

Tonga: Swimming with Humpback Whales

FROM BEACH BUNGALOWS IN THE HA'APAI ISLANDS



TRIP DATES

2024

August 15-22, 2024

August 22-29, 2024

September 26-October 3, 2024

2025

August 7-14, 2025

August 14-21, 2025

August 21-28, 2025



Wilderness Travel

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Each year, humpback whales migrate 3,000 miles from their feeding grounds in Antarctica to the remote Kingdom of Tonga to court, mate, and give birth in the warm waters. To swim and snorkel close to these majestic creatures, to see their spyhopping, breaching, and mother-calf interactions, is one of the great thrills of the natural world. In addition to our whale encounters, we paddle sea kayaks, snorkel over coral reefs, and enjoy presentations by our guides on whale behavior and Polynesian culture. Our beachfront bungalows offer relaxation and sunrise views.



Wilderness Travel

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Itinerary

Please note that because you are crossing the International Dateline, you need to depart the US two days earlier to arrive in Tonga on Day 1. Because of the early departure time to Ha'apai, we highly recommend you arrive in Tongatapu at least one day prior to Day 1 of the itinerary. For more detailed information, see "Arrival and Departure" on page 8.

DAY 1

HA'APAI ISLAND GROUP, TONGA

In the morning, we take a half-hour scenic flight to Ha'apai Airport, where the harbor town of Pangai on Lifuka Island serves as the Ha'apai "capital." (Wilderness Travel will book these internal flights; see Trip Cost section). On a clear day, we should have spectacular views en route of multi-hued reefs and the remote Ha'apai Islands. Upon arrival, we transfer to our welcoming beach resort, set on a private beach on the island of Foa, which is connected to the main island of Lifuka by a causeway. With spacious bungalows set in a tropical garden close to the water's edge, the resort has a friendly, relaxed ambiance. The bungalows have electric fans and en suite bathrooms. There is a beach bar and the restaurant serves fresh, locally caught seafood. After settling in, we have the remainder of the day to snorkel, kayak, or relax on the beach. In the evening, we gather for a festive Welcome Dinner. After dinner, we stargaze under the clear skies and bright Milky Way and learn how early Polynesians used the stars to navigate. Overnight at our beach resort...BLD

The Ha'apai Island Group: Beginning approximately 45 miles north of Tonga's main island, the Ha'apai Island Group consists of 62 islands. Forty-five of the islands are uninhabited and almost all are low, coral islands with vibrant reefs and miles of deserted white beaches fringed with coconut palms. The horizon to the west is dominated by the dormant volcanic cone of Kao, side by side with Tofua, an active volcano that is famous for its role in Mutiny on the Bounty (this is where Captain Bligh was cast adrift). In his book *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* author Paul Theroux describes Tonga as "the perfect area for paddling a kayak—perhaps the best in the Pacific. There was a surfy side and a safe side to each island. The lee shores usually had the beaches—all were secluded, all were lovely."



TRIP DETAILS AT-A-GLANCE

Length:	8 days
Arrive:	Tongatapu
Depart:	Tongatapu
Lodging:	7 nights Tongan-style beach resort
Meals:	All meals included (B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner)
Activity:	Cultural Adventures, Sea Kayaking, Snorkeling, Whale Watching, Wildlife and Natural History
Trip Level:	1 2 ③ 4 5 6 Swimming with whales, snorkeling, sea kayaking, beachcombing

HIGHLIGHTS

- Swim with humpback whales—in one of very few places on the planet where this is possible!
- Sea kayaking and snorkeling, optional paddleboarding
- Enjoy your beachfront cabana set in a tropical garden, with sunrise views from your lanai
- Stargaze in clear skies under the Milky Way
- Learn about the skills of early Polynesian navigators



“A very well-organized and well-run trip. Snorkeling with the whales is one of my great lifetime experiences! Just awesome.”

Rick L., Falmouth, MA



DAY 2

HA'APAI ISLAND GROUP / WHALE WATCHING AND SWIMMING

We're off on our search for humpback whales! To swim with a 45-ton whale in its natural environment is one of the biggest thrills and greatest privileges the natural world has to offer, and Tonga is one of the few places in the world where you are allowed to be in the water with them. After gorging themselves on Antarctic krill, humpbacks set off on a 2,800-mile journey that takes them across the great Southern Ocean, along the coast of New Zealand, and into the wide expanse of the South Pacific Ocean before finally arriving in the sheltered waters of the kingdom of Tonga. From June through October, the whales bask in the warm waters here. It is the dual imperatives of mating and calving that bring the whales here—they are the original tropical island honeymooners!

