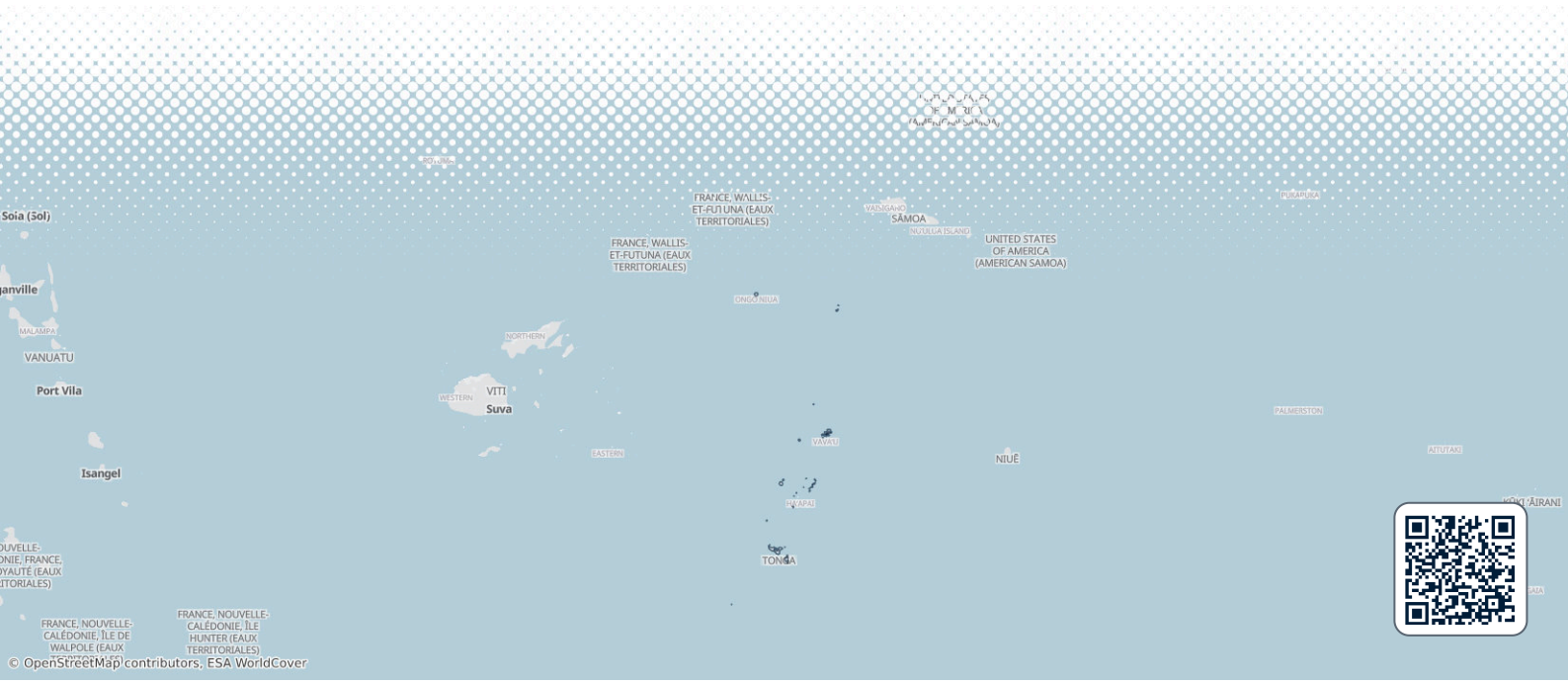


Tonga

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



Overview

Tonga is a Polynesian kingdom of 171 islands, and only 45 are inhabited. The islands form five groups: Tongatapu, Ha‘apai, Vava‘u, ‘Eua and the Niuas. About 70% of people live on Tongatapu, where the capital Nuku‘alofa is. Tonga was never colonised. It was a British protectorate from 1900 to 1970 and it has its own monarchy.

Tonga suits travellers who want quiet islands, beaches and nature, not nightlife. The best-known activity is swimming with humpback whales, mainly around Vava‘u, in a season that runs roughly from July to October. On Tongatapu you can see the ancient Ha‘amonga Trilithon, the Hufangalupe Natural Land Bridge and the Mapu‘a ‘a Vaea blowholes. Plan around **Sunday**, when most things close.

