

# HOSTS AND GUESTS

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF TOURISM  
SECOND EDITION (1989)

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## *Tourism in Tonga Revisited: Continued Troubled Times?*

CHARLES F. URBANOWICZ

### *Prologue*

The following is a revision of a chapter published in 1977. Fieldwork for the earlier chapter was conducted in the Polynesian Kingdom of Tonga in 1970 and 1971. Since then, I have not been back to Tonga but have followed Tongan matters through published works (including Tongan government documents) and contacts with individuals in Tonga or individuals who have been to Tonga. For archival research, I have turned to the excellent resources of the Library of the University of Hawaii and the university librarian, Renee Heyum.

### *Background*

The Kingdom of Tonga lies in the heart of fabled Polynesia, approximately 550 miles southwest of Samoa and 450 miles southeast of Fiji. The tiny kingdom encompasses approximately 289 square miles and supports an estimated (1986) population of one hundred thousand, giving an average density of more than 346 persons per square mile. The actual usable land available for settlement, however, is only 190 square miles, giving a true density of 532 persons per square mile.

The population is not evenly distributed and the largest island of the group, Tongatapu (one hundred square miles, population of 57,411), is

the economic center for the archipelago. The second largest population of Tongans (15,068) is located on the islands of Vava'u, 180 miles northeast of Tongatapu. Tongatapu has been the historic residence of Tongan royalty, and Nuku'alofa, the capital as well as the largest city and the main tourist attraction, is located there.

Formerly a British protectorate, Tonga achieved independence in 1970 and entered the British Commonwealth of Nations in that year. The constitutional monarchy dates to 1875 and the current monarch, His Majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV acceded to the throne on his forty-ninth birthday on 4 July 1965. Tongan is the official language, but English is the second language and most Tongans are bilingual. The population is ethnically homogenous and 98 percent of the population is Tongan. Tongans are also stalwart Christians and in the 1976 census, which listed 90,085 inhabitants, only 233 respondents failed to declare a religious affiliation. The most recent census, conducted in November of 1986, reaffirms this Christian aspect of the kingdom.

Tourism in one form or another has existed in Tonga since the mid-1960s. One could argue that in 1966, when 14,581 passengers arrived on a cruise ship (up from 6398 in 1965) tourism had come to Tonga to stay. Tourism has grown considerably since I became involved with Tonga in the late 1960s: tourism (and the economic impact of tourism on Tongans) has been increasing due to extensive promotions that stress the beauty of unspoiled Polynesia, where English is spoken and where there is a king and queen.

Although Tonga is the last Polynesian kingdom, it is far from being the storybook land of culture brokers. Tonga is an overpopulated and underdeveloped tiny nation, struggling to maintain its cultural integrity in the face of twentieth-century changes. There are serious internal economic problems in Tonga for which, I believe, tourism is not the total solution. This case study examines the impact of tourism on the Tongan economy and the problems associated with the advent of mass tourism. It also provides information for the reader on one individual's perspective on tourism in Tonga for the past eighteen years: and that perspective is not a very positive one.

### *The Economic Problem*

Tonga continues to be a nation of small landholders. Despite government efforts to modernize and increase food production, the natural resources of the islands are inadequate to feed the local population and the increasing number of tourists. For greater cash flow, however, Tonga has also become

an exporter of agricultural commodities to meet consumer demands for Western products. It is interesting to note that while various amounts of frozen fish, live animals, and fruits and vegetables are *exported* to generate hard cash, meat and chicken account for a large portion of Tonga's annual *imported* foodstuffs.

In addition to foodstuffs and a variety of other items (including Tongan handicrafts) exported to raise funds, one of the major "exports" from Tonga that result in cash returning back to the kingdom are Tongans themselves: Tongans abroad send back millions of dollars in what have been called "invisible earnings" (categorized as remittances or gifts) from relatives overseas in Hawaii, New Zealand, or California. In 1974, for example, overseas funds to Tonga resulted in T\$3,582,000 injected into the economy and in 1980, for comparison, Tongans overseas sent T\$10,728,000. It is important to note here that because of changing exchange rates over the time period discussed in this chapter, (nearly two decades), all dollar amounts are given in Tongan currency relative to the times discussed: exchange rates for Tonga dollars have ranged from us\$.92 to us\$.86, and in 1987 one Tongan dollar was exchanged for us\$.70.