Many migrating whales choose the northern Ha'apai waters, which means we seldom have to travel far before sighting the first whales of the day. From the moment of our first sighting, our aim is to let the whales take charge of the encounter.

We approach them slowly to avoid disturbing them so we can observe their behavior. At this stage, the whales are aware of our presence and will decide whether to approach us or simply continue with their current behavior. This will allow us the opportunity for close observation and a potential in-the-water encounter. These in-water encounters range from swim-bys, where the whales simply swim past us as we snorkel (sometimes changing course to get a closer look before moving off) to extended mother-calf interactions, courtship displays, or multiple adult play sessions. It's a delight to watch these magnificent cetaceans as they breach, do spyhopping maneuvers, and slap the water with their pectoral fins and flukes. Please note that we can't guarantee you will be able to get in the water with the humpbacks, but with several full days scheduled for interaction with them, we will do our best to give you this experience. We will also stop at times to listen for the ethereal sounds of whale song. Male humpbacks sing elaborate “ballads” whose stanzas evolve over generations.

We've chosen the best time of year for the possibilities of swimming with the humpbacks. Although the season starts in June, we choose the later months because the whales are more settled and relaxed, providing better opportunities to snorkel with them. The calves are larger, more independent, and tend to be curious, rewarding us with amazing encounters. We spend 6 full hours on our comfortable boat scanning the horizon for whale activity. Of course, simple luck plays a part in our chances to swim with them, but to date, in several years of operating this trip at this time of year, we've had 100% success rate in swimming with the whales. Overnight at our beach resort...BLD

Whale Watching Guidelines: There are strict guidelines in place to ensure not only the safety of the snorkelers but also the well-being of the whales. These guidelines include: no more than four snorkelers plus the guide in the water at one time; avoiding getting closer than 15 feet from the whales; staying in a line so that the whales don't get surrounded by snorkelers; and avoiding any splashing or excessive movements. We also don't allow anyone to dive below the surface during in-water encounters as we have found this disturbs the whales greatly and they move off quickly. The only exception to this is during multiple adult play sessions when the whales sometimes seem to encourage us to play as well.

DAYS 3-7

WHALE WATCHING AND SWIMMING / OPTIONAL CHURCH SERVICE / SNORKEL AT NUKUNAMU

We enjoy four more days of whale watching, with ample opportunities to swim with these marvelous creatures. In the late afternoons, we can snorkel, kayak, enjoy an easy bike ride around Foa Island, or simply relax on the beach, soaking up the remains of the sunlight. In the evening we gather to watch the sunset from the restaurant patio, sip on tropical cocktails, share stories with fellow whale swimmers, and listen to presentations by our guides on whale behavior and Polynesian culture.



Itinerary (cont'd)



Sunday is the day that Tongans officially observe as a day of rest. In the morning, after a safety briefing and kayaking practice session, we paddle to nearby Nukunamu, “The King’s Island,” just off the northern tip of Foa. We beach our kayaks and snorkel the channel between Nukunamu and Ha’ano Islands. The snorkeling here is good, and we’ll see brilliantly-colored fish, perhaps Moorish idol, butterfly fish, wrasse, and clown fish. We might even catch a glimpse of the elegant stingrays, leopard and reef sharks, and sea turtles that inhabit these reefs. In the afternoon, we’ll have an option to attend a church service to hear the locals singing, or enjoy a leisurely bike ride through the nearby villages.

“Snorkeling with the whales was an incredible, indescribable experience.”

Hila L., Falmouth, MA

On our last night, we gather for a final Farewell Dinner, a last look at the stars, and a walk along the beach, watching for fishermen who go out with their nets at the end of the day. Overnights at beach resort...BLD each day

DAY 8 DEPART

After breakfast, we transfer to the airport for the flight to Tongatapu for departure on homeward-bound flights...B



Trip Cost, Payment & Insurance

TRIP COST

Prices are per person, valid through 2024

\$7395 (6-7 members)

\$7795 (4-5 members)

Single supplement: \$1075

Internal airfare: \$550 (subject to change)

2025 Trip Costs: Please call for details

To offer the lowest possible cost, our trips are priced according to the number of participants on the trip. All costs are per person, based on double occupancy. If you wish to have a single room, you must pay the single supplement fee. Please note that Wilderness Travel staff, or guests of Wilderness Travel such as travel writers, photographers, or leaders-in-training, are not included in the tier pricing count.

