

## **Subject/ Area: Tonga Islands**

We just spent the cyclone season in **Vava'u**, Tonga. The harbour of Neiafu is well protected in case of high winds with no outside swell coming in. The fetch is not very long so seas cannot really build up very much.

Cyclone moorings can be rented from several shore operators.

What a pleasure to explore all the anchorages of the Vava'u group at our leisure without crowds and with much warmer wx than during the rest of the year. It was amazing to see air and sea temperature get suddenly warmer in November. The Ha'apai group is also a very nice and so little explored cruising ground (especially if you miss the remoteness and clear waters of the Tuamotus).

We recommend the following 3 cruising guides for more info: 1> Sailingbird guide to Tonga (newest, good map sketches and diving info, nice photos) ; 2> Ken's guide to Tonga (recent info, good info too, but sketches are not as nice) ; 2> Migrant cruising notes (old, less elaborate and not as complete as above guides)

Keep in mind that Tonga is 13 hours AHEAD of Universal time instead of 11 hours behind like in Samoa, Cooks and FP! Plan accordingly to arrive and be able to clear in. If you arrive on WE, you will have to stay onboard until Monday, when you will clear in without overtime.

### **Niuatoputapu**

Easy entrance thru the marked channel and a nicely protected anchorage between the island and the barrier reef behind. After anchoring, we waited onboard until the local authorities came to clear us in (after we found out that they had been informed of our arrival). When the van honked ashore, I went to pick them up with our dinghy and we had them all onboard for paperwork, quick inspection and some chatting. Their offices are located a few miles away in the next village (customs, health, immigration). You will get a 30-day visa on arrival that can only be extended in Neiafu, Vavau or Nukualofa, Tongatapu for about TOP 40 /pers./month (1 TOP=~ US50 cents).

A small grass landing strip gets rarely any planes and the supply boat normally comes only every 3 months! The road around the island is made of crushed corals and sand. 3 villages line one side of the island with an approximate population of 600. The other side of the island has plantations of vegetables (tarot, sweet potatoes, ..) and fruits (papayas, bananas, ...).

Not too much money circulates on the island. They have no refrigeration in homes, so either eat fresh food or canned goods. Many pigs are living in all 3 villages and fishermen go out catching fish. A few telephones but no internet access. No radio or television but a few VCRs and DVD players!

We brought books & school supplies from the Pago Pago Seafarer's Center to 2 of the schools. (Please do the same if you can). They can really use any supplies you can bring them.

We traded goods for fruits and vegetables and were quite surprised to see that each time someone told us he would bring us fruits the next day at a particular time, unlike at any other islands we have been,(or elsewhere in Tonga) they were right on time!

Kids are cute and everyone seems very friendly. The only tourists they meet are the cruisers. To our surprise, they had about 100 boats visit last cruising season. Reports about officials harassing cruisers for gifts kept several sailors away this season! Watch for those rumors that often poorly reflects the truth! We think much of the misunderstandings arise in the way people relate to others of different culture. The Tongans weren't afraid to look at and touch things on board and to ask for things. We always give officials refreshments, try to keep it to 1- 2 at a time on board, and when they ask for things, we either propose an exchange of some kind, or smile and say, "oh, you know we

really need this one, or sorry, we don't have any to spare". They will not insist if one remains polite but firm.

We were guided by 2 teenagers to the top of the hill: nice 2-hour hike and some nice photo opportunities.

Had umu (underground oven) potlucks on Sundays on a motu (small island) put on by Nico & Sia, the local couple that seek cruisers company and help them trading with the rest of the village. For one of these feasts, 18 cruisers chipped in \$15 Tonga \$ ea for Nico & Sia to buy and prepare 2 piglets, lobsters, fish and all the dishes local style!

