

Adina, Tom and Susie's  
Hylas 46, at anchor in Tonga

# Sailing with whales in Tonga

Humpback whales are big and beautiful, but must be approached with caution



Tom and Susie took a guide to swim with this mother and calf at 15 m depth

*'Vava'u is one of the few places in the world where you can swim with humpback whales'*



Susie standing on Adina's homemade ratlins, the best way to conduct MK1 eyeball navigation

## Tom Partridge and Susie Plume find their own private paradise in the Ha'apai islands

While Tonga lies firmly on the so-called 'coconut milk run' across the Pacific Ocean, much of it is little explored, which for us meant the opportunity to try and find an island or two for ourselves. Tonga is made up of three groups of islands: Vava'u in the north, the Ha'apai Islands in the middle and the Tongatapu Islands with the capital, Nuku'alofa, in the south.

The Vava'u island group is famous with sailors for a number of reasons: the main town of Neiafu with its deep water moorings provides an opportunity to relax, a chance to catch up with friends in the many bars and cafés, a good fresh market in which to provision, and then there are numerous beautiful islands nearby to explore with good anchorages and easy sailing in between. But the real draw card is that Vava'u is one of the few places in the

world where you can swim with humpback whales. Susie and I were determined to tick all of these boxes.

Humpback whales travel up from the Antarctic to the warmer waters of Tonga to give birth and breed. Regulations now in place mean yachties are no longer able simply to hop off their yachts and go for a swim. Not that we'd want Adina to be close to any whales, once you realise just how enormous they are. Also, we'd rather be with an expert who knows about the whales and how to approach them.

### Swimming with giants

Starting out nice and early, our whale-watching operator was soon on the lookout for slow moving whales so we could swim easily in their company. We learnt that if whales come up to breathe about every three minutes it means they are on the move and we will never keep up with them. Ideally we wanted a mother and a calf moving slowly; if the mother comes up every 15-20 minutes she is moving very slowly and allowing her calf to play. Singing males that hang in the water and sing to attract females are another possible option, and sing they do!

After a few hours, much to our joy we found a mother with a calf and male escort. When all three came to the surface it was quite something to see. The enormity of them strikes you and you start questioning the sanity of swimming with them. Up went the call for four of us to don masks, snorkels and fins.

Jumping in and looking into the depths we could see the mother, her calf and male escort. The calf spotted us and came up to have a look. When you think 'calf' you think something small, but a humpback whale calf is certainly not.

Very soon it became clear the calf was inquisitive and indeed seemed to think we were the morning's entertainment and to be played with. It came up close, eyed us all, turned and twisted right in front of us. Big and beautiful. And so it continued in a playful mood, sometimes flicking its tail on the water, going this way and that without any set pattern, all within touching distance, making us all alert trying our best not to get in its way.

Then the mother and male escort decided it was time to come up for air. We had thought the calf was big but the adults were simply enormous and we





*Beautiful  
Tofanga Island  
– leave nothing  
but footprints*



*Susie collecting sea shells and urchins on one of our many walks on deserted islands*



*In these conditions, even upwind sailing was a pleasure on the short hops between islands*

were keeping well clear. The calf seemed to be loving it, while Mum sat below very calmly. How you wish you could read their minds. With memories etched for life we returned happy explorers with a lot to talk about over sundowners.

Whale watching complete, we spent the next week exploring the beautiful islands and well-known anchorages of the Vava'u Group. The sheltered waters and short distances mean sailors get to have some real fun and even upwind sailing is relished. Picture perfect islands mean barbecues and sailing downtime.

But for us the major attraction of Tonga was the Ha'apai Islands. We'd added these to our itinerary a long time back when we'd read *Ken's Comprehensive Cruising Guide for The Kingdom of Tonga* (Ken Helewell,

*'It's the hidden coral heads that glow green and yellow in the water that you need to keep a good look out for'*

£47.40) in which he scratches his head at why people skip them and vows they should not be missed. Perhaps the easily explored islands of the north keep people content as we knew of hardly anyone tempted to head south.

Yes, they come with a big health warning of lots of reef which require good eyeball navigation; they are low lying islands so you need to pick your anchorage carefully in strong winds; there are rumours of islands being destroyed by cyclones; and yes, you even need to watch out for whales. But *Adina* has done some miles now, we're all too aware of keeping a good look-out and by gum we love an adventure!

At 2100 we set off, an overnight sail given we needed to arrive in daylight with the sun overhead to pick out the many reefs surrounding the island of Pangai, where we needed to do a domestic check-in with the Ha'apai authorities. A full moon brilliantly lit up the sky and helped us pick our way slowly out of the islands of Vava'u. The sail was soon over and we applied the brakes at dawn as we waited for the rising sun to get to a position where we could easily see our way in.

*Adina* has wooden steps we built into her shrouds to help us get a higher view to see any dangers lurking in the water. We'd done our homework, studied the charts, studied the pilot guide and downloaded satellite images – better to be fully prepared. Most of the reefs are easily spotted some way off, as you can see small breaking waves on them; it's the hidden coral heads – so-called 'bommies' – that glow green and yellow in the water that you need to keep a good look-out for. A few

*Kelelesia – if we could  
buy an island this  
would be the one!*

lefts and rights and we anchored, got the dinghy out and zoomed off to the town, first challenge completed. Pangai was hit by a cyclone in February 2014 and is still showing the effects with a lot of buildings left wrecked. Customs and Immigration were closed despite listings that they would be open, so we had a bite to eat and upped anchor to move five miles south to Uoleva Island.

Uoleva was the first of many beautiful islands; a long swooping bay lined with a perfect white beach backed by palm trees, we were intent on staying a few days to enjoy it. In the middle of the bay lies 'Uoleva Yacht Club' run by Craig and Kristin. Nothing more than a few tents, an experimental vegetable patch, a small kitchen, a wooden bar in the sand and happy hour was rum or beer! Perfect.

