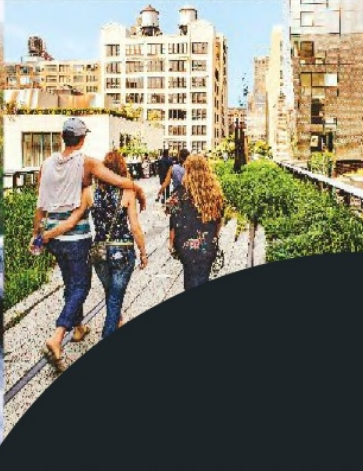
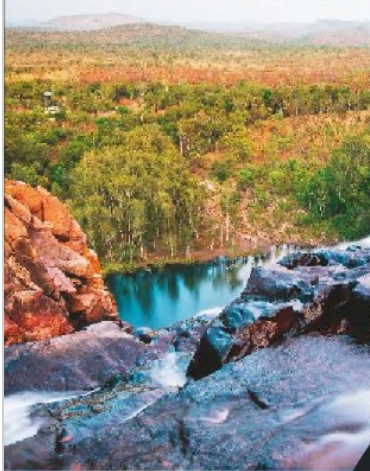


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January 2015 Issue 162

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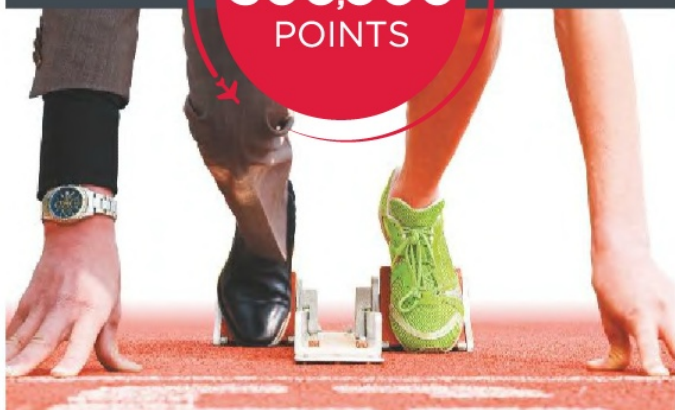
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## CONTRIBUTORS



### ANDY ISAACSON

is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in his hometown of Brooklyn, New York. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian* and *National Geographic Traveler*. Isaacson wrote and shot this month's feature about Tonga (page 92). This photo was taken in Park City, Utah, at the Sundance Film Festival by a German photographer. The owl belonged to a man who educates people about birds of prey.

### JOSIE PORTILLO

is an illustrator living in Los Angeles, who creates illustrations for books, magazines and the advertising industry. This issue she made the map of Faith Popcorn's Shanghai (page 107). She draws inspiration from vintage animations, nature, reading and one of her favourite pastimes — travelling. Among her hobbies are cooking, playing soccer and spending time with her dogs.



### JENNETH ORANTIA

lives in Sydney and works as a freelance technology journalist. She's had more than a decade of experience covering everything from new operating systems to the latest iPhone, so she was well placed to investigate the changing face of digital TV in Australia (page 114). When she isn't testing the latest mobile device or updating her social media, Orantia enjoys going on adventures with her three-year-old son.



### MELISSA MACKIE

created the illustrations for this issue's piece about the rise of the 'entre-ployee' (page 120). The New South Wales-based illustrator and graphic designer is often found at second-hand shops or local markets, looking for vintage books that she can use for her next illustration — which will likely combine digital and hand-painted elements with photography. Her love for everything vintage and reclaimed is reflected in her illustrations.





An island girl wears traditional dress for a cultural performance. **(opposite)** Whale-watching in Tonga.





SEA

# change

*The South Pacific's last remaining kingdom is a place steeped in tradition and teeming with marine life. And with conservation programs taking priority, Tonga will hopefully be charming tourists for years to come.*

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY ANDY ISAACSON



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# THE FOUR SEASONS

Photo by Christopher Ireland

RICHARD TOGNETTI EXPLORES MUSICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST  
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The humpback whales pierce the surface, shoot geysers of vapour and flash their tails before disappearing back under the sea. If this were a normal whale-watching trip, the dozen tourists watching from a boat 100 metres away would be giddy and gleefully recall this brief sighting with a tick on their bucket lists over chardonnay and mahi mahi below decks that night. But this isn't your average whale-watching trip. This is Tonga and here you can jump out into the water and actually join the herd.