We went on a day-excursion to Tafahi, the volcanic island 5 miles away with Nico. Got a group of 7 yachties together (about US\$50 for all of us!) and we all made the hike all the way to the top of the volcano. Great hike (about 3.5 hours) even tho it was cloudy on top and we couldn't see the main island of Niuatoputapu! Met some locals climbing coconut trees (great coconut to drink) and met other members of Nico's family. Jackie and I did a little snorkeling (others were too chicken to swim thru the breakers) before heading back with Nico small boat (35 min trip). Didn't catch any fish during both trip but Nico tried!

We biked around the island in both direction: met some locals working their fields and traded for fruits & saw the grinding mill in action for making kava powder. The roots of the kava plants are grounded into powder to make later kava drink. In this part of the world, they chew kava roots and mix it with water to make an intoxicating drink. It numbs the lips and palate ... then legs (so you cannot get up anymore) and get you sleepy when drunk in excess. Apparently, often in the morning, women find the guys all-asleep where they left them the night before to their kava party! Kava drink is reserved for men, ... shows that ladies are smarter :) We did buy some from Nico for future gifts in Tonga & Fiji, We had a sip of mild kava drink in Pago Pago and it does numb the lips as they say!

This island is a really nice way to break the trip from Samoa to Vava'u!

## **Vava'u**

If you come from Niuatoputapu (or from Tongatapu), you don't have to go to the dock for the check-in, you can just anchor or pick up a mooring and walk to customs (at the wharf) and show your paperwork.

Make sure you ask permission before picking up any mooring and find out if that particular mooring is suitable for your size boat. Everybody has quite a laugh when some yacht picks up a mooring buoy tied to a tiny mooring for dinghys and everyone goes ashore without checking any further!

A new small boat marina has been built by the EEC to make a safe & secure landing in town for tourism activities. The local gvt doesn't have any money to run it so, as we left, it was still undecided who would run it! One of the propositions was from the VTA (Vava'u Tourism association) and they would levy a charge to all cruisers in order to pay for all expenses. I have been amazed in my contacts with them to find most of those small businesses so self-centered instead of all working for the common good, and they expect Europe, NZ and Australia help programs to pay for the advertising of the island and basically their commercial activities J Lots of talk, few doing any work and nobody to agree to pay for anything, resulting in nothing much happening in tourism.

For latest info on Neiafu moorings and all facilities, do check [www.noonsite.com](http://www.noonsite.com)

Eating:

Several great restaurants in Neiafu. We particularly enjoyed the following:

**Mermaid:** Is the epitome of the Yachtie hangout from the first FREE glass of beer for any newcomers, to the raucous, and rumors circulating as crew from many corners of the Pacific re-acquaint at this staging area for the New Zealand or Fiji jump-off. Like all good hang outs, there is basic good food, plenty of beer, dinner specials and theme nites, a personable and silly staff, flags and T-shirt mementos from passing boats and tourists, bulletin boards, book exchange, BBQ's, and nautical flea markets at the height of the sailing season. Holly, the Mermaid manager jumped ship herself, and is always ready to do something fun with the ideas and help from the Yachties. They are located on the waterfront.... just look for the dingy dock that's full with the most dinghies!

**Ciao Italian restaurant:** Franco, our host has a menu full of authentic pasta and pizza, Italian style fish, chicken and meats, and the best part of all, the tiramisu and gelato ice cream desserts. Luc was excited to find Steak Pizzaiola on the menu, a dish he hadn't had since our Club Med days.

**Dancing Roster:** Gunther, the chef/owner is Swiss and has a very pleasant and shady restaurant on the slope overlooking the yachts in the bay. We were there for his very popular Wed nite All-you-can-eat BBQ. The fish, chicken, sausage, and lamb were amazingly succulent and flavorful. The salad and hot dish buffet was varied with Tongan and classic buffet selections, all tasty and plentiful. The covered outdoor setting, colorful plates and decorations make it a festive occasion. It is a very good value for the \$21.50 paanga price. We enjoyed it so much that we went back for Gunther's lobster specials, as we heard that he does them best. Jackie had the classic grilled lobster, which turned out to be a lobster and a half! The other odd half was added to the plate of our dinner companion, a French man who was touring solo, and had a craving for lobster. We were not disappointed at the quantity, nor the perfection of the grilling. Finger bowls and a Lobster cracking tool were provided to aid in getting every last morsel. Luc had the lobster morsels in Thai Curry sauce and it was extremely flavorful and succulent. The price of over \$35 paanga may seem steep, but translated in US, and looking at the quantity and quality, it is worth it! Gunther is serious about serving well presented and delicious meals, and gets lots of recommendations and repeat customers.