Inflation has eroded Tongan purchasing power over the past eighteen years, as indicated by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Established in 1969 with a base of 100.0, the CPI is based on the purchasing power of a "typical" Tongan family. Biased toward food items (64 percent of all items on the index), the CPI has risen steadily (Figure 1) ever since tourism began in the kingdom.

Another critical problem for Tonga is unemployment, and in an island world where land is important, many adult Tongans are landless. Although every Tongan male, upon reaching the age of sixteen (and becoming a taxpayer) is entitled to land for crops and for a home, there simply is not enough to go around. In 1966, 57 percent of all men over sixteen years of age who were entitled to tax allotments were landless, and by 1976 this number had increased to 64 percent. There are not many opportunities for jobs in the tourism sector of the Tongan economy, and since 1971 thousands of Tongans have gone overseas to work.

This "export" item has benefitted the Tongan economy but has also created problems: family life for wage earners who go overseas is disrupted and it has also created problems with the "host" countries that receive these (and other) islanders. On 1 December 1986, for example, the New Zealand Government lifted certain restrictions on visitors to New Zealand from Tonga, Fiji, and Western Samoa. In a mere eleven weeks, some 11,500 islanders had arrived in New Zealand, "many under the impression fostered

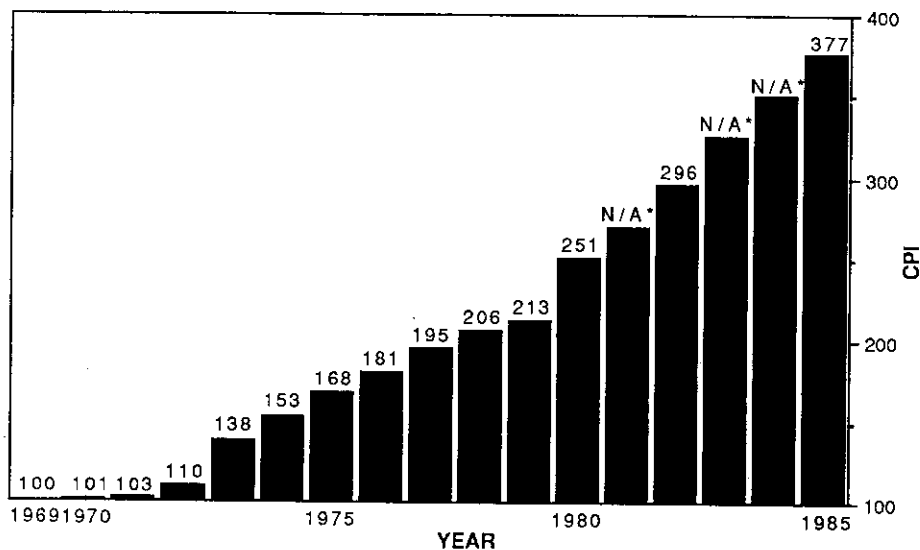


Figure 1. Tongan consumer price index, 1969–1985. \*Data not available. Source: Various Tongan government publications.

by travel agents that they could settle in the country permanently" (Barber 1987, p. 30). The New Zealand government terminated the program on 18 February 1987, but not until some 5000 Tongans had traveled to New Zealand on fifty special flights. It was reported that the kingdom ran out of passport forms and that this rush to leave Tonga left Tonga with a "shortage of nurses and teachers" (ibid.).

Tonga, like many of the island nations of the Pacific, continues to undergo massive acculturation. It is not surprising that in their 1970–75 development plan, Tongans viewed tourism as having the greatest economic potential for the kingdom, both as an employer of labor and also as a source of foreign exchange. In the five-year period of 1982–1986, tourism earnings brought some T\$37,878,997 into the kingdom: an impressive figure when one considers that the budget for the entire kingdom for 1986–1987 was T\$57,300,000.