Whale swimming is regulated. Use only licensed operators. The season is roughly July to October, mainly in Vava‘u and Ha‘apai. Groups are small, and rules set a minimum distance from the whales. Book ahead, and check the current rules with your operator.

Money & payments

The currency is the pa‘anga (TOP).

Currency

CURRENCY	1 TOP	1 TOP
TOP	**0.3761 EUR**	**0.4145 USD**
	1 EUR = 2.659 TOP	1 USD = 2.412 TOP

Cash preferred

Cash is very useful. Markets, guesthouses, local transport and many tour operators take cash only. Cards work at larger hotels and some restaurants, mostly in Nuku‘alofa and Neiafu. Card payments can carry extra fees.

ATMs are limited to the main towns: Nuku‘alofa, Neiafu and Pangai. There are none on the smaller islands. Bring enough cash before you go to the outer islands.

Tipping

Tipping is not customary and is not expected from tourists. You can give a tip for very good service, but nobody will ask for it.

At traditional dance shows, guests often give small banknotes to the performers. This is voluntary.

Restaurant	Not customary
Hotel	Not customary
Taxi	Not customary

Electricity

Tonga uses Type I plugs, the same as Australia and New Zealand. Travellers from Europe, the UK and the US usually need an adapter.

ELECTRICITY



Type I

240 V · 50 Hz

Language

Tongan and English are the official languages. Visitors use English in hotels and tourism, but a few Tongan words are appreciated in villages.

Tongan uses the glottal stop (ʻ) and long vowels (ā, ē, ī, ō, ū). The marks help with pronunciation.

Useful phrases

Hello	Mālō e lelei
Thank you	Mālō ʻaupito
Yes	ʻIo
No	ʻIkai
Sorry	Fakamolemole

Safety & emergencies

Crime is low. Theft from rooms and house break-ins do happen, so lock doors and windows and do not leave items unattended. Avoid isolated areas and beaches alone at night. Women in particular should avoid travelling alone at night.

- **Cyclones:** the cyclone season runs from November to April.
- **Tsunami and earthquakes:** these are possible. If you feel strong shaking near the coast, move to high ground at once. Do not wait for a warning. In January 2022 an eruption of the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Haʻapai volcano caused a tsunami, ashfall and a loss of communications.
- **Sea hazards:** reefs are sharp, and currents can be strong. Ask locals or your hotel before you swim.
- **Roads:** driving at night is hazardous.
- **Local laws:** sex between men is a crime under Tongan law. Penalties for drug offences are severe.

Check your government's travel advice before you go.

Emergency numbers

GENERAL EMERGENCY	POLICE	AMBULANCE	FIRE BRIGADE
911	922	933	999

Health

- **Water:** advice differs on tap water. Ask your accommodation whether the water is safe, and use bottled or filtered water when in doubt.
- **Mosquitoes:** dengue, chikungunya and Zika occur. Use repellent, especially at dawn and dusk.
- **Fish:** eating large reef fish can cause ciguatera poisoning. Ask locals which fish are safe.
- **Medical care:** facilities are limited and ambulance services can be unreliable outside the main towns. Serious cases may need evacuation to another country, so buy travel insurance with medical evacuation.
- **Vaccines:** no vaccines are required for entry according to the US government. Ask your doctor or travel clinic which are recommended for you.

Visas & entry

Tonga is a sovereign country. It has its own immigration service and its own entry rules.

- **Visa on arrival:** many nationalities get a free visa on arrival, usually for up to 30 days. Ask Tonga Immigration about extensions.
- **Other nationalities:** you may need to apply for a visa before you travel.
- **Passport:** it should be valid for at least six months.
- **Onward ticket:** airlines may ask for an onward or return ticket.

> Visa and entry requirements change frequently. Verify current requirements with the official immigration authority or your country's embassy before travel.

