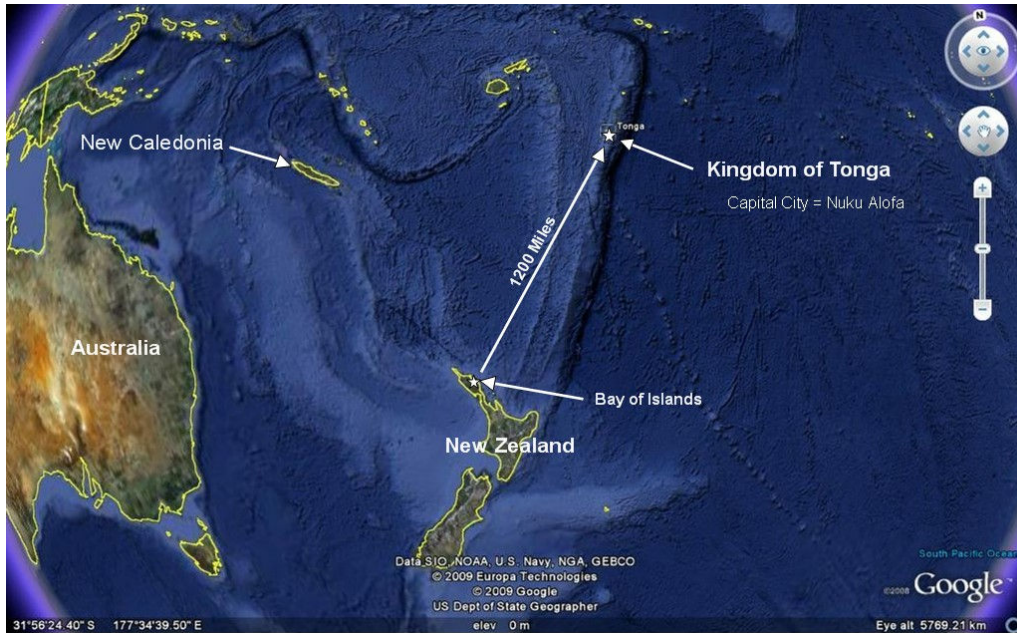


Day 54–Nuku’ Alofa, Tonga–Cook’s Landing–Stone Arch–Blow Hole–19 Nov. 09:

The day started with a calm sea, partly cloudy and temperature in the mid 70s. We were approaching the harbor at Nuku’Alofa, in the island kingdom of Tonga. We had left the Bay of Islands in New Zealand two days ago and had reached the end of the 1200 mile journey to Tonga. The location of Tonga on the globe is shown on the modified Google map below.



The harbor facilities at Nuku Alofa are small by world standards as shown in the picture on the right.



An Australian navy helicopter ship, shown on the left was tied up adjacent to where the Amsterdam was to dock. The ship and crew had provided assistance during the tsunami event last September. The Amsterdam Tour Guide, Barbara, later told us that the Captain of the ship was knighted by the King of Tonga because of the assistance

provided by his ship.

The picture below shows the view of Nuku Alofa from the Amsterdam. The whole island of Tonga is flat with no visible sign of hills or mountains. A Tongan legend recounts how one of the Gods stamped on the island with his foot and made it flat. Later, during our tour, we were surprised that even though Tonga is a low flat island, we saw no obvious damage from the tsunami that swept through the South Pacific in September and caused so much trauma in Samoa, less than 600 miles away.



By 8am the Amsterdam was safely docked and we were free to go into the city of Nuku Alofa, the capital of Tonga. We had a tour of Tonga scheduled with Teta Tours as arranged by Karen (kweenkaren) through the Cruise Critic message board. We went down to the Explorer's Lounge and met the rest of our tour group. Then we went out on to the pier looking for our guide and tour bus. There was an active row of souvenir shops already set up on the pier and in a few moments time Barbara had found a paua shell necklace with just the right "Island" look. We took this picture on the right showing the artisan who made the necklace. He is giving the classical "shaka" sign of Polynesia with his left hand. It probably signifies he has made his first sale of the day and prospects looked good.



We found our bus for the tour as shown on the right. We all were given a fragrant flower lei as we filed on board the bus. As soon as everyone was settled the bus got underway.



Our guide, Ofa, introduced himself and began giving us a running commentary as the bus made its way through the streets of Nuku Alofa. The view from our seat is shown on the right. Ofa spoke good English but was handicapped by the lack of a good PA system on the bus. He had to keep moving up and down the aisle of the bus as he spoke so that everyone got the gist of what he was talking about. Ofa was wearing the traditional Tongan garb of a black under cloak, undershirt with a print and a white long sleeved white dress shirt.



Our tour was going to take us to the highlights of Tonga and we would spend most of the day outside of the city of Nuku Alofa. A map of the island of Tonga and the highlights we saw today are shown below.



Tonga is currently in the last stages of an ancient monarchy. Our guide, Ofa, told us that everything is in place to install a Parliamentary form of government with democratically elected representatives in November 2010. A few months ago there had been violent riots in the streets of Nuku Alofa when it appeared the King was going too slowly in the move toward democracy. Now everything appeared to be calm and the course was set to move the King aside in favor of a Parliament and Prime Minister.