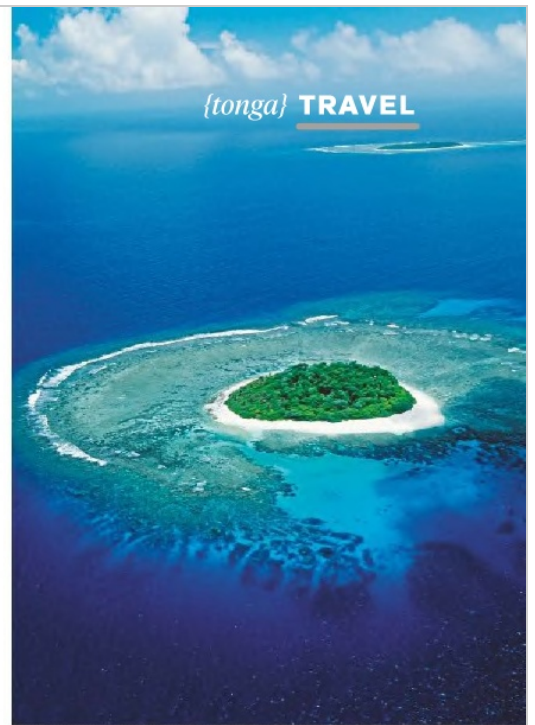
Our tour guide is an affable Brit named Sam, who summons the group into smaller rubber skiffs and ferries us to a position just ahead of the whales' migration path. Masks and snorkels are pulled on and we slide into the water. The whales soon pass

silently underneath, like ghosts, big as lorries. At first, they pay our cluster of rubber flippers little mind. But then they return. Are they curious? Apparently so. For the next 30 minutes, two male humpbacks circle closely below the group, periodically rising to the surface to breathe before descending with ballerina-like grace. Who knew that a 30-tonne mammal could pirouette? A few times, people dive down so they can stare into a whale eye.

Tonga is one of few places that allow such close encounters, and in the sleepy capital of Nuku'alofa — a town without a single traffic light — the country's Deputy Prime Minister Samiu Kuita Vaipulu explains how this came about. "I said to them [the International Whaling Commission], 'There are two choices: we can either eat the whales, or we can swim with them,'" he says. "I was only joking. But it worked."

Most local whale tour operators launch day trips out of the country's northern Vava'u island group. But with some outfits, including the Fiji-based company NAI'A ([www.naia.com.fj](http://www.naia.com.fj)), it's possible to live aboard a vessel for 10 days, tracking whales around the 60-odd islands that make up the Ha'apai Islands in central Tonga.

Humpback whales spend the summer months around Antarctica, feasting on krill, before migrating in the winter to places such as Tonga to mate and calve. Males there violently churn the water as they chase and slap each other in a battle for females. They call these 'heat runs'. New mothers with calves in tow school their



offspring on the ways of the sea. Meanwhile, pods of pilot whales glide through the ocean, singing songs. On a swimming tour, this hidden world is made visible.

#### CONSERVE AND PROTECT

Half of the animal extinctions recorded in the past 400 years have been island species, a consequence of more people, less habitat and the introduction of non-native wildlife. Local people typically see conservation and prosperity as a trade-off, which is where Seacology, a California-based non-profit environmental organisation, steps in.

Seacology proposes a 'win-win' deal to island communities: the islanders receive much-needed infrastructure in exchange for a commitment to protect local habitat. On Hainan Island in China, for example, Seacology supports children's education in exchange for protecting the habitat of the endangered Hainan gibbon. On an island village in the Philippines, Seacology funded the construction of guardhouses, and purchased conservation area patrol boats and cashew production equipment to encourage an alternative economic lifestyle. In turn, marine and mangrove protection areas were set up for 25 years.