Etiquette

- **Dress modestly in public.** Cover your shoulders and knees, especially in villages. Avoid all-black clothes, which are worn for mourning.
- **Swimwear:** wear swimwear only at the beach or at your resort. Cover up when you leave the beach.
- **Sunday:** it is a day of worship and rest. Keep public activity quiet outside resorts.
- **Church:** if you attend a service, dress formally with shoulders and knees covered. Do not wear a hat.
- **Bargaining:** it is not customary at markets.
- **Kava:** it is a social drink. If you are offered some, accept it politely.
- **Time:** things run slowly. Allow extra time for buses and boats.

Holidays & opening hours

Sunday matters more than any public holiday. Under Tongan law, most shops and services close on Sundays, including many petrol stations. Hotels and restaurants that serve tourists are usually open. Shop for essentials on Saturday. Flights do not normally operate on Sundays.

On public holidays, expect government offices, banks and many shops to close.

Public holidays

Jan 1	New Year's Day
Jun 4	Emancipation Day
Jul 4	Birthday of the reigning Sovereign of Tonga
Sep 17	Birthday of the Heir to the Crown of Tonga
Nov 4	Constitution Day
Dec 4	Anniversary of the Coronation of H.M. King George Tubou I
Dec 25	Christmas Day
movable — Mar/Apr	Easter Monday
movable — Mar/Apr	Good Friday

Getting around

- **By air:** Lulutai Airlines connects Tongatapu with Vava'u, Ha'apai, 'Eua and the Niuas. Flights are the fastest way between island groups. Weather can cancel flights, so reconfirm before you travel. Lulutai Airlines
- **By boat:** inter-island boats also run. Schedules are irregular, so check locally and keep your plans flexible.
- **By bus:** local buses have no published timetables and run mostly on weekdays until late afternoon.
- **By taxi:** use registered taxis. Your hotel can arrange one.
- **By car or scooter:** rental cars are available on Tongatapu, Lifuka in Ha'apai, 'Eua and Vava'u. See the driving section.

Nuku'alofa is the main hub. Vava'u and Pangai are reached by air or boat.

Driving

Traffic drives on the **left**.

- **Licence:** most foreign licences are accepted for visitors for a limited time, but rules differ by country. Confirm with your rental company before you drive. A temporary visitor licence may be available from the police.
- **Traffic:** there are no traffic lights. Give way at roundabouts.
- **Roads:** main roads are generally better than side roads. Side roads can be gravel or dirt.
- **Night driving:** it is hazardous, so avoid it if you can.
- **Alcohol:** the legal limit is very low. Do not drink and drive.
- **Motorcycles and scooters:** helmets are mandatory.
- **Fuel:** stations are in the main towns and are usually attended.
- **Rental:** check the car's tyres and condition before you leave.

Food & drink

Traditional Tongan food includes ‘ota‘ika, which is marinated raw fish, and lū, which is meat wrapped in taro leaves. Tongan feasts are a good way to try local dishes. Hotels and tour companies can arrange them.

Kava is the traditional social drink. It is mildly psychoactive.

What to eat & drink

DRINKS

Kava
A traditional, mildly psychoactive drink shared at social gatherings.

SIGNATURE DISHES

‘Ota‘ika
Marinated raw fish.

Lū · lū
Meat wrapped in taro leaves.

