

# Coconut Wireless



1973 A newsletter about where we were and where we've been 2001  
July 15, 2001

## *It was almost like being there again...*

It's hard to believe that just a few short hours ago I was in Fiji thinking about my previous week's visit to Tonga. It was a very interesting time. It rained almost always but did clear up from time to time for things like the King's birthday, and of course, the day we left. Many things have changed but with some surprise, in my mind many things have remained the same.

I took very good notes while in Tonga but wrote nothing down on paper. To that end I may jump around a little but I think when I put my virtual pen down I will have covered most of the time we spent walking and driving around Tonga. I did not include pictures this time so that all of you could open the whole thing. I will include several pictures when I have all my pictures on CD. The ones I shot on my digital camera came out very nice. I may be sending a few off to a few of you for personal request reasons but the majority of them will be featured on the next CW web site update.

Phil Weiss met us (Linda and me) at the "new" Tonga International Airport with leis in hand. We jumped into the cab as well as two people with atrophied legs could after a 12 hour plus trip across the Pacific Ocean, and off we went. As we drove from the airport I was struck by the many familiar *and* the many not-so-familiar sights. I think more pleasantly surprised at the familiar ones...the smells of the little fires and the sharp columns of smoke from many yards, the people working in their gardens, the pigs, and the kids walking around holding hands and laughing and the unsolicited waves were all welcomed sights. Then the unexpected showed up. The *massive* amounts of cars (more cars than pigs and there are still *lots* of pigs!), no more traditional Tongan fale that I could see from the cab (not necessarily a bad thing, I suppose, having lived in one for a month or so after our arrival at Joe's) and traffic jams downtown with horns blaring. *Almost* all of the streets were paved...about 60% as far as I could tell (a good thing for sure!).

I was saddened to see that dogs were in no better state than when I left. We had a few dogs come out growling at us from different properties now and then but the time honored "look like you're pick'n up a stone to throw" shtick still works like a charm...unfortunately.

We stayed in a very nice little bed and breakfast called the "Villa McKenzie" on the main road of Vuna...just down the street from the Red Chinese Embassy, yes, that would be new, and the Dateline Hotel. Nice place, although being a person who is somewhat potty shy I wasn't much on the curtain for the bathroom "door" in our room but I toughed it out and ended up enjoying our stay very much.

Those high pitched "Tissit's" AKA, "Hey, you over there, I know your name and you're only a few feet away, but I need to speak with you or get your attention for some other reason so I am using this "tissit" noise to make you turn instead of calling out your name" are still there. The kids still like to practice their English on the pa'alangi. The latest catch phrase seemed to be "goodbye" when you walked by. Mostly from younger kids probably just learning to say goodbye after their "hello" course was completed. When you responded in Tonga with a few words, particularly when, after saying good bye they added in a couple Tongan "daddy words" to make themselves laugh, you could easily get them to involuntarily say "WAAAY!" as only Tongans can say "WAY" or "aaaWAY!" when surprised. On one occasion I even witnessed the classic Tongan right hand, head scratch with the accompanying tchk, tchk, tchk clicking noise. All this was music to my ears *and* eyes!

## *How do they know...*

On the last night of our stay we attended a private club get-together at the Villa for fish and chips and a couple of beers. Several expatriates and a local couple were in attendance too for a chit and chat evening. Through basic [coconut wireless technology](#) (phones and cell phones will never catch up!) they all seemed to know I was "the one" on the Island along with "That writer chap". They heard that I had some "old" pictures and would love to see them. I brought my little album out for all to see. I was struck between the eyes and

my brain took a few steps back when more than one couple remarked how historical the pictures were...Historical? I had never even thought of them like that...just think what you have in *your* closets? Start looking!

### ***Downtown has changed a bit...***

It *has* changed, but after a couple of days it was recognizable in many areas. There is one 6 story, unfinished building across from where the [Tali'eva theater](#) used to be. [Moris Hedstrom](#) has changed to [Molisi Tonga Limited](#) and the semi or was it mostly-outdoor market, so busy on Saturdays, is now a *huge* two story building with a mix of Tongan craft wares and lots of wonderful coconut oil, fruits and veggies...and still busy as can be on Saturday.

Many Tongans still dress in what I'd consider traditional island garb with some "mix and match" and some scandalous younger Tongan women in jeans and tee shirts. The downtown area as well as the rest of the island is still busy on Saturday and almost dead on Sunday.