In the outer anchorages you have the following options:

**Ano Beach Tongan feast** at #11 every Saturday: Maka's father was the first person to offer the Tongan feast to the tourists, but after the death of his wife, he let it go for many years. This 2004 sailing season, Maka and his wife, Matoto have revived the tradition. The late afternoon starts out with the arts and crafts market accompanied by Tongan string band, then goes to the dance show featuring the adorable children, as the adults, open the umu, earth oven, and set up the eating area with woven mats and the food presented on coconut, and banana leaves in copious amounts. There is a selection of seafoods, fish, and root crops, and specialties such as ota, sipi in pele leaves, and fish or meat wrapped in young taro leaves with coconut milk. The guests sit on the mats under the thatched "fale" shelter and eat with their fingers as the Tongans do. After guests are satiated with food overflowing, the string band continues to play around the Kava bowl where everyone is invited to drink kava.

**Hinakauea Beach Tongan feast** at #11: every Thursday. Sione and his family offer their Tongan Feast on a different day than Ano to avoid conflict and give a choice of days to yachties with limited time in anchorages. The handicrafts are different and more varied than Saturday's. The feast is served in an enclosed fale, with tables and benches, which may be better for those who cannot, or prefer not, to sit on the ground. The food is as copious and varied as is befitting any Tongan feast.

**La Paella** Spanish restaurant at #11: Maria and Eduardo have a cute restaurant constructed of driftwood, and local materials and fitted out with a brick fireplace where Maria cooks her authentic Paella. While more costly than some, La Paella's six-course dinner of Spanish specialties is a real

treat for the more discerning palate. The Paella melts in the mouth, and I knew that this was the REAL thing. The evening included after-dinner Latino entertainment as our hosts passed out mariachis and percussion instruments, so we could add rhythm to the Latin beat as they sang and played Spanish guitar. Check the Ark gallery, run by Sherry & Larry (they also run yacht deliveries). **Mala Island Resort Tongan feast:** Friday nights the Tongan owners of the resort grounds have a chance to shine, as the Management of the resort, promotes the feast and all the proceeds go to the Tongan family and their village. This feast is not so traditional, as it is served in the Mala Island Resort dining terrace with china and silverware, and the dishes are served and presented Palangi style on platters and bowls. The selection of food caters more to Palangi palates as well as offering good samples of Tongan. This was the only feast that we attended that had platters of lobster and whole slipper lobsters. WoW! Mala Island is still under development and is planning many new services for cruisers. Check on [www.noonsite.com](http://www.noonsite.com) for their latest services. David, the new Manager is a former member of the rock band The Cure, and still is in the rock music scene and hopes to attract recording artists. Their Friday & Saturday disco nights are famous! The whole team will make you feel the most welcome on Mala. Just as we left, they opened their own restaurant and we hear that Saturdays nights are going to be real popular with yachties! Since everything in town closes Saturday afternoon and Sunday ... short sail to Mala to enjoy great company! The Tongan Visitor's Bureau has provided 2 moorings at Mala and a few other anchorages. They hope that users will leave donations for this service at their office, The Mermaid, and the Moorings office.