CURRENCY EXCHANGE RATE

Due to the volatility of currency markets, we can only offer the most competitive pricing on this trip by partially tying the trip cost directly to the value of the New Zealand Dollar. In the early spring of 2023, when we set the rates for our Fall 2023 through Spring 2024 program, the US Dollar equaled 1.0 New Zealand Dollars. While in most years, no price changes are ever necessary, if there were to be a significant change in exchange rates, we may be forced to raise or able to lower our trip cost; if so, your final invoice, sent two weeks before your final payment is due, will reflect the difference. Please note that the calculation will not be a straight proration. While most of the trip cost is paid in New Zealand Dollars, the remainder of our expenses are paid in US Dollars. The overall effect is to moderate any change; thus, if the New Zealand Dollar were to rise in value, the land price would rise less than might be expected, and if the New Zealand Dollar were to fall, the drop in trip cost would also be less than might be expected.

TRIP COST INCLUDES

- Expert leadership of a Wilderness Travel Trip Leader and local guides
- All accommodations
- All meals included as indicated in the Detailed Itinerary (B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner)
- PFDs (life jackets) and sea kayaking equipment
- All land and boat transportation, airport transfers for passengers on recommended flights

TRIP COST DOES NOT INCLUDE

International airfare (including fare from Auckland to Tongatapu); internal airfare within Tonga (see separate cost above); transfers for independent arrival or departure; any meals not specified after each itinerary day; airport departure taxes; optional activities; optional gratuities to leaders or staff; additional hotel nights necessitated by airline schedule changes or other factors; pre-trip expenses of medical immunizations (if any), travel insurance, or passports and visas; and other expenses of a personal nature (alcoholic beverages, laundry, etc.).

PAYMENT SCHEDULE

At time of reservation: \$600

120 days prior to departure: Balance

CANCELLATION AND TRANSFER FEE SCHEDULE

Minimum fee: \$600 per person

61-120 days prior to departure: 50% of trip cost

60 days or less: 100% of trip cost

*Please note that this differs from our regular catalog departures.

MANDATORY EMERGENCY EVACUATION INSURANCE

Please note: Insurance for emergency evacuation is required for this trip. Call for more details.

Arrival & Departure

Upon confirming your trip reservation, we will send you a Welcome Packet that includes a list of documents (passport, visas, etc.) required for your trip. Please feel free to call if you would like this information before making your air arrangements.

If you have booked extra services before or after the trip, an Extra Services Confirmation will be sent with your Final Documents.

ARRIVAL & MEETING PLACE

Tongatapu, Tonga

Suggested Airport: Fua'amotu International Airport

Suggested Date & Time: Any time prior to Day 1

Meeting Place: On the afternoon of Day 1, you will fly from Fua'amotu International Airport to Ha'apai and a WT representative will meet the group at the Tanoa Dateline Hotel, transfer everyone to the airport and check the group in for the flight. Your Trip Leader will meet you on arrival at the Ha'apai Airport (this is booked by Wilderness Travel). Your Trip Leader will contact you with the exact meeting time.

We highly recommend you arrive in Tongatapu one day prior to Day 1. We recommend booking the [Tanoa International Dateline Hotel](#) for this pre-trip night. Please note this is an "on your own" expense. If you would like Wilderness Travel to book the hotel and airport transfers for you, please review and complete the Extra Service Request form, enclosed with your Welcome Packet.

Please note: The internal flights to/from Ha'apai are booked on Lulutai Airlines, which are known to change flight times, but our staff in Tonga will keep you posted of flight changes the evening before the trip begins. Please keep us posted if you change your pre-trip hotel so we can contact you.

If you have extra time in Tongatapu on your arrival or departure day, we recommend a visit to the local craft market in Nuku'alofa or the Mapu'a 'a Vaea Blowholes.

DEPARTURE

Tongatapu, Tonga

Suggested Airport: Fua'amotu International Airport

Suggested Date & Time: Day 8, after 2:00 pm

On Day 8, we fly back to Tongatapu from Ha'apai (this is booked by Wilderness Travel).