Tonga – Plan Your Trip
Turn the places from this guide into a real itinerary, with smart routing, time estimates, and everything you need for a perfect trip.
3M+ downloads · 4.6 stars · 15 years of trip planning
App Store · Google Play
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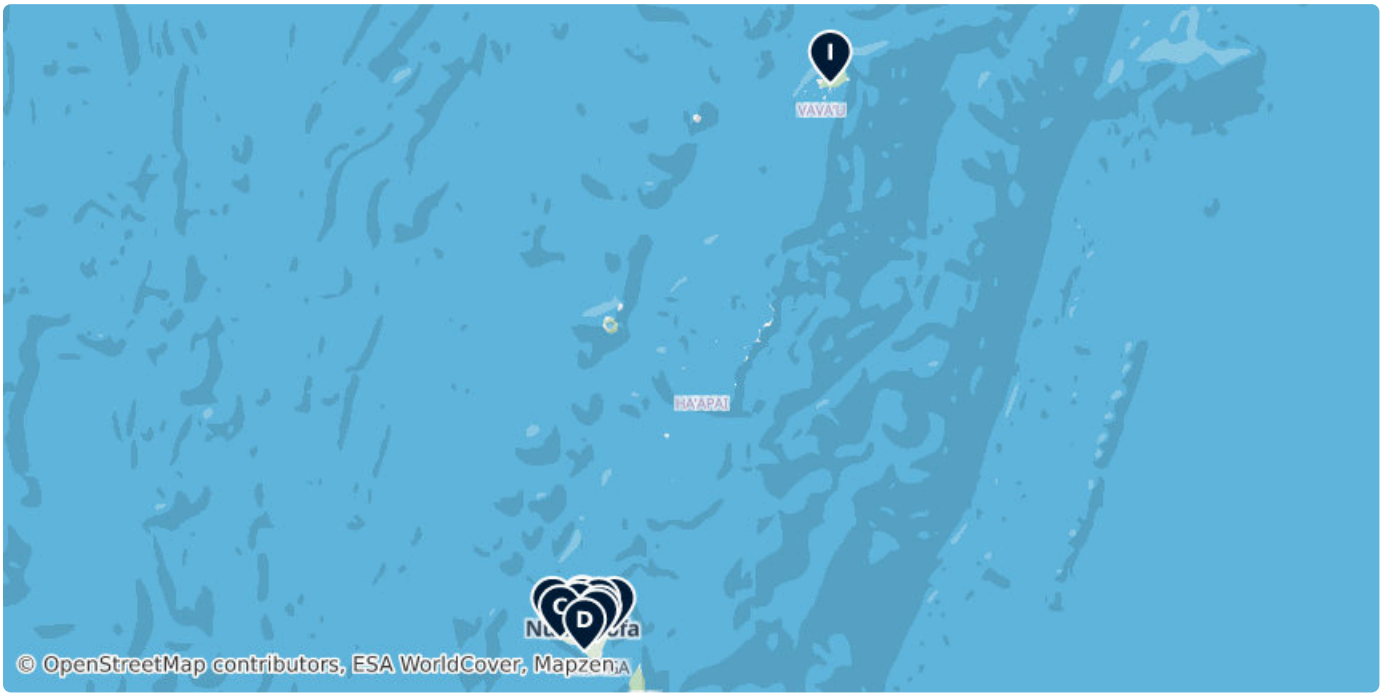
Where to explore

- Tongatapu Province is the main island group. It has the capital Nuku‘alofa, the international airport and most sights.
- Vava‘u in the north is the centre for whale swimming and boating. The main town is Neiafu.
- Ha‘apai is an island group in the middle of the country. Its main town is Pangai.
- ‘Eua National Park is the highest island in Tonga. It has a national park with rainforest walks.
- The Niuas are remote islands in the far north. Niuatoputapu is one of them. Flights there are infrequent.

Tonga Essentials

Tonga’s landscape is defined by its deep royal history and unique geological features. This selection explores the 13th-century Ha‘amonga Trilithon megalith and the ancient Tu‘i Tonga burial tombs. Cultural landmarks include the Victorian-style Royal Palace and the bustling Talamahu Market. Natural highlights range from the Mapu 'a Vaea blowholes, which shoot seawater 30 meters high, to the unusual sight of pigs foraging for shellfish in the reefs at low tide.





A Ha‘amonga Trilithon

A 13th-century stone megalith composed of three coral limestone slabs. Often referred to as the Stonehenge of the Pacific, it was likely used as a seasonal calendar to mark the solstices.

Hala Taufa'ahau, Kolonga, Tonga (-21.13669, -175.04802)



B Royal Palace

The Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Tonga is located in the northwest of the capital, Nuku‘alofa, close to the Pacific Ocean.

Tonga (-21.13137, -175.20059)

C Pupu'a puhi

Also known as the Mapu 'a Vaea blowholes, these limestone vents stretch for five kilometers along the coast. Waves force seawater through the holes, creating plumes up to 30 meters high.

Hala Vaea, Houma, Tonga (-21.17412, -175.30847)



D Hufangalupe Natural Land Bridge

A massive natural arch formed by the collapse of a sea cave roof. It provides a vantage point over the rugged southern coastline and the Pacific Ocean.

Hala Hufangalupe, Vainī, Tonga (-21.23253, -175.19040)

E Basilica of St. Anthony of Padua

A prominent Catholic church in Nuku'alofa known for its distinctive circular architectural design and intricate stained glass windows.