The [Tungi Arcade](#) (I could be wrong on the spelling a tad) is still there. I believe that was the location of the first Peace Corps office that I remember...anyone else remember that as a fact? There are a few other landmark buildings on the street. I did a lot of match up pictures as well as I could and will highlight them in the next web site update as those pictures are developed and put on CD's.

### ***I didn't know what to expect...***

Preparing for this trip I tried to not think too much about what I should expect. This, of course helped me think even harder on what to expect. With that being said I can say that in many ways I was pleasantly surprised at what I found. Many of the outer villages are all but unchanged, at least in my memories eye. The people are as friendly as I remember everywhere, even in Nuku'alofa. The smiles are still generous *and* honest. I did expect to down more than a few Stienlagers but they have all but disappeared. The new "in" brew is called Ikale and is produced in where else, but Tonga. It must be the water because it's not half bad. I had brought a few packets of antacids specifically for the Stienlager but found it wasn't really necessary with this fine "home brew".

No more "liquor license" to carry (I still have mine somewhere). Almost all stores, including falekaloa's have a good selection of various spirits and beers to purchase. Never mind that public drunkenness seems much higher than when we were the public drunks.

I had also conveniently forgotten just how humid Tonga could be. With the rain and the temperatures still up there it *was*, indeed humid. I seem to remember times as a volunteer when I'd take a shower just to dry off when it got real bad.

Everyone still loves to get their pictures taken. It still doesn't matter if they know you or not...point a camera and people will show up.

There is an 18 hole golf course on Tongatapu now. I was told it's pretty good by both locals and visitors. The peca's have moved down the road a bit...Tonga's flying foxes fluttered to new digs down the road after the last cyclone...seems like there were a lot of changes influenced by the last cyclone.

### ***Speaking of public drunkenness...***

"Our" hangout, the Tonga Club is a sad picture of a once noble place to get cross eyed in. When we visited on Saturday, June 30<sup>th</sup> there were only 4 people in the place and that included the "sommelier" and the three of us! There was no Stienlager to be found but he did have the local favorite, a subtle yet comfortably warm Ikale in the icebox. They had "run out" of electricity at the Club so all ales were at room temperature or higher...how could we refuse. Off came three tops and down went three, not just beers, but Ikale's..."The taste of Tonga"! In the six plus days we were on the island I walked by the Club several times and never saw the lights on. I can only suppose they were still out of electricity.

### ***Miss Heilala pageant...***

Big time, in Tonga nowadays is the Heilala Festival, this named, of course after the National flower. It was started in 1979 under the patronage of this [Royal Highness Crown Prince Tupouto](#). The Miss Heilala pageant (the second annual) is now an integral part of this "New Millennium" celebration. Among the many talents a Miss Heilala hopeful must have is ball gown wearing, evening wear and swim wear, well...wearing, coconut

decorating (one of my very favorite talents) plant arranging, leaf arranging, bottle arrangements and many more task specific talents as well.

### *Miss Galaxy pageant...*

Here's another fun one we missed. The Miss Galaxy pageant originated and is held each year in Tonga. All entrants are transvestites from several parts of the world. Over the years, it attracted most of its contestants from the "neighboring" island countries but has begun to attract a larger circle of countries more recently. It is a full blown (so to speak) beauty contest as I understand it and is a very popular event to say the least. It is my understanding that [Nafe](#) won this coveted crown 5 years in a row.

### *Saw a few old friends...*

A special hello to all of you special people from a few other special people. [Dennis Wolf](#), who was a volunteer in the late 70's, I believe, now works and lives in Tonga and sends his hi to both [Dave Wyler](#) and [Don Greer](#). I met him at the Rotary meeting at the Dateline Hotel. [Maki Fifta](#), who was the secretary at the Peace Corps office when many of us were there also says hi to all. She now works for the Coca Cola distributing company in Tonga and somehow recognized me when I walked into her office...go figure! It might have been the white beard or the subtle pouch I now carry on my belly, but recognize me she did. I do believe she helped us on more than one Taimi Totonu. Her address is P.O. Box 3086, Salote Road, Nuku'alofa, Tonga. If you want a fax or phone number let me know.

Another person that Phil guided me to was [Anna](#) a student from [Tonga High School](#) when I was there. She lives in Ngele'ia.

Of course, [Nafe](#) (officially Ahi Nafe) also sends "his" love to all of you who he might have yelled out to from Yellow pier, near the Dateline Hotel. His messages in those days may have been a little off color from time to time but his heart was in the right place.