INTERNATIONAL AIR TRAVEL

You are responsible for making your own arrangements for flights to and from Fua'amotu International Airport.

There are many online consolidators for booking travel, but for more personal help arranging air transport, you can contact Exito Travel at 1-800-655-4053 in the US or 1-800-670-2605 in Canada. They are very adept at putting flight itineraries together, to even the most far-flung places. More information can be found on Exito's website at www.exitotravel.com.

It is necessary to depart from the US at least two days prior to Day 1 of the trip itinerary in order to arrive in Tonga in time for the morning flight to Ha'apai on Day 1. The name on your airline ticket must match the name on your passport exactly, and your passport must be valid for at least three months after your date of exit from Tonga.

Please do not purchase your tickets until you are confirmed on the trip. Once your tickets have been purchased, please send us a copy of your airline schedule so we can reserve your airport transfers. It is your responsibility to ensure your flight times coordinate with the arrival and departure logistics for this trip.

Accommodations



OUR BEACH RESORT

Tonga

Days 1 to 7 (7 nights)

With spacious bungalows set in a tropical garden close to the water's edge, this beach resort has a relaxed ambiance and a friendly staff that makes you feel right at home (you'll soon feel like a member of the extended family). The resort's 12 bungalows feature ocean views, ceiling fans, en suite bathrooms (including a solar-heated shower), and private verandas with comfortable lounge chairs. Snorkeling is available right off the white-sand beach, and there is free access to kayaks, snorkeling equipment, and bicycles. The restaurant serves fresh seafood and the bar is a great place to sip a drink and gaze at the sunset. You may even be treated to a special Tongan feast and floor show from the local school children!



This is our signature accommodation for this trip. Although it is highly unlikely, we may make substitutions when necessary. To see more photos and descriptions, please visit our *Tonga: Swimming with Humpback Whales* webpage and click on the "Accommodations" tab.

Trip Leaders

Wilderness Travel Trip Leaders have a passion and a joy for creating an unforgettable journey. We are extremely proud of them and the incredible travel experiences they make possible. For more information, including client comments about them and which specific trips they will be leading, please visit our webpage and click on “Trip Leaders”: www.wildernesstravel.com/trip/tonga-humpback-whales-swim-snorkel-tour/



JON IMHOOF

Jon Imhoof has a degree in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii, where he first began leading hiking and sailing trips in the 1980s. He moved to Queenstown, New Zealand, in 1989, and has since been an innovator in adventure tourism, starting the first river-surfing company in the world in Queenstown, and then also on the Zambezi River in Southern Africa. Jon began leading our hiking trips in New Zealand, and guides our snorkeling and swimming with whales journeys in Tonga, as well as our exploration of the islands of Vanuatu. He loves to show off his adopted homeland of New Zealand. Jon lives in Gibbston, a world renowned pinot noir growing area outside of Queenstown, with his wife Ali and enjoys surfing, kayaking, kitesurfing, scuba diving, mountain biking, and just about anything else outdoors.



ZAC IMHOOF

Born and raised in Tahuna (Queenstown), New Zealand's adventure capital, Zac thrives in the outdoors and is the perfect travel companion on our New Zealand adventures. As the son of beloved WT Trip Leader Jon Imhoof, Zac takes to any adventure like a fish to water and has spent most of his life snowboarding, surfing, climbing, and biking. Zac is right at home in the New Zealand bush and will enlighten you with his knowledge of food foraging, medicinal plants, and traditional uses of plants for weaving baskets, braiding rope, or carving. He has also been fortunate enough to sail around Australia and the South Pacific, becoming well-versed in the ways of the Pacific Ocean and the many cultures that thrive there. Outside of leading trips, Zac started two community-based projects in Ōtautahi (Christchurch), where he helps people be more sustainable through repairing worn goods and upcycling plastic items.

What the Trip is Like

TRIP LEVEL

This trip is rated a Level 3 (Moderate) according to our trip grading system.

Average Day

- 5-6 hours boating
- 1-2 hours snorkeling
- Occasional kayaking and biking

How Tough is This Trip?

You need to be comfortable snorkeling in the open ocean, potentially with moderate waves and current. While the typical whale encounter is not an athletic event, it can be a challenge at times for those who are not adequately prepared. Depending on whether the whale is stationary or on the move, you may have to swim a significant distance.

