

OCEANIA · ISLANDS · WILDLIFE · DIVING · BEACHES · CULTURE · OFF THE BEATEN PATH

 Tonga

Tonga is the South Pacific's last kingdom, a scattering of around 170 islands where Sundays are kept strictly and village life revolves around church and family. From July to October humpback whales calve in the sheltered waters of Vava‘u, where licensed operators take small groups swimming with them, while Tongatapu holds the royal tombs and stone trilithon of the old Tu‘i Tonga empire.

 Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Tonga and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 19 March 2026.

 CAPITAL Nuku‘alofa	 CURRENCY Tongan pa‘anga (TOP) £1 ≈ TOP 3.19	 LANGUAGE Tongan, English	 BEST TIME Jun–Oct
 DAILY BUDGET £55–£250 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type I 240V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 32h via Auckland or Nadi ~£1,600–£2,800 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+13 standard time

Tonga is a constitutional monarchy of around 170 islands, about 36 of them inhabited, spread across three main groups. Most visitors arrive on Tongatapu, the flat main island, home to the capital Nuku‘alofa, the terraced royal tombs at Mu‘a and the Ha‘amonga ‘a Maui trilithon, then fly or sail north to Vava‘u, a maze of drowned hills and sheltered anchorages around Neiafu. In between, the low coral islands of Ha‘apai offer empty beaches and little else, while ‘Eua, a short hop from Tongatapu, has forest trails and sea cliffs. Two weeks allows two or three island groups at an unhurried pace.

Island time is real here: domestic flights and ferries are few and change at short notice, and on Sundays almost everything stops, from shops to domestic flights. Accommodation is mostly small guesthouses, family-run resorts and beach fale, and prices are higher than the simplicity suggests because so much is imported. Whale season is the busiest time, and the best whale-swim operators book up months ahead. Tonga suits divers, sailors, wildlife lovers and anyone happy with few distractions; visitors are often struck by the formality of Tongan dress, the power of church choirs and the warmth of the welcome.

Top 5 highlights

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WILDLIFE

Swimming with humpback whales

Humpbacks migrate from Antarctic waters to breed and calve here from roughly July to October, and licensed operators in Vava‘u, Ha‘apai and ‘Eua take small groups into the water with mothers and calves. Book early, and accept that encounters are never guaranteed.
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HISTORY

Ha‘amonga ‘a Maui trilithon

Three coral limestone slabs, each around five metres tall, form a great gateway built around 1200 for the Tu‘i Tonga Tu‘itātui. Notches on the lintel are thought to mark the solstice sunrises. It stands near the northeast tip of Tongatapu.

3

BEACH

Ha‘apai islands

Low coral islands between Tongatapu and Vava‘u, where Captain Cook was lavishly feasted on Lifuka in 1777. Stay on Lifuka or neighbouring Foa and Uoleva for empty white-sand beaches, snorkelling, kitesurfing and very few other visitors.

4

NATURE

‘Eua island

Geologically older and much higher than neighbouring Tongatapu, ‘Eua rises to forested limestone cliffs on its east coast. Trails through ‘Eua National Park lead to caves, sinkholes and clifftop lookouts where passing whales can be seen in season.

5

NATURE

Mapu‘a ‘a Vaea blowholes

Along the reef terraces near Houma on Tongatapu's south coast, hundreds of blowholes fire plumes of seawater high into the air as the southern swell rolls in. Visit at high tide on a day with a big swell, and keep well back from the edge.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Nuku‘alofa

≈ 34,000 people

Tonga's low-rise capital, with the Talamahu market, the white wooden Royal Palace of 1867 seen from the waterfront, and the flights and ferries to the outer islands. Most visitors stay a night or two.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Neiafu

≈ 3,800 people

Vava‘u's harbour town overlooks the Port of Refuge, one of the Pacific's great yacht anchorages, and is the base for whale swims, sailing charters, kayaking and island-hopping.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Mu‘a

≈ 3,800 people

The ancient royal capital on the shore of the Fanga‘uta lagoon, where the terraced stone langi tombs of the Tu‘i Tonga kings stand among village houses; an easy half-day trip from Nuku‘alofa.

Rounded 2021 census figures; Tonga has no large towns beyond Nuku‘alofa, whose figure covers its urban area. Mu‘a's combines its two villages, Lapaha and Tatakamotonga, and is only just smaller than Neiafu.

When to go to Tonga

Best time: **Jun–Oct**.