### *The Economic Role of Tourism*

Tourists arrive in Tonga by private yacht, by cruise ships making a one- or two-day stop as part of a longer Pacific itinerary, or by air from Samoa, Fiji,

New Zealand, or Hawaii. In 1958 guests to Tonga were an elite group, when only three cruise vessels landed passengers at Tongatapu, and some special flights brought a total of sixty-four air passengers from Australia. Tourism, however, has grown steadily and rapidly, and more growth is anticipated, including tourism to areas other than Nuku'alofa. In 1973, cruise ships began scheduled visits to Vava'u, 180 miles north of Tongatapu, and twenty-four ships brought 9463 tourists to that island. In 1975, 17,500 tourists visited Vava'u and in 1985 there were 23,043 visitors to that island.

Foreign exchange receipts make tourism one of the top two income generators for Tongans (along with agriculture and livestock products). Table 1 clearly points out the monetary impact of tourism in Tonga from 1975,

TABLE 1.  
SELECTED TOURISTS TO TONGA BY CRUISE SHIP AND PLANE: 1958-1986

Year	Number of Passengers	Number of Ships	Number of In-Passengers	Number of Flights	Tourism Earnings
1958	1715	3	64	N/A	N/A
1959	2600	5	45	8	N/A
1960	N/A	7	189	23	N/A
1961	2866	4	308	35	N/A
1962	3677	6	524	66	N/A
1963	4355	6	668	75	N/A
1964	5626	10	992	117	N/A
1965	6398	8	1174	144	N/A
1966	14,581	20	1460	146	N/A
1967	14,240	14	2883	231	N/A
1968	11,111	12	3465	182	N/A
1969	18,111	19	4326	230	N/A
1970	21,025	24	4001	324	N/A
1971	23,500	32	4000	314	N/A
1972	27,259	29	4599	358	N/A
1973	31,502	48	6356	403	N/A
1974	36,308	44	6403	397	N/A
1975	44,968	45	6770	N/A	T\$1,700,000
1976	43,074	N/A	9312	N/A	T\$2,224,150
1977	44,683	54	11,023	N/A	T\$3,358,623
1978	52,275	49	12,090	N/A	T\$3,980,884
1979	36,171	42	12,189	N/A	T\$3,919,226
1980	39,521	37	12,505	N/A	T\$6,584,823
1981	45,229	46	12,611	N/A	T\$6,006,133
1982	43,869	36	12,443	N/A	T\$4,406,306
1983	49,586	38	14,482	N/A	T\$6,222,564
1984	43,911	46	13,713	N/A	T\$6,170,581
1985	41,748	46	14,216	821	T\$10,079,346
1986	N/A	N/A	~15,211	N/A	~T\$11,000,000

N/A = Not available

Source: Various Tongan government publications

when tourism "earnings" were singled out as a category at T\$1,700,000, to approximately T\$11,000,000 for 1986! Tourism is definitely increasing in Tonga, and the length of the stay of the "typical" tourist is increasing: while cruise-ship passengers visit for an eight-hour day, in 1985 the average tourist stayed 8.7 nights in the kingdom, spending an average of T\$402 per person.

The government of Tonga is interested in developing tourism for apparent economic benefits. The Tonga Visitor's Bureau (TVB) was created in 1971 to work toward that goal and it is the TVB's function to disseminate information to promote tourism. A typical mailing from the TVB will include promotional literature on the kingdom and will state that "we hope that this book on Tonga will assist you in encouraging and promoting visitors to the Kingdom of Tonga." Such a cover letter was included with a copy of a 1978 book entitled *Tonga* (by James Siers) wherein the author wrote:

The jet lands at Tongatapu and the visitor disembarks to go through immigration and customs formalities in a friendly atmosphere which sets the tone for the visit. Next comes an unhurried drive into town to a choice of accommodation. The Dateline Hotel offers first class tourist accommodations but there are a number of motels and guest houses which are typically Tongan: ultra friendly and concerned for the guest's welfare. As the majority of these are located in Nuku'alofa, it is possible to visit places of interest on foot. There is the Palace and a Chapel on the waterfront; the Royal tombs nearby; the markets where the stall-holders proudly display the abundant produce of Tonga's rich soil—tomato, cucumber, cabbage, lettuce, peppers, melons, citrus fruits in season, papaya and mango and the taro and yam for which Tonga is famous. There are many other things besides, including souvenirs. The people are justly famous for their handicrafts, especially tapa cloth made from the bark of a tree and beautiful basketware. (p. 7)