**Popao Resort** at #16: Matt and Lisa, a young Canadian couple, have recently become the new owner/hosts of Popao. The resort is set high on the hill above the anchorage surrounded by tropical fruit trees and flowers, and there is a great view of the other side of the island, looking toward the Blue Lagoon and Hunga. In Sept. we saw the Humpback Whales spouting, and even cavorting in the channel. There was a spectacular sunset as we sipped one of Matt's rum drinks. Lisa is a certified chef, and she and Na'a, the Tongan cuisine specialist, teamed up to create two tropical gourmet creations: hot octopus Tongan style on cold salad greens, and a snapper in coconut cream sauce with roasted island pumpkin and other vegetables. The dessert of coconut custard in a crisp biscuit pastry and the King's own coffee, put a perfect ending to that idyllic evening on a Tongan isle. If you want to feel at ease in a friendly resort, visit those friendly people.

### **Provisioning & Repairs:**

We discovered a nice vanilla flavored rum at the Popao resort and were pleased to hear that it was made in Vava'u. I went to visit the distillery and to stock up on great rum. The owner was surprised that few cruisers came by but I told her that it's probably because it is a best kept secret! Check-out for yourself the Pirates Distillery on the right down the street perpendicular to Mermaid/Moorings street access (Ciao restaurant is on the corner of that street!).

Town market: every day except Sat aft and Sundays, you will find a selection of local produce. Selection varies from week to week. If you see something one day, buy it because it might not be there the next.

Several stores are trying to modernize: check Puataukanave store for frozen foods and more (but watch out for any deals with Tommy Farr, the owner); check 'Coeur de Mer' (close to Vava'u high school) for American foods. For frozen meats and fresh onions and potatoes, check also with 'Pete the Meat' (VHF16).

Internet access (do not expect much speed or reliability anywhere in town!), the best is Coconet, run by cruisers Robert & Roxana. Also Vava'u Business Services, opposite the police station (2 locations).

For any hardware, you can find a few 'island' stores in town or visit the well stocked ACE Lionvest. A service with a smile, knowledgeable and efficient staff, best selection of marine parts (sealants, bilge pumps, ss hardware, ...), ... free shuttle from the Coconet during the "yachting season." For Electronics repairs: call Vava'u Electronics: Uwe is very knowledgeable and they can repair many things!

### **Activities:**

Scuba diving with Beluga Diving. Great fast aluminum dive boats with congenial Tongan crew. Most of the best dive sites around Vava'u are a long distance from any anchorage and too far or rough or unsuitable to take the dinghy. If you want to dive at the most unique sites or do drift diving, it's always a good idea to go with a reliable dive center with long-time local knowledge. The Beluga folks have been around many years, and we like the fact that they have trained Tongans as guides and Captains. They have now 2 modern, stable, aluminum catamaran dive boats that take you out for 2-tank dives. Special sites include Swallow's Cave, Split Rock, and Fo tula Rock, which has a natural tunnel carved through the middle of it. Beluga has also a number of yacht moorings in Neiafu Harbor for a reasonable fee. They're green color and marked. Contact them on Channel 9 VHF.

Whale watching with Sailing Safari's Whalesong boat. From about August to the end of October, Humpback Whales hang around the protected waters of Vava'u to have their calves or mate. The mothers and calves, and escort whales stay the season to fatten up the calves and protect them from sharks. Sometimes they just hang in one location resting and idling around, and they let themselves be approached by boats and even swimmers who maybe lucky enough to spend many minutes observing them with mask and snorkel. What a lifetime unique experience! Often the whales keep moving, but on those special days, they stay, and you can see calves cavorting, or mothers nurturing, or exciting behaviors like spy-hopping, breaching, and tail slapping. We went twice with Whalesong, and the second time were rewarded by seeing up to 7 animals at once, and a couple times, had long in-water sessions, and whales rising and spouting an arm's length from the boat! The crew and guides are very experienced and in tune with these animals. This season, SSCA members, Jim and Kelsey Yates and their sons (Lady Starlight) were the video/photo specialists on board, and they produced an incredible CD of the best footage of the season.

