

: PIERRE CONSTANT

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IN THE WAKE

OF THE BOUNTY

> THE PACIFIC OCEAN IS HUGE. OVER THE YEARS I'VE VISITED THE EDGES, FROM THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS IN THE EAST PACIFIC TO PALAU IN MICRONESIA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE SOLOMON ISLANDS IN THE WEST, EVEN DOWN TO NEW ZEALAND. I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT THE CENTRAL PACIFIC AND POLYNESIAN ISLANDS, BUT FRENCH POLYNESIA DIDN'T RING MY BELL – THIS TYPICAL SOUTH PACIFIC POSTCARD WAS NOT GOING TO TRAP ME. WHEN I READ THAT TONGA IN

One very early morning of August 2003, the Royal Tongan Airlines flight out of Sydney landed in Tongatapu in the dark after a journey of four hours +. I caught the connection to Vava'u straight away, reaching Neiafu before sunrise. I spent the rest of the morning in bed, jet lagged and out of phase.

Vava'u The northern Vava'u group comprises about 50 hilly limestone islands, uplifted coral reefs separated by numerous waterways and channels. Good anchorages make it a favourite hang-out for yachties from New Zealand and across the Pacific during the winter months when the southeast trade winds are blowing.

WESTERN POLYNESIA WAS A BREEDING GROUND FOR SOUTHERN HUMPBACK WHALES DURING THE SOUTHERN WINTER, I FELT THIS WAS THE MAGIC PLUS THAT MADE ME WANT TO EXPERIENCE THESE AWESOME CREATURES. AND, GIVEN THE CHANCE, WHY NOT SWIM WITH THEM?

At Dolphin Pacific Diving, veteran dive operator Brian Sayer, a New Zealander with 20 years experience in these islands, is friendly and efficient. Next morning I'm on *Thilia*, a fishing trawler that can take 20 divers. Everyone stares at my thin, flashy, yellow and grey Lycra suit. Do they think I'm mad? Or are they just jealous? Taking an Instructor course, the kiwi group is all dressed up in 5mm wetsuits. The first dive is uneventful, except for the 23.9°C degrees water – extremely cool. No wonder the leopard shark isn't around!

Our second dive is at Moala's reef, a shallow lagoon in the middle of nowhere with coral bommies and a crown of coral. Again, the temperature is not a joke; from then on I decide to dive with a 5mm wetsuit. I thought that between the tropics water should always be in the 28.C degrees range. Big mistake! Also, with a maximum depth of 10882m, the Tongan trench is a gigantic scar extending north-south on the ocean floor, where the Pacific plate is in subduction under the Indo-Australian plate. Due east of the Tongan islands, this rift creates an upwelling of cold water. Now, the picture was clear. It also explained why southern humpback whales come to Tonga in the winter season to breed.

At Tungsika Island I enter a large bow-shaped swimthrough big enough for a train, with large golden seafans at the exit.

*Inset: Pierre at Pangai Motu Is. beach, Eua
Main: Diver Herbert over a colony of
Pachyseris sp. cabbage coral, Garden of
Eden, Tofua Is.
Whale surfacing belly up
On the flight from Ha'apai to Tongatapu*



Gorgonian, north Tofua
Vagabond butterflyfish *Chaetodon*
vagabundus, Kimmy's Reef (night dive)
in Va'vau.

Humpback whale breaching
Whitetip shark at Garden of Eden
Whitetip shark in cave, Kotu's outer reef
Dive boat Philia



UNLIKE THE TOTALLY BLACK NORTH PACIFIC HUMPBACK FOUND IN HAWAII, THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S SO-CALLED SOUTHERN HUMPBACK IS DORSALLY BLACK AND VENTRALLY WHITE, INCLUDING THE FLUKES AND PECTORAL FINS.

From there dive guide Kevin takes me into another cave, where we surface into an air bubble under the roof. Turning his light on, Kevin shows me seven banded sea snakes coiled into various holes of the limestone rock. This snakes' lair is a highlight! Painted lobsters hide in the cracks of the cave down below. At Bora Bora I witness two dogtooth tunas cruising at depth, followed by the hunt of a bluefin jack, a bigeye jack, a rainbow runner and a curtain of striped tunas zooming past.

The only colourful dive is at Fotula Island on a limestone pinnacle rising from the deep. The excitement here is to dive the leeward side down to 33m, where a swimthrough goes under the rock to the other side. An exquisite garden of soft corals is at the exit: purple, red, yellow and white, covering boulders like a plantation of broccoli. The invigorating current is quite challenging.

