn more about the Tongan culture and their way of life. David's engineering background came in very handy. First, he fixed solar panels for the school teacher; then for the minister. Then there were

generators and more solar panels to fix. Folks were coming by horseback from the other side of the island to enlist David's aid. Time to call in the troops! We contacted "Yohelah" and "Gannet", good friends and fellow SSCA members, and invited them to come for a Tongan feast ... and oh by the way, there are lots of things to repair here.

The feast was held in honor of Roxanne's (Fa'aki's oldest daughter) graduation from elementary school and it was splendid. The men had been invited to a kava circle earlier in the morning and were definitely mellow when it was time to eat. We contributed some baked goods on request (no ovens other than underground umus on the island) and were treated as honored guests. We were at a loss as to proper etiquette although no one seemed to mind.

The men earned their feast! They spent two subsequent very full days ashore making repairs. The final count: 30 solar panels, 4 generators, a telephone, a digital camera, 2 VCR's, 3 TVs, 1 DVD player, a weed whacker and who knows what else...we lost count. But it was truly a community affair. People were queued up. Everyone watched intently as "the doctors" diagnosed problems. If it was fixable, a collective sigh went up from the crowd with smiles and thumbs up signs. If not, "oh well" and they moved on to the next repair. We were paid in bananas, lettuce, coconuts and genuine smiles of thanks. While the men worked, Fa'aki took the women on a village tour with stops to admire weaving, tapa-making, gardening and learn more about Tongan culture. It's a very small village and it was easy to keep track of the men's progress. If we didn't see them, we certainly heard where they were and what project they were currently working on.

Unfortunately, the extended time spent in Matamaka necessitated our hurried departure to Neiafu to clear out and move south the following week in order to arrive in Nuku'alofa in time for Big Mama's annual end of season cruiser party. We spent a few days in the Hapa'ai group on the way south, but could have spent a month. Then we headed directly for Pangaimotu and Big Mama's. Usually a "party" is not enough to make us rush to another anchorage, but Ana "Big Mama" Emberson is an SSCA Cruising Station Host and I had been in touch with her via e-mail for the past 2-3 years so I was hell-bent to arrive in time for her big bash.

The anchorage at Pangaimotu is deep, but the holding was good and we had plenty of room...until the other 60 boats attending the party arrived! The party was outstanding (see "Around & About" issue for a full report) and well worth the effort of having rushed.

Two days following the party, on a sunny Sunday, Nine of Cups along with some 20 other boats, set sail for cyclone-safe New Zealand, the final passage of the season and the completion of our Trans-Pacific voyage.

If you go:

- **Guides:** *Moorings Cruising Guide to Vava'u Tonga* and its associated numbered chart; *A Yachtsman's Guide to the Hapa'ai Group, Kingdom of Tonga* by Phil Creegen; a new guide, *Sailingbird's Guide to the Kingdom of Tonga*, but felt we had enough with what we had. *Making Sense of Tonga*, by Mary McCoy and Drew Havea is an excellent introduction to Tongan culture and etiquette; as always *Lonely Planet South Pacific*.
- **Charts:** Navionics electronic charts were off by nearly 1/2 mile in some locations as were the paper charts we had. We recommend no navigation at night while in the island groups and a good watch while navigating during the day.
- **Currency:** Tongan pa'anga (TOP) though the Tongans refer to them as dollars. TOP\$1 = US 0.48
- **Time:** GMT +13; the first country in the world to greet each new day.

- **Check-in/check out**– Both Neiafu (Vava'u) and Nuku'alofa (Tongatapu) are international ports of entry. In both ports, you must tie up to the Quarantine Dock and officials will board your boat for inspection and completion of inbound paperwork. In Neiafu, we were visited by Customs/ Immigration, Health & Quarantine and paid TOP\$123 (Tongan pa'anga) for entrance fees including a free 30-day visitor's visa. They take all of your trash with them. Note that your visa can be extended at the Immigration office for up to a total of six months at TOP\$40/passport/month.

Overtime charges apply for weekends, holidays and after hours. Best to “arrive” between 9-4 Mon-Friday.

Movement within the country is regulated by the Port Captain and Immigration. Visit Immigration first and then the Port Captain's office where a fee is due. If you wish to visit Ha'apai, you must obtain a separate permit to go there and then check in and out again with the Port Captain in Pangai to obtain a permit to go to Nuku'alofa.

- **Note:** In theory, a 24-hour notice must be given to Customs prior to arrival, but no one there seemed to know any contact information for the pre-arrival notice and no mention was made of it on arrival. Check before going.