Tongans are deeply religious and on Sundays everything but everything closes – not even planes fly. You are advised not to work on your boat so we took it to heart and did nothing other than cook pancakes for breakfast and join in a barbeque ashore at the Yacht Club.

Dragging ourselves away we upped anchor and sailed past clearly spotted reefs to Tofanga, *Adina* enjoying the upwind romp. Uninhabited, we thought we'd end up finding Robinson Crusoe lurking behind some palm trees. It was bliss. And so started our routine for the next two weeks of swimming or taking the dinghy to our chosen island, trying to circumnavigate it on foot, taking in the joy of walking in

soft white sand, snorkelling in crystal clear water and soaking up the sunshine. Tofanga is known for good for collecting seashells and Susie was soon scooping up exquisite specimens.

Two nights there and again we reluctantly raised anchor and moved on. The next island of Limu required anchoring a little further offshore and we soon appreciated why you need to choose your anchorages carefully with these islands that barely rise 10m from the sea. With strong trade winds, we put down lots of chain but our snubber was being tested and *Adina* bounced all night, so we decided to head off the next morning to the island of O'ua.

Charts were no help sailing into O'ua, merely showing it surrounded by reef but the pilot book provided waypoints and we confirmed these using our satellite images. We weaved our way in and anchored in a



*Adina's crew enjoyed many special moments in the islands, like sunrise over Nomuka Iki*



*Dressed for Sunday Church on the island of Ou'a*

pool protected from the sea by reef on all sides while the wind turned our generator.

Our guidebooks had informed us a church service in Tonga was a must-do, just to hear the singing, so we made plans to visit the little island's church. The men arrived wearing Tongan skirts with jackets and ties. Women were dressed in their very best, special outfits in glorious pinks, oranges and bright greens. And then the singing started. Talk about raising the rafters! We were mesmerised – it was one of those moments you just wanted to last and last. The men would sing deep and low, the women's voices spiralled up to the heavens. Thank goodness it was all in Tongan for I fear we would have been banished from the island if we'd had to join in. A real joy. We offered our thanks, said our farewells and, armed with gifts of fruit, headed back to the boat.

The next day, another island by the name of Nomuka Iki – and there was another yacht anchored. What? We had to share this piece of paradise! Never fear, they left the next day and off we set for a walk on another uninhabited island laden with palm trees, mangoes and more



**Adina anchored off Kelelesia, which was Susie's favourite island**



**Looking down on Adina from the top of Kelelesia. It was normal to be the only yacht in sight**



## Tom Partridge and Susie Plume

Tom, 47, a change management consultant, started sailing in 2006 and is a Yachtmaster with over 25,000 miles under his keel. His partner, Susie Plume, is a 34-year-old brand director, and a Day Skipper with over 20,000 miles.

They bought *Adina* in May 2012 and crossed the Atlantic in November 2013. They spent 2014 cruising the South Pacific and plan to sail on to Asia in 2015.

■ You can follow their progress and find cruising notes at [www.yachtadina.co.uk](http://www.yachtadina.co.uk). They are also helping with relief efforts in Vanuatu following the destruction caused by Cyclone Pam in March 2015.

shells. Crystal clear water and some lovely big towering coral heads and we tried our luck at spearfishing. The big guys saw us coming and were soon off – we'd have to rely on trolling! We were relaxing more and more, taking a break from boat work, *Adina* was behaving, and we had these most beautiful islands all to ourselves.

Off we went again, aiming for what in theory was the hardest island to get into, the magical isle of Kelelesia. We had managed to see whales every day, but when we sailed we were a little wary. We'd just unfurled the genoa and had the engine still on when a now familiar very large black back appeared on the surface no more than three boat lengths away. Genoa away fast, change course sharp. A little frightening. We waited for the whale to surface again before heading on knowing it was on a different course from us! I don't recall the 'avoiding moving wild animals' part of the RYA Yachtmaster course.

Kelelesia is surrounded by reefs and what are known as 'blind rollers' – waves you don't see until they break very suddenly. We had timed our arrival to get the sun overhead and, sitting a dark squall out, we could see the breakers on the reef at the entrance. Our senses fully alert, we went for it. It turned out to be a smooth entry, we were quickly in and looking for

a nice sandy spot to dig the anchor in. The coral heads were impressive, towering up 10m. Looking around our anchorage, nearly totally enclosed by reef, we realised it wouldn't be a good spot to be caught in strong winds as you wouldn't be able to get out. But never mind that, Kelelesia somehow managed to outdo all the other beautiful islands and go straight to the top of our list of favourites. Again uninhabited, we had it all to ourselves and immediately falling for it, Susie decided it was her island and she was now Queen of Kelelesia!

It was slightly unique in that it had a limestone outcrop and looked like a mini-Gibraltar, but that's where the comparison ended. Palm trees lining the beach, lush vegetation in the centre, snow-white beaches, turquoise clear water, blue skies, and white tern birds flying around in pairs.

## Paradise does exist

Our circumnavigation of the island resulted in some wading and swimming, as not all of it was surrounded by sand. We even managed to startle some baby black tip reef sharks swimming in the shallows.

The Ha'apai islands are certainly remote but that's a good thing as for now they remain unspoilt. The islands were the South Pacific paradise we had so desired but had feared vanished in our modern world. The truth is, we'll probably never see such beautiful islands again but our minds are replete with treasured memories, imprinted forever – days we will think back on. If you're fond of walking on soft, silky white beaches, swimming in crystal clear blue waters, and soaking up the midday sun while the seas break in the background, the Ha'apai islands deliver in bucket-loads for those who are well prepared. ▲