GETTING IN SHAPE

A moderate level of fitness is recommended and you should be in good health and physical condition to get the most enjoyment from your trip. Because the primary focus of the trip is swimming with whales, we require that trip members know how to swim at least 50 yards easily and have previous snorkeling experience.

WEATHER

The climate in Tonga is very pleasant, slightly cooler and less humid than Fiji and Samoa. The winter months (June to September) tend to be the best months for travel, with temperatures ranging from the high 70s to the low 80s. Each day may vary from quite sunny to rainy in a matter of hours. Do note that it can feel cold when we're on the boat. Mosquitoes aren't as persistent in the winter months but we recommend bringing repellent, especially for the evenings.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Our nights out in the islands are spent at Sandy Beach Resort, a simple yet well located Tongan-style beach resort in fales (bungalows) that lend an authentic, laid-back experience of this island paradise. The 12 bungalows feature comfortable beds, en suite bathrooms, and private verandas with chairs and table.

CUISINE

Breakfast is served at the resort, and includes fruit and eggs made to order. Lunch is picnic style, either on the boat or on a beach, and typically includes sandwiches. Dinner is also at the resort, and consists of Tongan specialties typically consisting of seafood and vegetables.

TRANSPORTATION

Since we are out on the water for 6 hours a day (generally 9am-3pm), all trip members should be comfortable in small boats. You will be required to climb the ladder to get back into the boat after swimming with the whales which requires some coordination and upper body strength. Our whale boats are comfortable, have shade, are staffed by a certified captain and two whale swim guides, and meet all the requirements for relevant safety equipment.

OCEAN CONDITIONS

While we are typically not far from shore, we will be swimming in the open ocean and conditions can vary throughout the day. The seas are generally calm with low to moderate currents, but unexpected squalls or high winds can create rough ocean conditions at any time. Our boat will always be nearby and if you or our leaders ever fear conditions are getting dangerous, we can always end a swim early.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TRIP

Adventure travel often involves exotic destinations, unusual levels of physical exertion, or activities you may not have participated in previously. We work hard to help you choose the right trip for you, paying attention to your individual interests, abilities, and needs. If you have questions about the level of comfort or any of the activities described in this itinerary, please call Wilderness Travel at 1-800-368-2794 and ask for the Pacific Manager or email us at pacific@wildernesstravel.com.

Average Daily Max/Min °F												
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Tongatapu	84/75	84/75	84/75	82/73	79/70	79/70	77/68	77/68	85/75	79/70	81/72	82/73
Rainfall - Inches												
Tongatapu	6.9	7.4	10.4	6.1	4.0	2.8	3.4	4.3	4.5	3.7	4.5	5.0



WILDERNESS TRAVEL HAS BEEN AWARDED:

- World's Best Tour Operators:** *Travel + Leisure*, 2022, 11-time winner
- Best Travel Specialists in the World:** *Condé Nast Traveller*, 2022, 3 years in a row
- Best Wildlife, Hiking & Walking Trips:** *AFAR Magazine*, 3 years in a row
- Best Adventure Travel Companies:** *USA Today*
- Trip of the Year:** *Outside Magazine*, 9-time winner
- 50 Tours of a Lifetime:** *National Geographic Traveler*, 9 years in a row
- Best Adventure Travel Companies:** *National Geographic Adventure*, 3-time winner

Please be advised that California has established a Travel Consumer Restitution Fund under the California Seller of Travel Law that took effect January 1, 1996. This fund is designed to protect consumers from unscrupulous practices by discount airfare ticket sellers or air charter operators. Unfortunately, this law does not cover non-California residents and, even in the case of California residents, it does not cover any foreign travel where the foreign "providers of transportation or travel services" are not in compliance with the Sellers of Travel Law (compliance being defined as registered as a Seller of Travel in California and a participant in the Travel Consumer Restitution Fund). Thus none of Wilderness Travel's tours qualify and we are required by law to advise each client that they are not covered by the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires sellers of travel to maintain a trust account or bond. This business has a trust account. California Seller of Travel #100769640

While as accurate as possible at the time of printing, this itinerary should be considered an approximate indication of the schedule and scope of activities and trip routing, rather than an inflexible schedule of events; it is subject to change due to circumstances beyond our control. This trip is subject to the Limitation of Liability and all the terms and conditions as detailed in the General Information section of the Wilderness Travel Catalog.