Bicycling around the island in several day-trips will reward you with great vistas and friendly encounters with local farmers (possible to trade). An easy walk to the summit of Mount Talau is also worth the half-day excursion (2hr each way). See the Tonga Visitors Bureau (TVB ch 16) for more info.

We won't write about all the 'numbered' Moorings anchorages as they are well documented. The TVB maintains moorings at many anchorages (more to be installed this season) and welcomes donations to help maintenance.

Ben & Lisa on s/v Waking Dream are starting a Zorbing center so if you never tried a Zorb ride before (like in Rotorua, NZ) give it a go, you will have the laugh of your life!

### **Ha'apai group**

The remoteness of the islands in this group was pretty appealing to us. Less crowded anchorages like in Vava'u during sailing season, you visit communities little touched by palangis (white-folks) and

modern society. One phone (if any) in the middle of the village! People work their land and do some fishing. Women raise kids, tend the house, and weave the famous pandanus mats.

Most (but not all) anchorages are slightly rocky even tho protected from NE to SE trades; they are open to the SW and W. It is important to get daily weather bulletins to know which anchorages are appropriate or which to go to if the winds turn. If you do not have e-mail aboard, Rag of the Air broadcasts wx at 8:20AM local, on 8173USB. There are a few well-protected areas and some W wind anchorages. Eyeball navigation between the islands is important as many isolated reefs and blind breakers are present ... easy to avoid if you see them! The cruising season this year was not kind to most of those who visited Ha'apai as there was frequently blusterly (30-35kts) winds and overcast conditions and COLD water, making for uncomfortable anchorages and limited opportunity for snorkeling and diving or beach combing. We waited til the month of Nov. when the wx settled and the migration toward NZ was over. The weather was balmy and settled a few days after our arrival in high winds gusting to 40kts. The rest of the month was idyllic moderate breezes and mostly, bright sunny days. Most of the anchorages visited, we felt would have been over crowded w/o enough swinging room for more than 1-3 boats. Another reason we were thankful to have avoided the crowds.

Nomuka iki: we arrived in 30 kts + and rough seas and were happy to find shelter from the worse in the reef protected anchorage (20d16'742 – 174d48'035). Our new 70 lb bugle anchor held us well in 15ft of good sand against 30kts and up to 38 kts gusts the next 48 hours! Very rewarding spearfishing all around the island and some wild fruits (papayas, oranges) to be found on this ex-prison island. We had a nice beach bbq with "Freefall" and "Jingle Bells 2", the last boats of the cruising season that we saw.

Mango Island: deep anchorage (50-60ft) on the North side of this small island with less than 50 inhabitants. Traded for lobsters & fruits. A short (20min) and easy walk to the summit of a small mountain gave us great photo opportunities.

Kelelesia Island: very scenic island (rugged limestone cliffs) and nice, albeit small (3-4 boats?) anchorage in 30ft of good sand with isolated coral heads. Good snorkeling right in the protected anchorage (open only to the West). There is an old gentleman with a crippled arm who stays here year round to tend the land and fish camp. He is very discreet, but we made sure to ask him if we could walk the island, and gave him some cake and cookies. This island's geology is so different from the rest, with reddish-layered cliffs.

Lalona Island: we anchored in 15ft of water, good sand at 20d20'449-174d31'344 between 2 breakers and the reef. Easy island to walk around. Small temporary fishing camp, otherwise uninhabited

Telekivavau Island: protected anchorage inside the tiny "lagoon" which could accommodate maybe 4 yachts at once. Anchor in 8 to 10 ft of sand with loose coral rubbles. The holding is not that great and we wouldn't chance it in more than 25 kts! The small, well-kept resort is now owned by an American living in Hawaii. The resort mgr, Steve, has his own trimaran in the lagoon. The 45 nm to the nearest airport is a great difficulty to overcome to get tourists to book!