Neiafu, Vava'u – 18S39.85 / 173W58.92 (Mooring in Neiafu Harbor)

- **Anchorage/Moorings** – Moorings are available at TOP \$15/night no matter what company owns them. Pink moorings belong to The Moorings and are reserved for their charter customers, otherwise any free mooring with a number can be picked up and used. Call the “owner” on the VHF channel marked on the mooring ball and pay them when you're leaving. It's a pretty informal system.
- **Port Guide** - In Neiafu, pick up a current, free *Vava'u Marine Guide* by Baker Hardin as soon as you arrive in Neiafu from Tropical Tease or Tropicana. This guide contains all the information you'll need for getting around Neiafu and finding needed supplies and services including fuel, propane, laundry.
- **Dinghy dock** – Tie up at Aquarium or the public dinghy dock behind the little breakwater near the Custom's Dock.
- **Water/Trash** – Both seem to be an issue in Neiafu. Water can be obtained at Aquarium for a fee. Trash can be left at Aquarium for a fee.
- **Tourist Info Center** on the main street provides some basic brochures and has a crafts center which offered some different products than those seen in the public market at good prices.
- **What to do do/see** – whale watching in season (Aug/Sept especially); fishing; snorkeling/diving; cruising at its best in paradise. Inland hiking; bicycle, car & motorcycle rentals available; Tongan feasts
- **PIG 89.3 FM** – the local “ex-pat” radio station with easy-listening music
- **Cruiser's Morning Info Net** – 0830 daily on Channel 26; weather/tides, general information, local happenings

- **Internet** – While we were in Neiafu, we had free wifi on the boat compliments of Aquarium, but we're not sure the plan was to continue this free service. Otherwise, there is internet available at Aquarium and Tropicana.
- **ATMs** – Yup...two of them. ANZ and Westpac Banks; both on the main street
- **Fakatonga** – an important expression to learn...it means “the Tongan way” and for better or worse, it's how things are done in Tonga.

Matamaka – 18S42.46 / 174W07.75 – 45' (good holding in sand)

- **Services** – None; you can probably pick up some fresh lettuce, kumara (sweet potato), coconuts, fish/lobster from the villagers for purchase or trade. There is an old, dilapidated wharf, but it's easier to beach your dinghy ashore.
- Fa'aki's house is near the wharf. If she's there, ask her for a village tour. She speaks excellent English.

Hunga – 18S41.56 / 174W07.75 – 70' (good holding in sand)

- There's a small village here. Check in with them as a courtesy if you plan to stay. The narrow entrance to Hunga is daunting...the proverbial “between a rock and a hard place”. We'd suggest checking out the Moorings guide or getting local knowledge before entering.
- Pretty little beaches here and lovely scenery.

Blue Lagoon – 18S42.72 / 174W08.38

- Gorgeous anchorage; entrance through the reef can be tricky, but it's pretty straightforward with good visibility. No services. We used it as a jump-off point for heading to Hapa'ai.

Ha'apai Group

Nukunamo Island - 19S42.71 / 174W17.01 – (43' good holding, sand)

- **Services** – None; this is just a small, uninhabited island. Good shelling and beachcombing. We learned in Nuku'alofa that there were plans to develop this island into a resort. See it while it's still pristine!

Tofanga – 19S57.45 / 174W28.35

- **Services** – None; this is just a small, uninhabited island. Good shelling and beachcombing

Tongatapu

Pangaimotu- 21S07.51 / 175.09.82 – (75' good holding)

- **Anchored off Big Mama's.** Big Mama's bar and restaurant – everything you'd expect in a South Sea's island bar/restaurant...sand floors, cold beer, friendly people, good food. You can also tie up med-moor style at the inner harbor in Nuka'alofa. Fees apply.
- **Ferry** several times a day from Big Mama's to Nuku'alofa. If you've already checked into Tonga, you can anchor at Big Mama's and do all of your paperwork on foot in Nuku'alofa. Lalo at Big Mama's can give you all the information you need for check-in. TOP\$10/pp/RT.

NOTE: You can certainly dinghy across the bay and tie-up at the dinghy dock in Nuku'alofa. We found this more convenient and economical than relying on the ferry.

- **Duty free diesel** - If you plan to depart Tonga from Nuku'alofa, duty-free diesel at the public dock in Nuku'alofa can be arranged through Big Mama's and requires both a duty-free purchase permit and a bunkering permit through Customs.
- **International check-out** in Nuku'alofa can be done from Big Mama's anchorage. First, go to Immigration in downtown Nuku'alofa, then to Customs and the Port Captain's office in the port area. Fees are due, but they were minimal.
- Supermarkets/provisioning

The Talamahu Market is a huge fresh/crafts market; other smaller supermarkets are available with varied offerings. Don't expect much and you won't be disappointed.

- **Laundry** – available through Big Mama's. We did not see any self-service laundramats.
- **Trash** – big bins available at Big Mama's at no charge.
- **Water** – jerry jugged in from Nuku'alofa on the ferry. Otherwise, you can take your boat to the wharf in Nuku'alofa to get water. The anchorage is deep and clean enough to make water with your watermaker.
- **Propane** – check with Big Mama's.
- **ATMs** – Westpac and ANZ both available on Taufa'ahau
- **What to do do/see**

Walking tour of the town; archeological sites; neverending offerings of cultural shows, feasts & dancing; snorkeling, diving; good collectible stamps here from the post office.

This is wonderful cruising ground with warm and friendly people. We barely touched the surface. Check our website www.nineofcups.com for more photos and commentary. We plan to return here next season.

Commodores Marcie (AA1ZM) and David Lynn (AA1ZL)