It's very sad but I suppose not particularly surprising that most if not all of his old "hang around" buddies have died of AIDS over the years. Most had come to the United States or went to New Zealand or Australia where they contracted the disease. His address is P.O. Box 113 Nuku'alofa, Tonga.

### *How many kilometers was that ...*

One of the things that really caught me off guard were the trips in the taxis from location to location. From this beach to that beach, to that ancient structure to another and then back to town. It wasn't the cost of the taxis, which were, many times a "you decide" arrangement (which was always more than they would have charged, I'm sure...but still a very good deal!) or even the numerous near misses of dogs, cats, kids, pigs, chickens and adults, not necessarily in that order. It wasn't even the condition of the cars we drove in that caught me off guard...it was the fact that 25 years ago we all, or at least most of us routinely rode our pasikalas to these areas, sometimes two or three times a week. And then it was almost always on dusty, bumpy coral roads. Twenty-five years later, I was winded just driving there...we were surely in some of our best health in those days...when, of course we weren't sick from some strange virus or other cell invading, vomit inducing, bug!

We, or at least I never gave much of a thought to picking up our backpacks and riding the day away.

### *Some things never change...*

The bread...Oh, that bread...still fresh and tasty as I remembered it, with, I do believe, much less cooked rat fecal matter and bugs mixed in. A little less roughage, perhaps but not missed as far as I'm concerned. It was a real treat to chow down a few pieces of toast each morning at the B&B with my "Rice Bubbles" AKA "Rice Crispies". Then, a *toasted* not a grilled (blank looks with the word "grilled") cheese sandwich in the afternoon. Life just doesn't get much better than that.

Another thing that hasn't changed is the ice cream. On one particularly humid day we decided it was time to get a cone. We stopped at John's, but of course they were out "for a while" and then meandered off to a little shack that sold ice cream only. We lucked out because they had two flavors that day, orange and lime. You'll be happy to know that, as in the olden days, those flavors are actually just colors. The orange tasted like vanilla and the green tasted like vanilla. It felt good that some things just plain don't change! Oh yes, I almost forgot. The milk shakes we once enjoyed in Tonga are still just that..."shook"

milk with the slightest introduction of a sliver of ice cream mixed in for purposes unknown.

There are still many, many falekaloa's in every village...a nice thing to still see.

### *Some things do change...sort of...*

The Loni Theater still has the same shell but evidently the building burned down a few years ago so they built a new "dual" theater complex. Theater one *and* two. One goes upstairs now, which does give a certain Hollywood feel to it. The night we went they were showing "Proof of Life". Not a bad movie and only a few months removed from the States. The other movie that I had hoped to see was a Kung Fu thriller but the time of showing was not convenient for us...other pressing social engagements, and all. The "multi-lingual" action feature film would have been fun to revisit.

The seats, I do believe were the same ones that were almost new when we were also new. The screen was of modest size and the projected movie was even more modestly projected (about two thirds of the screen). The sound was OK and the two or three people already in there were really into the movie. I was surprised to hear a few "super daddy words" in the movie thinking the censors would still be reviewing and taming all the newly arrived movies at the police compound as they used to do on Sunday evenings. The most comforting thing I saw was the popcorn machine...right there in the lobby...never mind that it had been "unworking for some time now".

### *I was a little disappointed...*

I had eagerly expected *and* had advised make that bragged to both Linda and Phil that we should see a lot of classic Tongan dances put on by numerous villages from throughout the Kingdom for the King's birthday. I was looking forward to watching all my favorite dances and listening to all those wonderful songs being sung by all those beautiful voices...there were none. There *were* several marching displays and some very good marching band music but no "village competition" as I remember it. It might be selfish of me but this was a big disappointment for me.

Another *big* disappointment was that Tonga doesn't use those major cool stamps any more...to me that *was* Tonga...no more banana stamps? No more coconut stamps? All they have now are stupid boring run of the mill lick 'em stamps!

