

THE KINGDOM OF POSSIBILITY

As the South Pacific's last surviving kingdom, with a largely intact traditional culture, Tonga has something truly unique to offer tourists.

Tonga is the closest Pacific Islands destination for New Zealand, and offers an alternative to Queensland in Australia and Fiji as a winter holiday destination for the southern hemisphere. Its peak whale-watching season, for which it is famous, also coincides with the northern hemisphere holiday season (June to October).

'Sailing, diving and fishing; getting close to the culture and the Monarchy. That's what makes us different.'

Historic sites such as the landing place of Captain Cook's 1773 visit to Tongatapu and the Ha'amonga 'a Maui trilithon (which dates back to 1200 AD), sit alongside outstanding natural features such as the Mapu 'a Vaea Blowholes, Eua's waterfalls and National Park, the low coral islands and sandy beaches of the Ha'apai Group, and the Vava'u Group's deep and clear waters (see box opposite).

VISITOR ARRIVALS GROWING

According to the Tonga Visitors Bureau, Tonga received 91,218 foreign visitors in 2008 and arrivals were up by an impressive 30% on the previous year. Just over half of all visitors came by air; the remainder coming mostly by cruise ship or yacht. In addition, many expat Tongans also return home each year—part of Tonga's important 'visiting friends and relations' (or 'VFR') market.

WELL-SERVICED BY AIR

'Whether they are visitors or Tongans, they still bring in foreign exchange,' notes Sione Finau Moala-Mafi, Acting Director of Tourism at the Tonga Visitors Bureau. In fact, Tongans' love of travel means the Kingdom is well-served by international airlines for a country of its size.

'We have eight or nine flights out of Auckland every week, with Air New Zealand and Pacific Blue,' notes Moala-Mafi. 'We also have two direct flights out of Sydney and are looking at more.' (For more on air services to Tonga, see page 18).

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

In spite of Tonga's many attractions, the development of its tourism sector is currently hampered by a lack of access to international booking systems, the consequence both of an underinvestment in marketing Tonga internationally, and a lack of quality four- and five-star branded resorts.

'There is a definite need for some larger resorts. Most of the big wholesalers don't sell Tonga currently because we don't have them,' notes Siosaia Moehau, President of the Tonga Tourist Association and owner of the Black Pearl Suites and Loumaile Lodge in Nuku'alofa. 'The potential is there, and it's huge.'

While several international developers have looked at Tonga, Warwick International Hotels is the first to announce plans for a premium resort (see box).

RE-BRANDING TONGA

Private sector group Tourism Tonga has recently been formed to provide advice to the Tongan Government's National Economic Development Council on tourism development priorities, and sees marketing as a key issue.

'The first thing we are doing is re-branding Tonga,' says Sue Gardiner, President of Tourism Tonga and General Manager of Forum Travel, the Pacific Forum Line's travel agency. 'We're looking at where we are, and what we have that is different to the other South Pacific islands; what Tonga represents. Personally, I think it has to be around the sailing, diving and fishing; getting close to the culture and the Monarchy. That's what makes us different.'

Marketing plans aimed at increasing tourism flows from North America have already been drawn up, with plans for Australia, New Zealand and Europe also under way. Tourism Tonga is also looking to secure representation in its major tourist markets and set up a 'Coconut Club' that will enable overseas wholesalers and travel agents to discover Tonga at first hand.

NEW INVESTMENT

While Tonga still awaits a major international-brand hotel, there has been investment in the country's room inventory. In July 2008, a new 78-room hotel opened at Fua'amotu International Airport and, in November 2008, the Loumaile Lodge and Little Italy became the first new hotels to open in Nuku'alofa since November 2006.

Meanwhile, land has been leased to Lomipeau Marina Resort Holdings to build a hotel, resort and marina just outside Nuku'alofa, while the owners of the successful Friends Café and Tourist Center are hoping to commence construction of a boutique business hotel as early as February 2010.

CRUISE SHIPS & CONFERENCES

According to Tourism Tonga, some 25 cruise ships were scheduled to visit Tonga during 2009. With the construction of a new cruise ship wharf and marina under way at Vuna Wharf, close to the centre of Nuku'alofa, not only will Tonga be able to accept more cruise passengers, but visitors will be able to stroll straight off their boat and onto Nuku'alofa's main shopping street.

With the International Dateline Hotel and a convention centre in Nuku'alofa, the island of Tongatapu is also well-placed to host conferences and reunions for up to 400 people.

A CLEAR ROADMAP

While there is work to be done before Tonga can achieve its potential in tourism, there now appears to be a clear roadmap ahead for the sector, and Tonga will also benefit from assistance from the Pacific Islands tourism organisation, south-pacific.travel.

'We are excited to work with Tonga to develop their tourism potential over the years ahead,' Chief Executive Tony Everitt told *Business Advantage*. ■

VAVU'A: TONGA'S PEARL

'Having visited Vava'u, it's not hard to see what the tourism potential is,' noted New Zealand's Minister of Foreign Affairs Murray McCully during a July 2009 visit to Tonga.

While all of Tonga's main islands have their attractions, the general consensus is that the country's best tourism asset is the picturesque Vava'u Group, which has its own international airport just 45 minutes from Tongatapu.

'The beautiful sheltered inlets of Vava'u provide some of the world's best sailing opportunities,' says Tony Everitt, Chief Executive Office of regional travel organisation, south-pacific.travel. The island group is a popular stopping place for super yachts and offers a wide range of water-based activities, including swimming with whales, which Everitt notes, is described by many as 'a life-changing experience.'

With the whale watching season only going from June to October, the challenge for Vava'u is to encourage visitors all year round.

Most of Vava'u's resorts are currently operated by small, local operators. However, its natural assets have persuaded Warwick International Hotels, which already has premium properties in Fiji and Vanuatu, to sign leases for two resort developments there.

Warwick plans to build a 100-room family resort on



VAVA'U'S DEEPER COASTAL WATERS MAKE IT IDEAL FOR SAILING AND OTHER WATER-BASED ACTIVITIES.

Taunga Island adjoined by sandbar to a smaller 30–40 room resort for couples on Ngau Island.

'Warwick's plans are at an early stage and it will probably be three to four years down the road before we start construction,' notes Tammie Tam, Warwick's Senior Vice President/Executive Director—Pacific.

Further information

www.vavau.to

Tonga's Gateway to the World

Tonga Airports Limited is a wholly owned public enterprise of the Government of Tonga and operates 6 airports throughout the Kingdom. We aim to provide a safe and efficient airport environment that is both welcoming to travellers and commercially successful for our airline and business partners.

We are continually upgrading our airports to offer improved customer facilities while ensuring they remain fully compliant with all international regulations. By doing so we aim to encourage increased passenger traffic and aircraft movements and thereby contribute to the growth and development of the nation.

We look forward to providing all travellers with services of an international standard, and greeting them in true Tongan style!

www.tongaairports.com

Tonga Airports Ltd
PO Box 876
Nuku'alofa
Kingdom of Tonga
Phone +676 21888
Fax +676 27942

Darin Cusack
CEO
dcusack@tongaairports.com

Viliami Ma'ake
Deputy CEO/Director of Operations
vmaake@tongaairports.com