Seacology's investments are relatively small, but the results are measurable and immediate. Since 1991, Seacology projects have protected more than 500,000 hectares of marine and terrestrial habitat worldwide.

In 2008, the Tongan government, with Australian funds, established six marine protected areas within the Ha'apai island group, including a 1600-hectare zone ►



(top to bottom) Paradise in blues and greens; hanging out the welcome sign; swimming with the whales.





## TRAVEL {tonga}



around the village of Felemea. The waters there contain clams, sea slugs, seaweeds, crab, lobster and many reef fish — highly commercial resources that are threatened by overfishing. The ‘special management area’ around Felemea prohibited outsiders from fishing there, and also mandated that the villagers themselves harvest sustainably. But the marine reserve was managed very laxly so Seacology offered the people of Felemea funding to refurbish its community hall in return for the people’s help to protect 150 hectares of marine habitat over the next 10 years.

On the day that Seacology’s board members and executive director Duane Silverstein visit Felemea to commemorate the community hall’s opening, the villagers prepare a grand ceremony. Plastic chairs are arranged under a white tent outside the low-lying white and blue structure, its cement veranda ornamented with painted tapa cloths, a traditional fabric made from paper mulberry tree bark. A beautiful hymn kicks off speeches to give thanks, followed by a ribbon cutting, dancing and music by a fellow with a synthesiser.

Inside the building, local women display woven purses, hand fans, necklaces and trays, on which the slogan ‘Tonga Friendly Island’ is painted. Captain Cook gave the Tongan islands this nickname after he received a warm welcome here in 1773. It later turned out the islanders were actually

plotting to kill him, but they’re friendly indeed. These days Cook’s nickname is used as a marketing slogan.

Across many tables, the villagers have laid out an enormous banquet: mussels steamed in banana leaves, whole roasted pigs and taro, shredded beef and grilled fish. Teenage girls in tapa dresses perform slow dances, their twirling arms glistening with coconut oil, on which the audience stick Tongan money as tips.

“Unlike the vigorous *tāmūrē* of Tahiti and Cook Islands or the swaying hula of Hawaii,” reads a decades-old pamphlet on Tongan dance practice, “dancing in Tonga is a dignified, graceful portrayal of the choreographer’s art.” Only vaudeville best describes what occurs next. A lady in a tapa skirt emerges wearing a boa of red balloons and a long necklace that is strung with aluminium soda cans. Her twirling hands mimic traditional dance movements but the absurd outfit has the locals in belly laughs. Then, two women in plastic grass

WE’RE STILL  
CARRYING ON  
TRADITIONS  
THAT HAVE BEEN  
LOST... A LIFESTYLE  
THAT IS NOT  
COMMON.

”

skirts come out wearing oversized red boxing gloves and fake a fight with each other. It is bizarre and wonderful.

### A ROYAL WELCOME

Tonga is the last Polynesian monarchy, the only South Pacific island nation to have avoided formal colonisation. On the outskirts of Nuku’alofa lives Princess Mele Siu’ilikutapu Kalaniuvalu Fotofili, niece of the late king, Tāufa’āhau Tupou IV. Her small estate sits on the edge of a tranquil bay; the former site of Tonga’s first wharf. A spacious porch lined with tapa cloths wraps around the house. When I visit, the princess is dressed in a white-and-black flowered dress, red shawl and pearl necklace. She tells me to call her Mary.

Mary has the dignified, elegant presence of a royal and the unassuming warmth of a friendly islander. Now in her sixties, her accent carries traces of the 22 years she lived abroad in New Zealand. Asked how she explained Tonga to people she met during those years away, the princess considers the question.

“You’re going to get something here that’s lost,” she replies. “We’re still carrying on traditions that have been lost... a lifestyle that is not common. We have something here that you won’t get anywhere else.” It’s true — where else will you see pirouetting whales and village women boxing? 🐳

**GETTING THERE** To book your flight to Nuku’alofa, visit [www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com) or call 13 67 89 (in Australia).



Locals performing a traditional dance. (top left) Waterside on the Vava’u island group, Tonga.