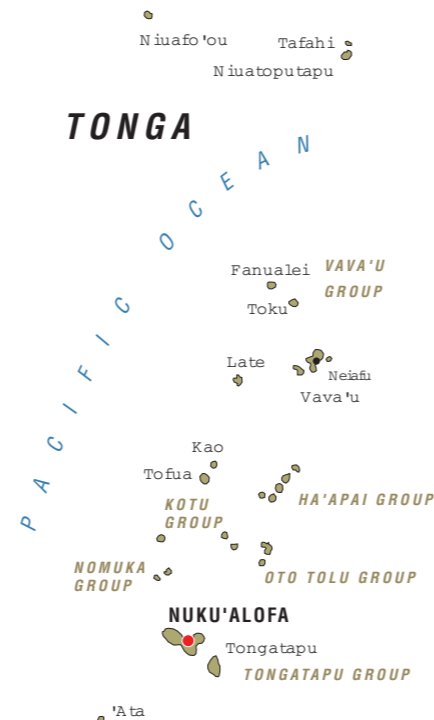
In a sheltered lagoon close to Neiafu harbour, is an old wreck. The *Clan Mac William* was an Irish cargo boat loaded with copra. Catching fire on Christmas eve 1927, it sank in 40 metres. The deck sits upright at 25m with a lot of marine growth on the hull, *spondylus* oysters and sponges, among others. The vis isn't that flash due to the absence of current. The best dive plan is to swim along deck from the stern to the bow. The *Clan Mac William* would be a very good night dive, but it's too deep.

Whale watching is a well advertised activity in Tonga, and Vava'u is the place for it. Operators offering these tours are officially licensed, use a proper guide with the know-how to approach the whales. Responsible conduct is necessary to respect the giants. Many offer 'swimming with whales', but this is no mean feat – humpbacks have to show curiosity to the boat, be willing to play, and must accept the presence of snorkellers in the water. At times the whale is simply not in the mood, or it's on the way to somewhere, males could be interacting with each other, a female may be courted by one or more males, or could be caring for a calf. Different situations require a right way of action.

One morning Kevin suggests a whale watching trip on the company's boat *Makaira*. The overcast sky soon delivers rain and wind, but we spot three or four males porpoising and 'tail lobbing'. When a whale shows its flukes, it's goodbye; it dives into the depths, surfacing again about 10 minutes later. A favourite display is to lift a pectoral fin out and slap the surface a few times, just to say 'hello'. We approach the whales 30m away, but conditions aren't right to go into the water.

Next morning it looks like a great day. The night before I'd met a young Dutch couple who'd swum with a whale and raved about their 'spiritual' experience. I was green with envy. "Give me the name of that operator!", I demanded. The Tongan whale swim guide was a girl with character. Prior to the first whale sighting, each of the nine guests had to guess a time the whale would appear and was given a number accordingly. "I can only take four of you with me in the water, this is the rule", she warned. I was number five and in the second group.

We had several sightings, but due to the whales' behaviour, the group sizes and numbering system it was difficult to get time



in the water. In fact I was the only one on board to miss out! But I get a great shot from above when the female surfaces by the boat, white belly up.

Ha'apai The 45 minute Twin Otter flight to Ha'apai is enchanting. From the air it's a never-ending chain of islands, coral reefs awash, lagoons and passes, all aligned west of the Tongan trench. Wasn't this the epitome of the South Pacific paradise?

The Ha'apai group has 56 islands, the three main ones being Lifuka, Foa and Haano. James Cook made his near-fatal landing here. Not so lucky, the British privateer *Port au Prince* was ransacked in 1806; only one survivor, William Mariner, lived to tell the tale. The only dive operator Happy Ha'apai Divers is at the Sandy Beach Resort on Foa Island. A 15km bike ride out of Pangai (capital of Lifuka), got me there one morning. Herbert Mohr, 43 years old, is a German with a pioneering spirit that travels to the far reaches of the planet in search of a better life. A diver for 25 years, he'd lived in Brazil, the Cape Verde Islands and Costa Rica, where he ran a dive operation. Herbert and his Brazilian wife Maysa arrived in Tonga in late 2002 and made Ha'apai their home.

Diving in Ha'apai is very different to Vava'u, better marine life plus colourful seascapes. The Green Wall of Ha'apai Island is a long dropoff plunging towards the depths of the Tongan Trench. It's covered with an algae known as 'sea grapes', plus red, yellow, purple and white soft corals. A hair-raising experience, which translates into a fast-flowing drift dive where you can flirt with grey reef sharks and schools of tunas.