O'ua Island: follow the well marked channel to the South anchorage inside the lagoon for easy access to the village and the calmest and one of the roomiest anchorage we found in the Haapai! The reefs all around may give you a comfortable night. Small typical village with only 1 phone and only one house with TV and VCR! But with the solar panels/battery bank/6 lights/radio they received last year from the EEC/Australia ... technology may arrive fast! Calm wx made it possible for us to sail approx 3 miles and anchor at Wickham reef for some good scuba on the south side of the long reef. (see Sailing Bird's Guide) We anchored at 20d04'017-174d45'575 in 15ft of good sand in the small bight. At high tide we dinghied across the center of the reef area and passed over the barrier to the deep side.

Later that day, we went to the Northern anchorage of O'ua mentioned in the guidebooks. Despite low light and clouds we had no trouble as the entrance is wide and the path straight and easy.

Uonukuhifo Island: postcard scenery looking from our anchorage behind the sand bar! Easy swim ashore and walk around. Drinking coconuts easy to grab to quench your thirst during your short walk around. Good snorkeling and spearfishing outside the pass on the barrier reef and the numerous small seamounts (watch for currents and do not let the dinghy too close to rollers – keep an eye for blind rollers). The deep drop-offs and walls on the outside corner of the pass made a great drift dive. Be sure to go having someone on the surface in the dinghy and a drift float on the divers for security.

Tofanga Island: another nice deserted motu to walk around. Another good shallow sandy bottom anchorage!

Luhangahu Island: good west wind anchorage with reefs protecting some from the North and some from the South. Anchor in 15ft of good sand. See Ken's Guide for description of entrance.

Uiha Island: we anchored off the dock in Uiha village in 15ft of good sand but with many coral heads around, so buoy your chain. Convenient to dinghy to that small dock. Check the very ancient cemeteries. Very nice people in the village.

Uoleva Island: anchor in 25-30ft, good sand ... watch out for some coral heads reaching abt only 5ft deep! Great spearfishing in the pass south of the island. Wild orange trees between coconut trees on the south side. We did not visit the resort(s) which are hidden away from the anchorage. As a reminder to the volcanic activity around the Tongan islands, we found many pumice stones that floated and drifted on to shore from some distant (we hope) eruption.

Lifuka Island: anchor in good sand (20ft) outside the harbour entrance, without blocking the access (do not forget your anchor light). Some space at the dock inside in bad wx ... you should check first with the harbor master. If you stop anywhere along Foa, Lifuka or Uoleva, you should visit the customs officer here in Pangai, to show him your clearance papers from Vava'u or Nukualofa. He is (rightly) quite upset to see (with his binoculars) boats anchored around that never check with him. It takes 3 minutes and cost nothing, why upset officials? We were quite surprised to see that Pangai, the main town in the Ha'apai was in fact very small and undeveloped. Do not expect any major provisioning or organized activities. Most tourists, in fact, leave the Ha'apai with almost as much money as they had with them arriving. Do not miss a visit to the Afa Eli Historical museum (opposite the customs). Virginia (a mature lady from the US lives here for over 20 years) created & maintains several museums on the island. You will enjoy talking with her! For local info, see Trevor (Australian here since 6 years) running the Mariner's Café. You CAN get bread here, the only bakery in the Haa'apai.

Foa & Nukunamo Islands: anchor in good sand in front of the uninhabited Nukunamo or just off the Sandy Beach Resort on the North tip of Foa. Good sand, 20-30 ft, watch out for coral heads. The resort is not too accommodating to cruisers (dinner 29 US\$) but we did enjoy meeting Herbert Mohr, who ran the Happy Ha'apai Divers. With 30 yrs of experience, he is a real professional! He runs a very good operation: he knows great dive sites, safety is well organized and the equipment is in excellent shape. We decided (even tho we are instructors ourselves with our own compressor and gear) to go with him to dive some top spots. We went for a day 2-tank dive to Ofolanga where we dove the Hot Springs Caves. Terrific dive with arches, caverns and great soft corals, nurse shark, big tunas and more. Even if you could find the site on your own, it is so relaxing and enjoyable to be guided thru the different places of interest by a qualified divemaster! After lunch, we went to Mo'unga'one island to dive the famous 'Ofolanga Coral Arch' (mentioned in Lonely planet). The Tongan boat driver dropped us right on the spot (really close to the surge on the coral shore!) and