From this the reader gets a fairly good idea of the "image" that the TVB (and the travel agent) is trying to sell to the potential guest. A survey of tourist "likes" and "dissatisfactions" taken by the TVB indicated that many visitors felt that most Tongans did not know enough of their own culture and history (or at least the aspects of touristic interest), so the TVB published a pamphlet for local distribution to remedy this particular complaint.

Tongans have built airstrips to encourage tourist travel to outlying islands and the government continues to allocate substantial sums of money for hotel expansion and construction. With the help of overseas backing (from Australia, Japan, and West Germany), new hotels have been constructed on Tongatapu and Vava'u. Japanese companies have also expressed

an interest in joint investment with the Tongan government for facilities that would serve the public and especially entice the now rare Japanese traveler to Tonga.

In September 1986 the Japanese government confirmed a grant to Tonga of T\$4,850,000 to construct a "handicrafts and cultural resources centre" in the capital of Nuku'alofa on the island of Tongatapu. King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV has traveled to Japan, exchange clubs have been established, and Tongans have been encouraged to visit Japan. In 1976 the Japan/Tonga Friendship Fellowship opened a resort clubhouse in Tonga in an effort to develop growing contacts and increase guests to Tonga.

Tourism, however, increases the economic problems in the kingdom, especially the need for additional imported foodstuffs. Air passengers have to be fed, and although many enjoy the local fruits and bread (made from the imported flour), few would be content for long on the relatively bland Tongan diet of yams, taro, and fruit. Tongans are, indeed, competing with the tourists for the imported foods. The ever-increasing quantities of food that must be imported to feed the increasing number of tourists contributed to the steadily rising CPI. A similar situation prevails in Fiji, as Ward (1971, p. 171) noted more than a decade ago:

Some (Fiji) hotels, in the interest of greater economy and convenience, only provide a strictly limited choice of meals and the sort of meals which tourists expect to receive in their home countries, e.g. of the steak-hamburger-mixed grill variety. Many hotels argue that this is all the tourist wants although the best hotels do provide more extensive menus. The majority (of hotels, however) do provide the food which is produced and consumed by the local inhabitants and this compounds the problem of buying requirements from domestic producers.

Ward also states that despite the availability of many local foodstuffs tourists might consume, hotels in Fiji prefer to purchase their requirements overseas because, it has been argued, "they can only then be assured of continuity in supplies and of a consistent high standard of quality."

Tourism has grown rapidly in Tonga, but it could evaporate just as quickly. Tongans occasionally have experienced situations when the anticipated tourists have failed to arrive. In 1972, at least forty tour groups cancelled their planned air visits to Tongatapu because the tour operators could not be assured of making airline connections from the kingdom to other points on the itinerary; one can see in Table 1 that cruise-ship visitors appear to have peaked in 1978. The TVB attributes the steady increase in air visitors to consolidated and improved marketing of Tonga, with a media