The Arch of Mo'ungaune Island, is decorated with white pencil soft corals at 30 metres. On top of the wall, the eerie Moon Avenue is a submerged ledge with pinnacles and coral mushrooms next to the barren shore wall where the surf is pounding; the visibility is amazing. To add a dimension, the song of a humpback is filling the vast blue expanse.

Ofalanga Island to the north is a breathtaking atoll with a turquoise lagoon



fringed by a white sand beach. There, Herbert discovered a large cave at 25m into the coral reef. The sunbeams stream through the open roof, turning it into a giant cathedral. It's hard to resist the temptation to explore its hidden corners!

For novice divers, smooth and easy diving is accessible at reefs offshore from Foa Island, such as Haano Castle and the Channel, where dive instruction is possible.

Four to five hours west of Ha'apai and 75km as the crow flies, the volcanic islands of Tofua and Kao are uninhabited except for a few Tongan men tending the kava plantations. 'Kava Tonga' is the mildly sedating national drink made from the

kava plant roots. The diving there is superb and untouched, but the islands are hard to reach. There's no accommodation, so the only solution is to camp on the beach. I convince Herbert to join me on such a trip, which became a true adventure. We visit the head of the Tonga Visitor's Bureau (TVB). He leads us to believe we can go with the Ministry of Agriculture boat if we catch the interisland ferry to Ha'afeva Island first. "Everything is arranged", he grins reassuringly.

The *Pulupaki* leaves Ha'apai around midnight, reaching Ha'afeva two hours later. It's raining outside. Popping out of the night, a small wooden boat collects us. We disembark with 22 tanks, diving equipment, food, and water container. We're on the wharf in pitch darkness with all our gear; nobody meets us. We spend the rest of the night on a bench under a verandah, freezing in the damp wind. Early morning, I find out we've been abandoned. The boat that was to pick us up has disappeared to nearby Kotu. "We do not have any space for you", snaps a voice over the phone.

Hiring a local boat we headed to Kotu, where it's easier to arrange a crossing to Tofua. After another night in a local house, we reach an agreement with Toa, owner of the *Taiseni*. Ofa will come with us as interpreter. The rough crossing to Tofua takes two and a half hours. The outboard chokes and stops a few times. We could be adrift at any time. But there's a spare motor. Herbert and I are relieved to reach our destination! Heading to the sheltered waters of the west coast, our dive exploration starts straight away. At the Garden of Eden the seabed is covered by white mushroom-like *Sarcophyton* soft corals. A school of blue and gold snappers, a jobfish and a curious whitetip shark come in close to visit. The dropoff is 100 metres off shore, the vis is excellent.

At the Canyons on the west coast the underwater terrain is a mix of lava flows and sandy channels terminating at depth in canyons. A yellowfin tuna, a few tame dogtooth tunas pass by, followed by a shy group of Napoleon wrasse, barracudas and a hawksbill turtle. In a deep gully at 30m, I bump into a very impressive two-metre long giant jack eye-to-eye. I'd never seen such a monster! A vast desert of salt

and pepper sand stretches into the blue.

Late afternoon we pull the boat up onto a beach on Tofua's east coast. "The ocean can be wild at night", says Ofa with a grin. Camp is set above the high water mark at the base of the basalt cliff crested with pandanus plants and casuarina trees. I gather some dry wood before dark; soon our little fire crackles to life. The stars come out, the light breeze and white bar of foam rolling onto the reef seem timeless.

The next day starts early for a dive on the north coast of Tofua. The soft tuff formation of the south and west coasts gives way to black lava flows on the east and north coasts. Ridges and sandy channels are still found underwater. A nice archway decorated with gorgonians hosts painted lobsters, dogtooth tunas and Napoleon wrasses. Lots of bread loaf sea cucumbers crawl on the volcanic sand.

Crossing to Kao Island takes 20 minutes on a flat sea. The highest island in Tonga, Kao volcano reaches 1030m. Covered by thick jungle, it's always crowned by clouds reminiscent of the rings of Saturn. The south coast dropoff is barely 50m out and