picked us later. Great dive too with arches , interesting caves full of lobsters and a white tip reef shark ... and more beautiful black coral & soft corals. The reefs were very healthy and we were pleased to see types of fishes and corals that we only remember from the Red Sea and the Maldives. Next time, we will dive with him the Green Wall (Ha'ano), Lava lava (seamount) and the tunnel in Ha'ano. Last season, some cruisers anchored in Olofanga called him by phone (+676- 60 639 or [Herbert@kalianet.to](mailto:Herbert@kalianet.to) ) and he came to Olofanga to pick them up and do those 2 dives we did! But we went with him from Foa, leaving our boat well anchored there. Nothing replaces local knowledge, as we all very well know! NOTE: Happy Ha'apai Divers has just changed hands and Herbert may no longer be there, but he may still be in the area on his own.

Ha'ano Island: anchor in 45-50ft in sand patches between corals. Tight anchorage as described by Ken and Sailingbird. Interesting snorkeling on coral heads along the coast. Very friendly villagers, had nice conversations, got fruits and made many photos! Glad we brought little things like samples of shampoo, body lotion, fishing hooks, ... for the kids (as we always do when visiting villages) We were passed by the 2004 wave of yachts just before they made the home stretch to New Zealand. We decided to enjoy the warm climate of Tonga instead! We felt secure on a strong mooring in Neiafu harbor in case of cyclone. And the main advantage is that we were able to cruise anywhere in Vavau and still be less than 4 hours away from our mooring. We planned to do some boat projects here like painting the deck and haul out. But had a Big disappointment dealing with many local businesses! Empty promises to not say lies, lack of basic things and lack of seriousness made everything take 3x more time that it should! In retrospect, we should have ordered everything we needed from NZ, Australia or the US! Boats from NZ come in every other week and you can arrange it yourself with vavau Shipping. We kinda guessed this from hearing other cruisers comments but it was worse than expected. If you plan on doing any kind of boat projects here, prepare yourself as if you were staying in Palmerston or Suvarrow and you won't get crazy J Local unqualified labor is cheap (US\$15/day) but you do have to supervise every minute and not expect perfection! After waiting more than 5 weeks for more paint (and getting 5 gal of paint badly mixed by Tommy Farr – this without excuses, admission, credit or guarantee that the 3<sup>rd</sup> batch would be good!) and waiting more than a month to haul out at George's railway ... 3 months to just paint the front half of our deck ... we decided to cut our losses and leave early for Fiji! Probably will cruise the next year there and hopefully have more luck finishing our boat projects.

Vava'u is a great area to spend cyclone season cruising (water's warm, balmy weather, anchorages to ourselves) but as to any shore services, it has been very disappointing after Tahiti, Rarotonga and Samoa. If you plan to stay the cyclone season in Vava'u, we recommend a stop in American Samoa to provision to the max (even basics ) and get all your project needs shipped there by US mail duty-free, so you can be self-sufficient and just enjoy the good things about Tonga. Apparently Tongans never cared one way or another about visitors and the good thing is that they leave you alone ... so if you want solitude, you will enjoy Tonga. Bureaucracy is still very ineffectual and thus cruisers are well left alone ... but Sales tax was just introduced so it won't be long before modern world creeps in! Waited over 2 months to get express mail sent from England, 1 month to get a package airmail from California (no tracking possible) ... once mail arrives in Nukualofa it comes by boat to Vava'u. Several times we had some shortage on the island lasting several weeks (gasoline, diesel, flour, onions) quite surprising for a populous area.

March 2005

Luc & Jackie on s/v Sloepmouche