



by Ulafala Aiavao

## DECK PASSAGE TO TOKELAU

Isolated from much of the world, the atolls of Tokelau enjoy what most other South Pacific islands used to have decades ago. The inshore waters teem with marine life, sea birds nest near village houses and there is a small, self-sufficient population.

The closest you will get on a scheduled flight is to Western Samoa, home base for Polynesian Airlines, and then it is a matter of contacting the Apia-based Office for Tokelau Affairs and waiting for the monthly supply ship.

Apart from radio wireless, there is no other contact with the outside world. Few visitors make the journey, but those who do remain grateful for the privilege.

Tokelau's 127 islets on the three atolls of Fakaofu, Nukunonu and Atafa make up just 12 square kilometres of land area, and that is spread in a gentle arc more than 100 kilometres long.

Before our two-day voyage from Apia on the MV Wairua, a small merchant vessel chartered from Fiji, friends offer advice on how to cope with the ocean swells. A few of us sneak in magic tablets of something called Sea Legs bought from an Apia pharmacy as backup.

The loading of general cargo, which consists mainly of fresh food for relatives and drums of diesel for power generators, continues into the night. Several officials from New Zealand, which administers Tokelau, have bunked into the handful of cabins below decks ('don't go down there, they're too hot,' my friends tell me).

We join the other passengers in searching for any part of the deck floor which is not yet claimed by a sleeping mat. Veteran travellers avoid laying their mat between a novice and the sea side of the ship, just in case someone needs a free run. Since our small party is safely stretched on top of chest freezers near the back of the ship, we feel quite safe from anything that might come our way.

11 p.m. Saturday night. Ropes are cast off, farewells made and ... trouble. The Wairua's propeller has fouled a four inch mooring rope while reversing from the wharf, leaving us adrift at sea, several metres short of Apia and 480 kilometres short of Tokelau to the north: not quite bye-bye-Apia-see-you-in-seven-days. It takes a good half hour before the rope is cut free and we are off.

Regular deck passengers carry their own supply of coco-

nuts for drinking water and food to supplement the basic fare on board. The locals have a habit of offering something to a visitor first, whether food, drink, a comfortable seat or a place to stay when we land.

The last bit is important because Tokelau has no purpose-built facilities for visitors in the atolls - it is really a destination for travellers willing to take their chances rather than a tourist event. Many islanders and some visitors seem eager to keep it that way. Arrangements can be made for a brief stay on one atoll while the supply ship continues to the next, or, one may sleep aboard the ship and make forays ashore when it reaches another atoll.

Early on Monday morning, a thin line breaks the horizon: Fakaofu atoll, a string of islets forming a rough triangle around a deep lagoon about 25 kilometres across. Coconut trees are the only things that give the islands their height since none of the islets is more than fifteen feet from sea level.

Most houses in Fakaofu spread to the water's edge on the two islets of Fale and Fenua Fale; plantations take up the rest of the atoll land.

Since there is no passage into the lagoon, the Wairua has to unload cargo and passengers into a l u m i n i u m workboats which run through a narrow man-made channel to a jetty on Fale.



Foua Toloa, a Fakaofu islander working in Western Samoa and making a visit home, explains how Tokelauans are forced by circumstance to be self-reliant. The thin underground water lens means that rain water must be saved for drinking, and all houses have watertanks alongside or built into the house foundations. Bathing and laundry are controlled affairs employing small basins to cut down waste - no taps run unless there is a container to catch the water.

There is a very small range of crops that can be grown from the poor soil, a task made more difficult after Cyclone Ofa in 1990, when waves washed over the atolls taking the topsoil with it. Coconuts, pandanus and a type of breadfruit predominate. To help build up the fertility, small patches of crops are surrounded by leaves and other organic rubbish.

The close link with the sea, and lack of land, makes even young children quickly expert in many types of fishing.

A small fleet of handmade traditional canoes, formed by a jigsaw of pieces from scarce and very hard wood are pulled up near several houses. Other Pacific Islands blessed with rainforest can afford to make canoes out of a single trunk: in Tokelau, the painstaking carving of many small pieces to fit

perfectly together is quite common. Some of the canoes are said to be several decades old, testimony to the great care with which they were made.

In recent years, the traditional canoes have been outnumbered by dozens of aluminium dinghies and outboards, which, in the absence of roads and vehicles, are the main transport to the crop plantations on neighboring islets.

Fale islet is crowded by buildings and crops, mainly breadfruit trees. Pigs are kept on a stretch of dead coral reef near the jetty, stepping down to wallow in pools of sea water since there is no surface water anywhere in Tokelau, thereby providing what locals term 'instant salt pork.'

Watching over this crowded layout are clouds of frigate birds, terns, noddies, boobies and other sea birds. A general hands-off policy means the sea birds can be found nesting in the village and quite a number are tame enough to feed by hand. Children next to Foua's traditional thatched fale have befriended a sea bird which dutifully returns each evening to sleep on the hull of a Tokelauan canoe. A tiny strip of red string tied near the wing's source tells other children that

this one already has someone providing it with meals of fresh fish.

There is time in the few days ashore to snorkel in the lagoon, marvelling at schools of multi-coloured tropical fish close to shore, the rich hues of living coral and the

profusion of clams that pebble the reef. A scuba diver tells us the view is even better '30 metres down.'

In the distance, the school catamaran returns pupils in their bright uniforms from one islet to another, their curiosity turning to big smiles and waves when they spot a visitor.

Smoke from the ground ovens, covered with a mound of very hot coral in the absence of stones, breaks through the line of coconut trees. This 'tree of life' has a hundred uses, of which we have particular interest in one: the making of 'toddy' drink from the sap of the emerging coconut buds. In its fresh state, toddy provides much-needed vitamins, but turns into the popular atoll version of fire-water when it is fermented. Veterans can apparently tell how many days it has fermented by taste, although this secret escaped us, despite repeated tests.

On the fourth day of our stay, we catch up with the bureaucracy and obtain a passport stamp that verifies we did indeed arrive in Fakaofu. By then, it is time to farewell new friends and make plans for a return visit to this peaceful island.