### *The food...*

I was pleasantly surprised at the number of nice restaurants in Nuku'alofa. I hadn't really thought of it one way or the other while planning this trip but I did remember such fine mouth watering dining holes as the [fale fakalotu](#), the [Hengihingi](#) (*when* they had food), [Joe's place](#) "all you can eat" (Saturday night only) and a few other food fales. The exchange rate is exceptional and very good dinners around town rarely exceeded \$35 US for three people including a round or two of drinks. Even the Blowholes have a restaurant/bar/massage parlor /one room hotel *right* on the shore. They had *very* good fish and chips and the beer was cold...at least, ish. One night I had to order a pizza at [Little Italy](#) on Vuna road just past the palace and found it good as well. The steak selection in Tonga was not particularly world class, as it was not when we were there, but everything else was really very good.

I was a little surprised that there was only one ethnic restaurant (Tongan ethnic, I mean) that I could find..."[Tasty's, Take Away](#)"...you didn't have to take it away because there were tables inside but it did suggest a certain connivance in a hurried island world. If you walked in, in the middle of the day they would be happy to turn on the lights in the "buffet like" serving bar and the house lights as well. They also had a "Kentucky fried chicken" they say is almost identical to the 11 herbs and spices the Colonel is so famous for. In all fairness there were also places simply called BBQ (many of them just little stands) that may have dealt more in the traditional Tongan fare but time did not allow a full exploration of those dining establishments. There was also a Chinese restaurant right down from the Red Chinese Embassy, so you *have* to believe they were good if not excellent...or else! I don't remember the exact name but it was another place we didn't have time to get to. Some of the other restaurants we enjoyed...some very much, had names like [Billfish](#), [Waterfront](#), [Lalunarosa](#) and [Friends](#), and of course, [The International Dateline Hotel](#) just to name a few.

### *The piers and the palace...*

When you see the pictures on the web site you will notice a few changes. In particular you'll note that Vuna wharf has no buildings on it and that the Royal Palace has no Royal Chapel on it. As it was told to me, these changes were the result of the last cyclone to hit Tonga a few years ago. Both wharfs are also all but unused now for boat traffic. They are unpaved, and the end of [Yellow pier](#) is all but collapsed from an earthquake of several years ago, I was told. We did find a piece of the Royal chapel in the front yard of a Vuna road residence.

### *The King and Princess's new digs...*

As I remember it there were two royal residences in "my" day. The Royal Palace and the Princess' Fale. Not so any more. I had noticed with some dismay that the Royal Palace looked a tad, how should I put it... "unpristine" when I first saw it, this visit. I didn't give it too much thought... I was just disappointed to see the building I thought so classic back then looking worse than me now. Then it was pointed out to me that there is a new Palace in town... well, out of town but new to me. Actually as far as I can tell there are three new Palaces around the greater Tongatapu area. I saw but one in the time I was there. His [Royal Highness Crown Prince Tupouto](#) has a really cool looking, almost classic French "hill top" winery looking place around the [Tofua](#) area almost directly across the road from the Princess' palace. As far as I can tell the King's new places are in or near [Maka'akiu Beach](#) and another around the [Longoteme](#) area.

As we all know, real estate is a good thing to invest in right now so who can blame the Royals for getting in on the action. Did I mention that His Royal Highness also has a rather large fale in Hillsborough, a rather pricey... Beverly Hills pricey, town in the San Francisco Bay Area?

### *And then there was Fiji...*

Our stay was great. We stayed a week there after Tonga... I needed the rest. The sun was out and the dollar was just as strong there... what a wondrous combination. We stayed in a resort called the [Sonaisali Island Resort](#). Nice place with a good beachside, not just room but a bure *with* a door on the bathroom. There was also a hot tub on the porch... nice. I tried to hunt down Dave Wyler in Suva but we managed to only chat on the phone. Linda and I rented a car and drove to Suva... quite the adventure. Left side driving is soooooo freaky. Going straight was not the problem, it's making turns... particularly right turns. It was much easier on my posikala, for sure. Got stopped in the village of Galoa, I believe, for **speeding**. *Anywhere* else in the world (perhaps, with the exception of San Francisco) I would have kept driving if a man jumped out of the bushes, on foot, in a white skirt, waving a flag. But through some fine Peace Corps training I realized at once that I was busted. When shown the radar gun I knew I was caught doing 74.15 km's in a 60km. How can one fight such overwhelming evidence? I was told that an infraction like this would be 50 big ones (not in those exact words) and that Fiji has strict speeding laws to protect the country's children, pigs, dogs etc. I wholeheartedly agreed (once again, using my valuable Peace Corps diplomatic training so useful all those years ago) and was ready to turn over my Fijian \$50 (knowing in the back of my mind, with a big mental smile, that it was only \$25 US... somehow a very comforting thought at that moment). It was explained to me that it might be hard for me to find the courts in Suva and I understood the message... perhaps, I said, with eyes turning slightly slit like and eyebrows pointed a tad upward, it would be OK for me to, well, perhaps, pay here? He looked at me knowingly and advised me that he did not have the proper paper work to give me the proper receipt... I understood again and assured him that it was OK with me not having a receipt... after all, he was an officer of the law and I trusted that he would make the proper paper work when he had the time. Who needs paperwork? I knew I didn't. I offered my \$50 bill to him in what I felt was a discreet manner but he just kept advising me of their concerns for the children etc. It took me a few minutes but I finally understood (Linda beat me by most of those minutes), with his help that he was trying to tell me that he was giving me a warning... DUUUUH! I thanked him profusely and promised to drive like a saint for the rest of the trip. Apart from my windshield wipers going off every time I was going to make a turn I did just as I promised and adhered to the speed limit at all times. I must say that it's very comforting to realize that there are honest, honorable folks in the world right where you'd expect them to be. Beyond the "event" our time in Fiji was great. The 8 hour trip from Nandi to Suva of yesteryear is now a comfortable 2 hour, plus change trip... *if* you're not stopped