We stopped at the King's Palace in Nuku Alofa. The grounds were enclosed in a high fence but we were able to get a photo of the large wooden building, as shown on the right. Barbara thought this would be a good place to document her library card's visit to Tonga in the picture shown below.



As we drove about the city and out into the countryside we took some pictures of typical houses and fields around Nuku Alofa. We saw a range of buildings from affluent neighborhoods down to South Pacific shabby. The farm land appeared to be well cared for and productive. A few of the pictures are shown below.



Many of the government buildings were new and the old ones appeared to be well maintained. An example of a government project was the Tonga National Center shown as Star number 2 in the map of Tonga above. We stopped there and after browsing through their museum we gathered in an open air auditorium for a cultural show. The buildings of the Tonga National Center are shown on the right and pictures from the cultural show are below.



The master of ceremony showed us how to open a coconut, which was a primary food source of early Polynesians.



Some young people performed traditional dances for us.

There were both men and women dancers. They all appeared interested and enthusiastic about the job they were doing in telling the Polynesian and Tonga story to visitors.



After the Cultural Center show our bus took us to the place where Captain Cook landed on the island of Tonga for a visit with the king. The landing site was well within the natural harbor that penetrates to the middle of the island. Some viewing stations have been added along the shoreline but the general features of what Captain Cook saw in 1777 is shown in the picture on the right.

Part of the Captain Cook Landing site was dedicated to a demonstration of how tapa cloth is made from the leaves of the tapioca plant.



The leaves are given a treatment that involves soaking for a period of time and then they are pounded with a mallet until the fibers are spread out in a thin layer. Multiple leaves can be joined by pounding two leaves together at their edges. The lady shown on the left was pounding a tapioca leaf in the tapa cloth making process.

From Captain Cook's landing we continued on around the bay a short distance to the site of the

Royal Burial Tombs. The tombs were constructed of large rectangular blocks of coral or lava rock carefully arranged in a low pyramidal array as shown on the right.



The latest burial of a member of the Royal Family was in 2007. The daughter of the King was killed in a car accident while visiting the United States and her grave is marked by a pile of stones on top of the tomb in the picture above.

On the subject of burial grounds we observed an interesting Tongan custom in the ordinary cemeteries. In addition to the brightly colored plastic flowers that we have often seen decorating graves in many countries, today we saw the use of colorful quilts displayed on poles above some of the graves, as shown on the left and below.



This was a widespread practice. Our guide, Ofa, said it had no special meaning and was just an alternative to putting flowers on graves as a symbol of remembrance and respect for the dead.



From the Royal Tombs the road took us away from the bay and overland to the northeast shore of Tonga, to the Ha amongara Maui Trilithon Reserve, shown as number 5 in the map of Tonga above. Along the way we saw people tending their fields of taro and coconut trees, as shown below.



Some yards and fields had pigs roaming around as shown on the right and below. Ofa said that ownership of a pig is a sign of prosperity in the Tongan culture.



We arrived at the Ha amongara Maui Trilithon Reserve and saw an

amazing bit of Stone Age architecture dating back to 1200AD. Two giant slabs of lava rock had been shaped into a rectangular form and stood upright with a third large slab of rock placed on the upright supports to form an arch. The three rocks put together in this array are called a Trilithon and is shown



on the right with our guide, Ofa, and us posing in front. The purpose of the arch was to serve as the gateway to the Royal compound 800 years ago. This use of large pieces of stone reminded us of Stonehenge in England. The tour guides have picked up on this similarity in shape and offer a second purpose of the arch. They say there are two other large stones several hundred yards away. One of the stones is said to be positioned so that a line drawn through the arch of the Trilithon and over the stone points to the sunrise on the shortest day of the year (winter solstice) and the other marks the summer solstice. We didn't see any of these claimed marker stones. However, this stone construction represented an incredible amount of work and expertise by ancient people and was a memorable sight on this tour.

Near the stone arch was another large stone that is said to be used by an ancient chief who was over 7 feet tall. He would lean on the stone and his head would fit comfortably into a depression in the rock. In this position he could watch everyone in front of him and not have to worry about someone sneaking up behind him with assassination in mind. Ofa took us to the rock and in the photo on the right he is placing his hand on the depression in the rock where the huge Tongan chief rested his head.



As our bus was preparing to leave the Trilithon area the students in a grade school next to the parking lot put on a little show for us. Obviously, the word was out that bus loads of people from the cruise ship were coming by their school today and they had prepared to entertain us. Their teacher lined them up along the schoolyard fence and they sang a cute song, as shown on the right. The table shown in the picture had a donation box on it. Some of us made a donation with many thanks from the teacher and the kids. There seemed to be a spontaneous friendliness among all the people we



met and particularly these happy children today. The children we saw walking along the roads and in town were all well dressed and courteous to us. Because of this experience we came away from Tonga with a very good feeling.