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

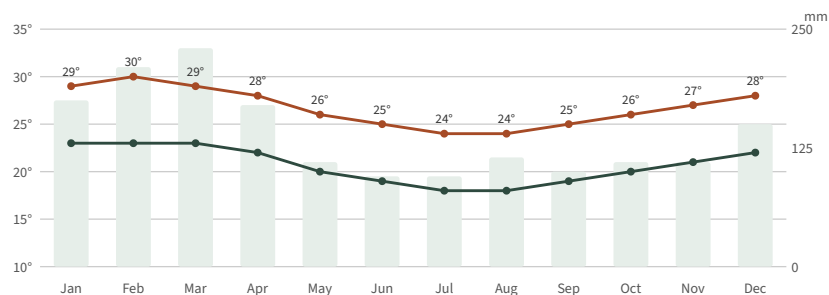
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Nuku‘alofa

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

May	Fakamē (Children's Sunday) On the first Sunday in May, children dressed in white lead church services across Tonga with recitations and singing, followed by family feasts. Visitors dressed modestly are welcome at services.
Jun–Jul	Heilala Festival Tonga's biggest celebration, held in Nuku'alofa around the King's birthday in early July, with float parades, brass bands, traditional dance and the Miss Heilala pageant.

How much does Tonga cost?

SHOESTRING £55 per person / day ≈ TOP 176 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £120 per person / day ≈ TOP 383 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £250 per person / day ≈ TOP 799 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Lu pulu Corned beef, onion and coconut cream wrapped in taro leaves and slow-baked in an 'umu, the underground earth oven, traditionally for Sunday lunch after church.	‘Ota ‘ika Raw fish 'cooked' in lime or lemon juice, then mixed with coconut cream, tomato, onion and cucumber; a cool, fresh dish served at feasts and in many cafés.	Faikakai Soft dumplings of flour, breadfruit or taro drenched in a sweet caramelised coconut syrup, a favourite at celebrations and family gatherings.
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Getting around

Lulutai Airlines, the national carrier, flies small planes from Tongatapu to ‘Eua, Ha‘apai and Vava‘u, though schedules are thin and change at short notice. Cheaper ferries run regularly to ‘Eua and less often, overnight, up to Ha‘apai and Vava‘u. On Tongatapu, use taxis (agree the fare first), join a tour or hire a car, for which visitors need a temporary local licence. Bicycles suit flat Lifuka.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE  I 240V — bring a UK-to-I adapter	EMERGENCY NUMBERS Telephone: 911 (ambulance, fire, police) Fire: 999 Police: 922 Ambulance: 933 Source: FCDO “Getting help”
DIALLING CODE +676	TIME ZONE UTC+13 (standard time)
TAP WATER Not safe — drink bottled or treated water	DRIVING On the left

TIPPING

Not part of Tongan culture and not expected. A small tip for a guide or skipper, or to a staff fund at resorts, is appreciated.

ETIQUETTE

Dress modestly away from the beach, covering shoulders and knees; going shirtless in public is against the law. Sunday is for church and rest, so avoid noisy activities and swimming near villages.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Fua'amotu International Airport (TBU), Nuku'alofa

Visas & entry for Tonga

Shown for a British passport.

Check the entry requirements

You can visit Tonga without a pre-arranged visa for up to 30 days. Border officials will issue a free visa on when you arrive. You may need to show: an onward or return ticket; sufficient funds – a bank statement is acceptable evidence; confirmed accommodation such as a hotel booking or letter of invitation.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Dengue

Hepatitis B

Bat Lyssavirus

Typhoid

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

No yellow fever certificate is required to enter.

MALARIA

No malaria risk

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Tonga

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Mon 2 Nov 2026	Constitution Day (observed)
Mon 7 Dec 2026	Anniversary of the Coronation of HM King George Tupou I (observed)
Fri 25 Dec 2026	Christmas Day
Sat 26 Dec 2026	Boxing Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day

Fri 26 Mar 2027	Good Friday
Mon 29 Mar 2027	Easter Monday
Sun 25 Apr 2027	ANZAC Day
Mon 7 Jun 2027	Emancipation Day (observed)
Sun 4 Jul 2027	Birthday of the Reigning Sovereign of Tonga
Mon 5 Jul 2027	Birthday of the Reigning Sovereign of Tonga (observed)
Fri 17 Sep 2027	Birthday of the Heir to the Crown of Tonga

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Tongan

ENGLISH	TONGAN	SAY IT
Hello	Mālō e lelei	<i>MAH-loh eh leh-LAY</i>
Thank you	Mālō ‘aupito	<i>MAH-loh ow-PEE-toh</i>
Please	Kātaki	<i>kah-TAH-kee</i>
Excuse me	Tulou	<i>too-LOH</i>
How much is this?	Fiha hono totongi?	<i>FEE-hah HOH-noh toh-TONG-ee</i>

Know before you go

Plan around Sunday: almost everything closes, domestic flights and most tours stop, and swimming near villages is frowned on. Stock up on Saturday or stay somewhere that serves meals.

Carry cash in pa‘anga, especially outside Nuku‘alofa and Neiafu: ATMs are few, and many guesthouses, taxis and market stalls do not take cards.

Book whale-swim trips and Vava‘u accommodation months ahead for July to September, and leave buffer days, as domestic flights and ferries are often delayed or rescheduled.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.