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A place of historical significance in many ways, Tonga is the only kingdom left in the South Pacific. The king Taufa' ahau Tupou IV was once famous for its huge size and heavy weight (201kg in 1976). But word has it that he lost his girth by riding a bicycle around his palace! He chose to be on a diet and fitness program to set an example for the Tongan people – over 60% of the population is mostly obese, but happy that way! Sailing across the Pacific in their journeys of discovery, European navigators left trace of their passage in Tonga. From the first Dutch navigators in 1616, Abel Tasman in 1643, to the English explorers: Captain Samuel Wallis (1767), James Cook (1773), whose ambition was limitless, came very close to ending up in the cannibals' pot with his comrades. Ironically in 1777, on his third Pacific voyage Cook had labeled the Tongan islands the 'Friendly Islands', following a memorable feast to which he and his crew had been invited in Lifuka, an island of the Ha'apai group. Some years later Cook found out the feast was actually part of a plot to attack his men and seize the valuables

of the ship. Fortunately for him, this didn't occur, because two groups of locals didn't agree on the plan of assault. Spaniard Don Francisco Antonio Mourelle discovered Vava'u, the northern part of Tonga in 1781. French explorer Jean de la Perouse passed briefly through Tonga (1787) after surviving an infamous attack in Samoa. He was followed by another Frenchman Antoine d'Entrecasteaux, who was in search of La Perouse (1793) in Tongatapu. The latter had disappeared and in fact shipwrecked off Vanikolo Island in the Solomons Is. Last but not least, the famous mutiny of the 'Bounty' occurred in Ha'apai in 1789. Captain Bligh and 18 loyalists landed on the island of Tofua after Fletcher Christian had seized the ship. Savage islanders killed one of the men, forcing Bligh to escape in an open boat, for a 6500km journey to Timor in Indonesia, which remains one of the greatest feats in the history of survival at sea. I vividly remembered the action film *Bounty*, with Mel Gibson starring as mutineer Fletcher Christian. Later, I realized that the austere reality of the island was far from the romantic approach depicted in the movie!

Aboard the ferryboat *Pulupaki* at midnight, with the dive tanks and gear. Featherstar and blue starfish



Is Tropical sea life in the Australia's North adequately protected from the oil and gas boom?



Australia's tropical seas are in the midst of a massive oil and gas boom. Big companies like INPEX, Santos and GDF Suez are planning multi-billion dollar petroleum projects and each year vast new petroleum exploration areas are released in the Timor and Arafura seas. Even the Gulf of Carpentaria is being pegged out for oil and gas development.

While the boom gathers pace, the risks to the healthy marine environment on which our fish stocks and sea life depend are downplayed and ignored.

Offshore oil and gas exploration is inherently risky. The 2009 Montara disaster which spewed million of litres of oil into the Timor Sea after a major blowout is a case in point. Ocean currents took the Montara oil spill away from Australia's shores, which meant that we didn't experience the impact directly, but next time our ocean wildlife may not be so lucky.

The largest oil spill in history – the BP catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico, USA, wreaked havoc on local communities, marine life, tourism and the commercial fishing industry. Such an event would be truly devastating if it were to occur in Australia's waters.

With this threat in mind, marine conservationists have been asking if Australia has adequate buffer zones from oil and gas development to protect the critical feeding and breeding areas for our endangered sea turtles, vulnerable dugong, rare dolphins and valuable fish stocks? The answer, Sport Diving readers, is 'no'.

The Federal Environment Minister, Tony Burke, recently released draft plans for a network of marine reserve across the Top End and Gulf, which are meant to protect our marine biodiversity. However the Australian Marine Conservation Society believes the proposal is totally inadequate. It does not deliver the large, highly protected sanctuaries which scientists tell us are needed to conserve marine life for the long term.

Under the Australian Government's plan, only 3% of waters in the Top End and Gulf will be fully protected in sanctuaries or Marine National Parks.

Everybody wants a healthy marine environment, but government appears to have put the interests of the oil and gas industry ahead of our threatened sea life. The proposed reserves in the Arafura and Timor sea are zoned 'multiple-use' which means they will leave dolphins, dugong, turtles and tropical fish vulnerable to oil and gas drilling, sea bed mining and certain kinds of commercial fishing.



The West Atlas Rig spewed millions of litres of oil from the Montara Basin into the Timor Sea following a massive blowout in 2009. Photo courtesy TWS collection.

In fact, the marine reserves proposed for the Top End and Gulf will leave Northern waters the least protected around Australia, meaning the north will have less opportunity to reap the benefits of marine reserves to tourism, regional employment, ecosystem resilience and security for fish stocks.

To protect our tropical sea life, Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke must dramatically increase the number and size of marine sanctuaries in the Arafura and Timor Seas, particularly in places like, Fog Bay, the Coburg Pinnacles, the Arafura Canyons, Limmen Bight and the Central Gulf/Cape York.

For more information visit www.saveourtropicalsealife.org.au

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