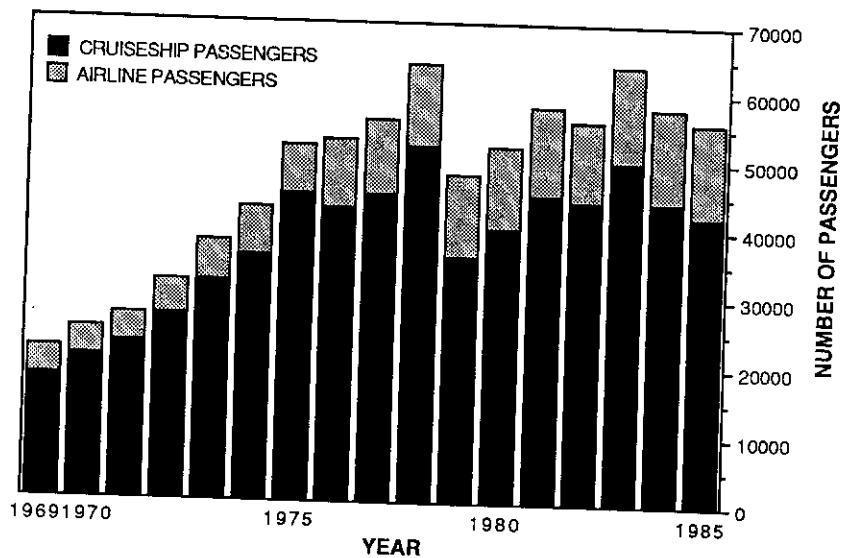


Figure 2. Number of cruise-ship and airline passengers (based on data from Table 1).

campaign in Australia and New Zealand, and some joint promotions of Hawaiian Air with the West Coast of the United States.

It is interesting to construct a bar chart which indicates, in gross numbers, the combined number of cruise-ship passengers and air visitors to this tiny Polynesian kingdom and to compare this chart with the steady increase in inflation over the same time period (Figure 2). There is, I believe, a direct relationship between increased tourism and increased inflation in the kingdom of Tonga.

Because of fuel and labor costs, long-haul cruises such as those that stop at Tonga are not as profitable as the short-haul, fast turnaround cruises that operate weekly or biweekly in the Caribbean (Waters and Patterson 1976). Future cruises to Tonga might continue to decrease, seriously affecting businessmen in Tonga. Awareness of the potential loss of revenue from tourism should serve to reinforce the Tongans' awareness of the potential for disaster if their economy is tied too closely to tourism. While short-term cruise passengers consume little of the imported foodstuffs, airline guests (whose stays range from five to eleven days) must be fed for the duration of their visit. The host-guest competition for food and natural resources will further contribute to inflation.

### *What Price Tourism?*

Tongans have become the victims of their own tourism. Exceedingly happy when ships dock with a thousand passengers (and several hundred crew members) who inject thousands of dollars into the economy in an eight-hour period, Tongans are even happier when the ships depart at dusk. The physical impact of a thousand tourists on one town on a tiny island is tremendous, especially when most tourists are bused to see *all* the sights of the island.

The tourist literature has brought the visitors here "to observe the traditional Tongan way of life in the *natives' own habitat*" and the shore excursions promise that you will "see the daily work routine of men and women—gardening, weaving baskets, cooking, washing and their many other activities. This village walking tour offers you an excellent opportunity to photograph the Tongan people as they really are" (Itinerary for the International Institute, 2 June 1974). Tongans cannot tolerate being regarded as members of a "cultural zoo" and Kirch has recently written of *Tourism as Conflict in Polynesia: Status Degradation Among Tongan Handicraft Sellers* (1984). Under these circumstances, there are few opportunities for a true host-guest relationship to develop.

Ordinarily, tourists have heard something about Tonga long before they arrive, and they anticipate "seeing" Tonga, but, all too often, cruise passengers get only a look at a "phony-folk-culture" in action or a Disneyland of the Pacific. Air guests, fewer in number than cruise guests (but staying longer), may have a somewhat different experience. They have the opportunity to enjoy the recreational facilities of a tropical island and they also have the opportunity to see more of the island at a gradual pace, to meet some of the truly hospitable Tongans, and to share a cross-cultural educational experience. The actual experiences, of the tourist, however, can fall short of this ideal.

The increasing number of visitors entering the last Polynesian kingdom can be impressive when compared to the indigenous Tongans who are year-round inhabitants. Rajotte, in a 1977 work entitled "Evaluating the Cultural and Environmental Impact of Pacific Tourism," stated that any attempt to ascertain the impact of tourism on a Pacific community should "begin by relating the tourism flow to the size of the island community into which it is injected" (1977, p. 44). With 60,000 Tongans in 1958 and 1769 tourists for the entire year, the Tongan-to-tourist ratio was 33:1. With 100,000 Tongans in 1985 and 55,964 ship and air passengers, the Tongan-to-tourist ratio was barely 2:1.