Tonga (-21.13683, -175.20184)

F Maketi Talamahu

The central hub for fresh produce and traditional Tongan handicrafts. The market offers local staples like taro and yams alongside hand-woven mats and wood carvings.

(-21.15731, -175.22040)

G Terraced Tombs

Ancient stone burial mounds, known as Langi, belonging to the Tu'i Tonga dynasty. These terraced structures are constructed from massive, precisely cut coral limestone blocks.

(-21.17488, -175.11642)

H Tsunami Rock

A 1,600-ton coral boulder located inland. Scientific evidence suggests this massive rock was deposited by a prehistoric tsunami thousands of years ago.

(-21.13609, -175.34508)

I Mt. Talau Lookout

A flat-topped mountain on Vava'u offering panoramic views of Neiafu, the Port of Refuge, and the surrounding island group.

(-18.64785, -173.99930)

J Captain Cook's Landing Place

The historic site where Captain James Cook landed in 1777 during his third voyage. A monument marks the location near the village of Holonga.

(-21.19195, -175.13001)

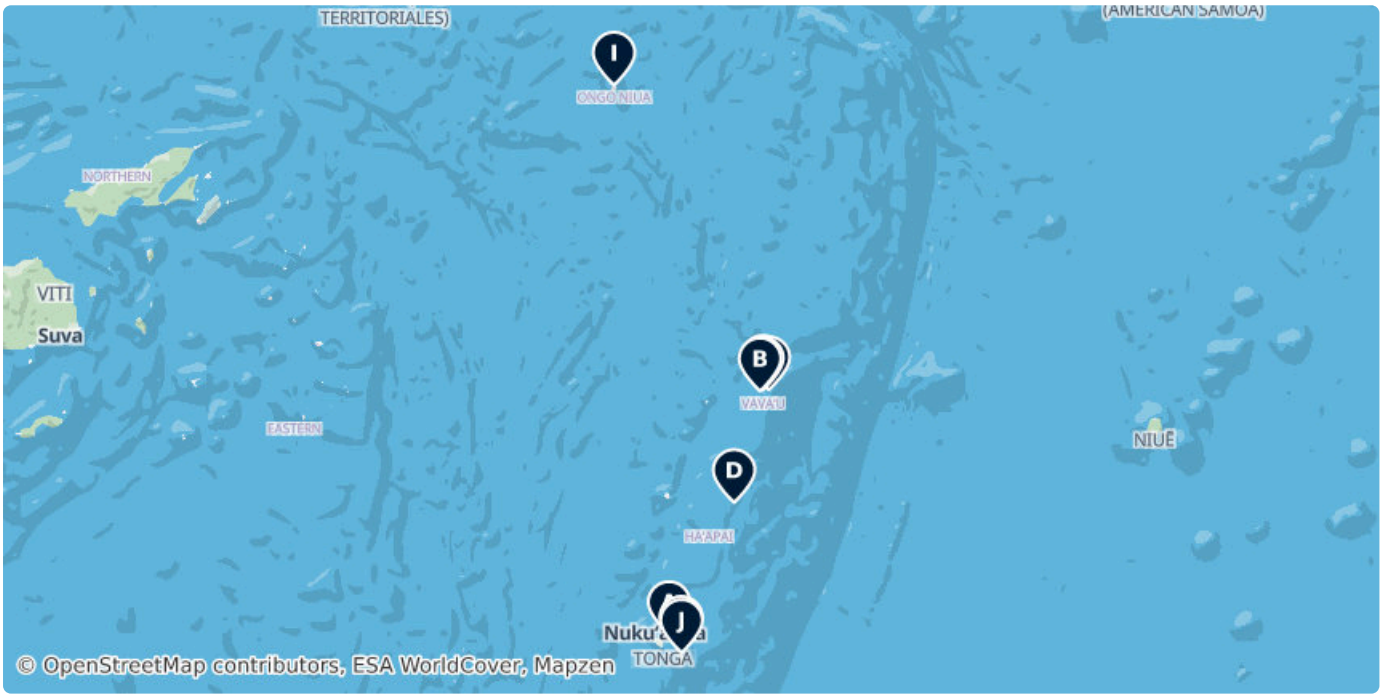
K Fishing pigs (on low tide)

A unique local phenomenon where feral pigs forage for crabs and shellfish in the shallow coastal reefs during low tide.