The next item on our tour today was across the island at a place called the Hufangalufe Archway that was the number 6 highlight shown by stars in the map above. The archway is a natural arch in the cliff at the ocean's edge. After a 20 minute ride across the island the bus turned off the paved road and we jostled down a two tire track road with bushes and tree branches rubbing on the sides and roof of the bus. We had almost reached our goal when we came to a police blockade, as shown on the right.



It turned out that the police were conducting some sort of firing range practice at the Hufangalufe Archway today and it was closed to the public. With a great deal of difficulty our bus driver managed to turn the bus around without getting it stuck in the ditch alongside the road.

We had plenty on our agenda today so nobody was too disturbed by the cancelation of the Hufangalufe Archway tour. This cheerful response was probably also fostered by the fact that we were now headed for the Liku'alofa Beach Resort where we would have lunch. It took about 30 minutes to drive the length of Tonga Island on the two lane asphalt roads. The road surface was in fine shape but the roads were narrow with lots of bends. Along the way we spotted a gas station but noted it did not have the price of gas posted. We asked Ofa what gasoline cost and he said it cost about 3 Tongan Pa'anga per liter. The current exchange rate is 1.87 Tongan Pa'anga per \$1 USD so that a liter of gasoline costs about \$1.60 USD. With the assumption of 4 liters per gallon that makes the cost of gasoline about \$6.42 per gallon. That is slightly lower than the highest price of \$7.40 per gallon that we found in Rarotonga of the Cook Island group.

We arrived at the Liku'alofa Beach Resort and took a look around. They could handle a crowd of people as this sign on the right indicated.



We walked through the resort and climbed up to an elevated dining area looking over the beach, as shown on the left.

We were treated to the most magnificent ocean view that we could imagine. The sun was shining, the beach stretched for miles, uncluttered by high rise buildings and there were white topped breakers forming a line along most of the beach. A couple photos taken from the dining area and shown below try to convey the beauty but fall a little short.

We decided that the Liku'alofo Beach Resort in Tonga would be a good candidate for anyone wanting to get away to beautiful uncrowded beaches.



There was a band playing good Polynesian music to set the mood, as shown on the right.



The buffet table was soon set up and ready for business, as shown on the left.

There was a whole roasted pig lying on a bed of banana leaves and bordered by coconuts. They put on a real feast.





We sat at a table with Bob and Rosemary and enjoyed one of the local beers (Ikale) along with the delicious food.

It was hard to imagine a more idyllic setting.

During the meal there were Polynesian dancers showing us their skill with different styles of dance, as shown on the right.



After the meal we had time to go down to the beach. Those who wanted to snorkel brought their gear out and dived in. Karen was among the first to test the water and appeared to be having a great time as shown in this photo on the left.

We joined with others in walking the fine beach.



After about a 2 hour lunch period it was time to continue our tour of Tonga. There was a protected sanctuary for Flying Fox Bats close to the Liku'alofa Beach Resort. We stopped where Ofa knew there were some bats. They are nocturnal animals so we knew that seeing one flying was not in the cards but we hoped to see a few of the critters hanging from the trees. We were in luck and were able to see a few high up in a tree next to the road, as shown in the photo on the right. The bats are the 10 to 15 inch long black things hanging from the limbs of the tree. Apparently the fox bats of Tonga are suffering from some contagious disease and their numbers have decreased in recent years. Fox bats are not a pest and hopefully, they will be able to preserve what they have and perhaps bring them back to a higher population.



Our next stop was at the Mapu'a Vaca Blowholes which were a few miles from the Liku'alofa Resort and marked as number 8 on the list of tour highlights in the map shown previously. We had heard that the blowholes were spectacular and we were not disappointed. An example of what we saw is shown on the right.



These were not like the blowholes we had seen in other areas where narrow water spouts would shoot into the air like geysers. In that case a vertical tube-like opening in the rocky coast catches a wave at the bottom end and directs water from the onrushing wave vertically like from a firehose. What we saw here was more like a wall of water and foam rising high into the air. This action was caused by the long waves coming in parallel to the coastline and hitting the vertical solid wall of lava that exists along this beach. We and everyone else just kept taking pictures hoping for bigger and better waves. Here are some of our photos shown below.





Finally, it was time to go so Barbara, having lost any fear of water in the Bay of Island canoeing adventure, bravely turned her back on the crashing surf for this photo on the right.



We all climbed back on the bus and headed back to Nuku Alofa and the Amsterdam.

It had been one of the best tours we have had. Our guide Ofa did a good job and there were some very interesting sites on the agenda. The grade school kids singing and the lunch at the Liku'alofo Beach Resort were probably highlights of the day for us.

However, we still had to run the gauntlet of souvenir vendors on the dock. They were wrapping up their day since us cruise ship passengers had to be back on board the Amsterdam in a few minutes.

True to form, Barbara found just what she had been looking for in the form of small pieces of tapa cloth art glued to a stiff backing. The triumphant shopper is shown with the artist in the photo on the right.



We climbed on board the Amsterdam and got ready for dinner. The Amsterdam got underway about 5 pm and set sail for Apia in Western Samoa. So ended another day for us on this glorious cruise that will be drawing to a close in the not-too-distant future.