TABLE 2.  
TOTAL OF VISITORS AND EXCURSIONISTS ARRIVING IN TONGA: 1981-1985

Category	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Air Visitors	12,611	12,443	14,482	13,713	14,216
Cargo-ship Passengers	33	38	81	116	173
Yacht Visitors	875	648	1252	1290	1687
Naval Vessel Crew Members	627	2707	1180	2032	1462
Cruise-ship Passengers	45,229	43,869	49,586	43,911	41,748
Cruise-ship Crew Members	21,641	20,926	24,166	20,947	19,320
Foreign Vessel Crew Members	N/A	1369	1747	2760	2593
Total Visitors and Excursionists	81,016	82,000	92,494	84,769	81,199

"The Tonga Visitors Bureau uses the following criteria to define visitors/tourists and cruise passengers (excursionists). Visitors/Tourists: Any person visiting Tonga other than those usually resident within the Kingdom for any reason other than following an occupation remunerated from within Tonga. Visitors include persons travelling for pleasure (recreation, holiday, health, study, sport, religion), and for business, family reasons, missions, or meetings. The stay must be a minimum of 24 hours (over night) and accommodations must be in a hotel, guest house, or in a private home. Persons classified as yacht visitor arrivals may depart by air, ship, or yacht. From this definition, the Tonga Visitors Bureau reports its visitor statistics by three modes of travel: Visitors by Air, Visitors by Ship [and], Visitors by Yacht. Cruise passengers (Excursionists): as defined above visiting ports [in] the Kingdom by cruise ship but not utilising any land accommodations within the Kingdom. . . . the statistics presented are not based upon a sample but are an analysis of all Immigration Cards for the year [emphasis added]."

Source: Taumoepeau, Semisi P., *Visitors Statistics 1985*. Research and Statistical Section, Tonga Visitors Bureau, Nuku'alofa, Tonga 1986, pp. 6, 8.

The Tonga Visitor's Bureau has developed a sophisticated tracking system in an attempt to assess the impact of *all* visitors to the kingdom. In February of 1986, the Fifteenth Annual Statistics Report was published with data from a standardized format adopted in 1985 to "reflect the current requirements of those persons involved in the South Pacific travel industry, especially in the areas of planning, development and marketing" (Taumoepeau 1986, p. 5). Utilizing their data for 1985 (Table 2), including all individuals who entered Tonga, the 1985 total for all "Visitors and Excursionists" was 81,199 or a ratio of 1.23 visitors and excursionists to each Tongan!

The fact is granted that *not* every single one of these 81,199 individuals touched Tongan soil or interacted with Tongans (and many of these, especially cruise-ship crew members, were probably counted more than once in

the tally), but the impact of these "guests" on the "hosts" is increasing: what happens when tourists outnumber the Tongans for any given year? Forster (1964, pp. 217-22) pointed out that one of the fascinating aspects of the tourist process in the Pacific is the deliberate creation of a "phony-folk-culture," which the indigenous inhabitants develop to provide "authentic native culture" to the tourists. For example, a popular tourist "attraction" is a display of dances in Tonga: the program may contain almost a dozen Fijian, Tahitian, Hawaiian, or New Zealand dances performed by the Tongan dancers, but show only one or two Tongan dances. The fact is granted that a Tahitian *tamure* has a tremendous amount of visual impact, and a Fijian fire dance is dramatic, but Tongan dances have a beauty and symmetry of their own that should be performed for visitors to Tonga.

It is this alteration of their basic culture that has prompted Tongans to consider legislating the tourist industry. They seek to ensure the active preservation of the traditional Tongan way of life and culture by integrating traditional patterns into mass tourism and not making traditional culture a contemporary "phony-folk-culture."

The substantial amount of quickly generated cash derived from cruise-ship passengers (in return for an "authentic" Polynesian feast, shore excursions around the island, and the purchase of handicrafts), when placed into circulation in the port towns, can be the occasion for a party. Drinking may commence even before the ship has weighed anchor. Tongans still enjoy their traditional *kava* drink, but as stated elsewhere, when individuals begin to consume more alcohol than *kava*, in violation of their Christian ethic, it is an indication that the basic fabric of their culture and society has shifted (Urbanowicz 1977).