(-21.13882, -175.12165)

Tonga's Hidden Gems

Explore Tonga's lesser-known landmarks, from the 13th-century Ha‘amonga ‘a Maui trilithon to the volcanic ruins of Angaha. This collection features secluded sea caves like Mariners and Swallows, the defensive earthworks of Veleta Fortress, and the unique ecosystems of the Ngofe wetlands. These sites span the islands of Tongatapu, Vava'u, 'Eua, and the remote Niuas, showcasing the archipelago’s diverse archaeological history and natural geological formations.



A Ha‘amonga Trilithon

13th-century megalithic structure built from three coral limestone slabs. Often called the Stonehenge of the Pacific, it likely served as a royal gateway or seasonal calendar.

Tonga (-21.13659, -175.04808)

B Mariners Cave

Submerged sea cave in Vava'u accessible only by diving through an underwater tunnel. The cave is known for the unique pressure-induced mist that forms inside with the ocean swell.

(-18.69085, -174.07465)

C Swallows Cave

Large limestone sea cave on Kapa Island accessible by boat. It features deep turquoise waters, nesting swallows, and ancient rock art on the walls.

(-18.68408, -174.04713)

D Veleta Fortress

Historical Tongan fortification on Lifuka Island featuring defensive earthworks and mounds used during regional conflicts in the early 19th century.

(-19.81600, -174.35182)

E Grand Cathedral cave and submarine cavern

Massive limestone cavern on 'Eua island characterized by high ceilings and sunlight filtering through openings. It is a key site for divers exploring connected submarine tunnels.

(-21.28572, -174.91396)

F Veimumuni Cave

Freshwater pool located inside a cave on Vava'u. It holds significance in Tongan folklore and was traditionally used as a bathing spot for royalty.

(-18.67797, -173.97942)

G Houma Tahi Arch

Natural limestone bridge and arch formation located along the rugged coastline of 'Eua island, shaped by continuous wave erosion.

(-21.28702, -174.92396)

H Ngofe

Coastal wetland and lake area on Vava'u, providing a habitat for native bird species and featuring a unique brackish water ecosystem.

(-18.66306, -174.04344)

I Former site of Angaha village

Ruins of a settlement on Niuafo'ou island that was completely abandoned following a major volcanic eruption in 1946.

(-15.56875, -175.63651)