for speeding. Each village was proudly announced with signs and in the more affluent villages, speed bumps were installed to keep you under 40km for sure. There were indeed cattle, pigs, horses and other farm animals to dodge when driving down the road but few kids jumped in the way. Although I know he'll never know I wrote this little "sorry" card, I still need to send my virtual apologies out to the "man in the skirt". I should have thought the best of him before I thought the worst. He obviously thought that of me...the best, I hope. Suva was a bit "big city" for us but the rest of Fiji was wonderful. One night the resort we were staying at offered a fire walking demonstration for a few bucks so we went to check it out. The fire walking turned out to be hot rock walking but still hotter rocks than I'd volunteer to stroll over. It was interesting to understand why this tradition exists and to see the whole process. After this demo they had a Kava ceremony (I had tried like hell to find a kava clutch in Tonga but with the time and limited transportation I was never successful, so this was my last chance to show Linda what this was all about.) As they explained the process and history of the kava ceremony people were encouraged to sit around the firewalkers and watch. I choose to stand for better "photo ops"...also realizing that sitting in the classic cross legged position might prove fatal in my present, shall I say, "uncondition". They'd called out for a "chief" to watch over the making of the kava. As I focused my camera a hand touched my shoulder and I was appointed, like it or not as the chief. An amazing thing happened that I felt was unattainable just minutes before...I was able to sit with my legs crossed...without passing out from the pain, in front of the "warrior" as he prepared the mix. As the chief I had the time honored responsibility, of course of downing the first shell of the magic mix. In my two years in Tonga that I spent drinking kava I never acquired the taste that would generate a yummy sound after taking down a "serving". Perhaps it was my age or maybe all the "pre-beering" that narrowed my taste buds and appreciation but I've matured over the years and I do understand, much more, the complexities of exotic flavors and what makes them special. As I sat there and realized this would be my first taste of kava in 25 years I cleared my mind for the experience. When I finished the drink, to the ceremonial shouts and hoots I realize that I had indeed, grown up. My tastes had matured and that this kava, this ancient spiritual drink, drunk by hundreds of generations over countless centuries still sucked, big time. In all fairness I always loved the traditions of the kava ceremony and the long nights of "drink and chats" but I never fell into much liking the taste.

The people and scenery of Fiji were postcard perfect.

### *No pictures this edition...*

I'm sending this "pictureless" to make it easier for all of you to open up. When it goes onto the web site I will include a few pictures in this edition and lots more in the photo section of the site to give you a "today" look of our old home away from home...The Kingdom of Tonga.

### *Reunion update...*

Still don't know for sure how many RPCV's will be at the reunion but there will be more than Linda and I. Jan Worth will be out as will Rod Hooker. Phil the writer also plans to drop by. There are a couple of others I think I know are coming and then there will be a surprise show or two I'm sure...or at least I hope. You can look it all up on the web site at [www.friendsoftonga.com](http://www.friendsoftonga.com). Door open on Friday August 3 and doors close on Sunday, August 5 (with no one coming Thursday, I thought I'd clear my desk off for a comfortable Monday return.

If you're undecided just show up. I do plan another reunion in twenty-five years but who wants to wait that long for an icy cold Stienlager?