### *Conclusions*

Deep-seated economic problems induced by a growing indigenous and tourist population have almost engulfed the tiny islands of Tonga. The glitter of tourist money seemingly promises a substantial portion of much-needed economic help, but will it bring more "troubled times"? The current substantial cruise business might be considered relatively benign in that visitors are short-term, and they arrive and depart at a scheduled hour. Comparatively little capital or space is required to cater to their needs, aside from docking areas and taxis or buses. Further, the money that the cruise passengers spend is largely for local services (transportation, amusement, and for handicrafts as souvenirs) and directly benefits individuals.

A threatened demise of the cruise industry, to be replaced with an in-

creasing number of air travelers, may be potentially more disruptive to the economy and to the culture. To accommodate air visitors, hotels and resort facilities must be financed and built, but they must occupy land, already in short supply in Tonga. Given the small size of the capital of Nuku'alofa as well as the Island of Tongatapu itself, one must imagine the impact if one thousand guests were continually present, day *and* night, demanding that their needs be met, including Sunday, the traditional Tongan Sabbath and a day of rest. Although air travel is steadily developing, the advent of mass travel could "Waikiki" the beaches, and inundate local culture, as has already happened in certain parts of the Fiftieth State.

Tonga will certainly never approach the tourist volume of Hawaii (estimated to be 5,600,000 visitors in 1986), but Tongans could certainly take some hints from the tourist industry in Tahiti. For example, in all of 1967, Tahiti had a mere 16,200 tourists and it wasn't until 1979 that the 100,000-visitor mark was passed; in 1986, Tahiti's visitor count was a phenomenal 161,238 and with increased air carrier service in effect, officials are predicting 220,000 tourists a year by 1990. To anyone who has traveled to Tahiti it is clear that the number one complaint in Tahiti is the cost of food and beverages. Tahiti has been described by some individuals in three simple words: "beautiful but expensive," and the same might well be said for Tonga within the next decade.

The prime minister of Tonga (His Majesty's brother) has repeatedly stressed that Tongan culture can withstand the impact of modern tourism development. I, too, am certain that Tongans will survive; however, will they still be Tongans? Or will they become yet another example of a people who have been forced to abandon their traditions (or at least move them "back stage" away from prying eyes) to prevent their becoming the "quaint" customs of ethnic tourism?

The anthropological analysis of tourism differs from the statistical methods employed by economic planners in that the former assesses tourism's impact upon culture and the social milieu rather than being restricted to analyzing the balance-of-trade or the CPI. There is an important ethno-historic component to cultural change, from past to present, just as there is a strong cross-cultural component that must be studied. Tongans must become aware of the changes that have occurred as a result of non-Tongan influences; they must also study the effects of tourism elsewhere in the Pacific islands. From these two sources, they should design for the future. Tourism *must be* properly controlled if it is to make a positive contribution to the economy, to the Tongan hosts, and to the non-Tongan guests.

*Epilogue*

It should be clear from this reading that I am not overwhelmingly ecstatic about tourism in Tonga or impressed with the impact of tourism as a world-wide phenomenon. Tourism has been with us as long as people have had excess time to travel and, too, excess funds to expend on traveling to locations distant from home.

Tourism will not go away because being a tourist allows the traveler to leave behind his own local "poverty" and see or experience a new localized (and often) Third World poverty that is not his own. As affluent tourists we leave behind the hardships of home and "visit ourselves" upon the hardships of others. As tourists (or travelers) we effectively leave behind the death and dying of our peer group: while we may see death and dying around us as we travel (just as we may see poverty and beggars as we travel), the people that we see are not "our own" people.

Travel or tourism is thus a bit of an escape from our local problems: an escape from the daily routine of paying mortgages, bills, and watching the stress level go up around us. As a tourist (or traveler) we are safely in the hands of the pilot or steward or cruise captain who will take us to our destination without our worrying about getting there. Traveling is an escape to the carefree times of childhood when someone else had to do the worrying for us, and traveling is here to stay!

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