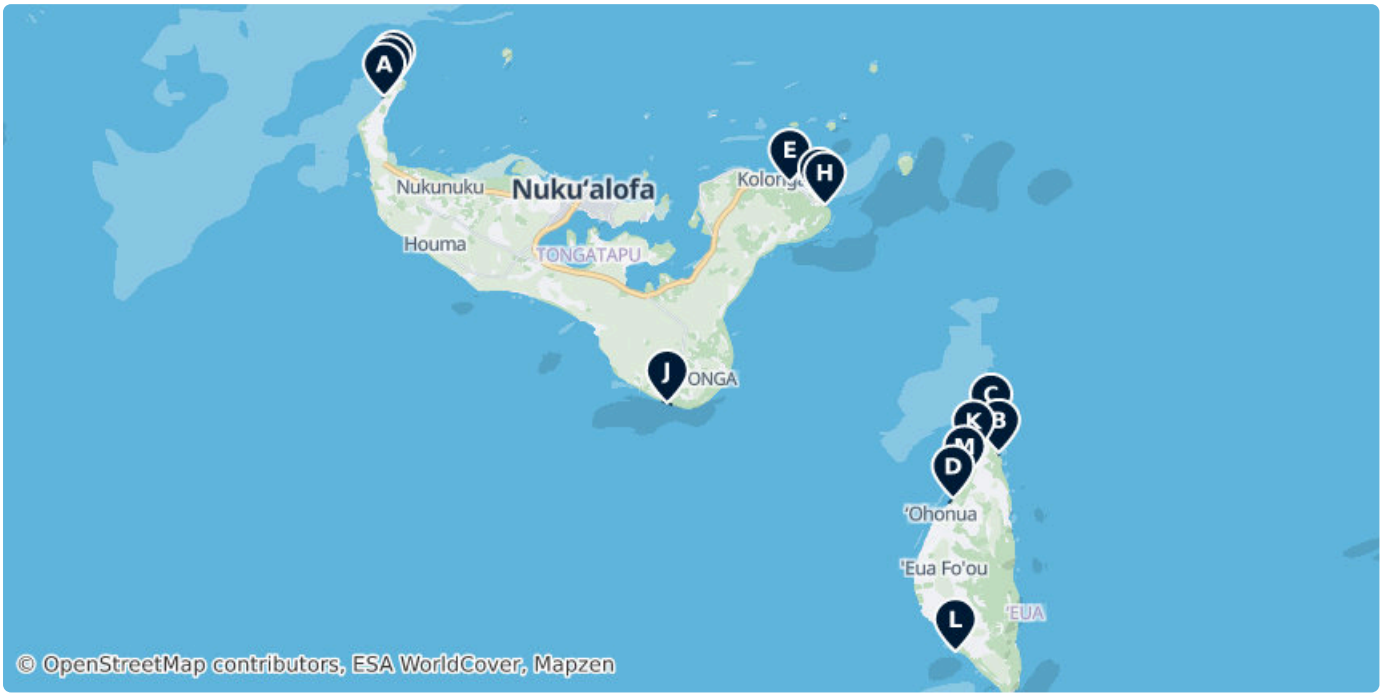
J Mermaid cave

Secluded coastal cave on 'Eua island, accessible via a forest trail and featuring white sand and clear pools inside the limestone structure.

(-21.31700, -174.91412)

Beautiful Beaches

Tonga’s coastline ranges from the calm, reef-protected lagoons of Tongatapu to the dramatic limestone cliffs of 'Eua. This collection features western peninsula spots like Kanokupolu, known for its surf breaks and sunset views, and remote southern stretches like Ha'aluma. Many of these beaches, such as Fangatave, are tucked beneath high ridges or located near the capital, Nuku'alofa, providing a mix of accessible sandy shores and secluded coastal caves.



A Matatahi ko Kanokupolu

Located on the western tip of Tongatapu, this beach is known for its proximity to surfing reefs and clear sunset views.

Tonga (-21.07377, -175.33817)

B Fangatave Beach

A secluded beach on 'Eua island accessible via a forest hike. It is characterized by dramatic limestone cliffs and nearby sea caves.

Tonga (-21.30146, -174.91655)

C Houma Tahi Beach

Sandy shoreline on the southern coast of Tongatapu, situated near the Mapu 'a Vaea blowholes.

(-21.28510, -174.92179)

D Ufilae Beach

A remote sandy cove located on the rugged southern coast of 'Eua island.

Tonga (-21.33084, -174.94788)

E Utukakai

Coastal area on the northern shore of Tongatapu, located near the capital of Nuku'alofa.

Tonga (-21.12869, -175.05988)

F Matatahi ko Namo'olie

Sandy beach on the western peninsula of Tongatapu, part of a continuous stretch of coastal reefs.

Tonga (-21.06933, -175.33416)

G Matatahi ko Fakatafa

Coastal stretch located on the westernmost point of Tongatapu island.

Tonga (-21.06594, -175.33152)

H Matatahi Felekie

Northern coast beach on Tongatapu island, situated within the Kolomotu'a district.

Tonga (-21.14320, -175.03589)

I Matatahi Tuitui 'a Tamale

Sandy coastal spot on the northern shore of Tongatapu.

Tonga (-21.14071, -175.03955)

J Matatahi Fanga ko Fefe ho Loto

Southeastern beach on Tongatapu, located near Fua'amotu.

Tonga (-21.26984, -175.14411)

K Kapa Beach

Sandy beach area located on the eastern side of 'Eua island.

(-21.30204, -174.93393)

L Ha'aluma Beach

The southernmost beach on 'Eua island, featuring a wide sandy shore near the volcanic rock pillars.

(-21.42866, -174.94631)

M Ha Unu Beach

Coastal area on the southern part of 'Eua island.

(-21.31825, -174.94006)

DATA SOURCES

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