



Payback Is Paradise

They were just lending a hand in Tonga. In return, they got an island — all of it.

by BRIANNA RANDALL

→ BEN AND LISA NEWTON WERE sailing gypsies back in 2004. They had sold two businesses and two homes in California, and set sail for the next decade. But then they nearly tripped over the Tongan island group of Vava'u. That's where an unexpected gift dropped at their feet: a three-acre island. A deserted one, with palm trees and white sand. Now the couple is firmly rooted on Fetoko Island (population 2), dodging pigs, sharing fish and playing cornhole with the locals from neighboring islands.

Q: Claiming an island in the South Pacific doesn't happen in real life. Does it?

BEN: It wasn't planned. When we arrived in Vava'u, we made friends with a local Tongan family who had four kids and a fifth on the way. Their house was in foreclosure. After some serious soul-searching, we decided to pay off the bank debt for them.

Q: Nice way to make friends.

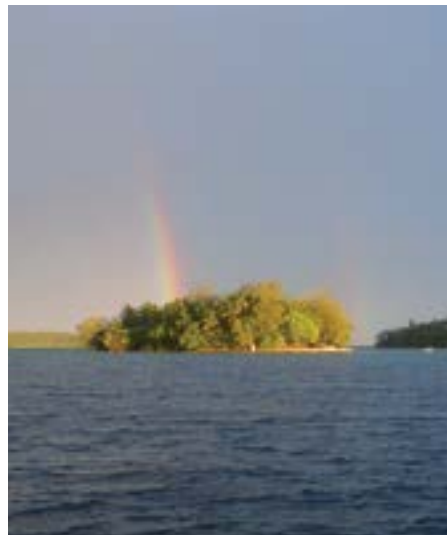
BEN: First they offered us their unborn child in return. We were like, "Whoa! A simple 'thank you' is just fine."

Q: And Fetoko was their thank-you card.

BEN: The family had been caretakers of this little island for generations.

Q: No way. So a piece of the Kingdom of Tonga is suddenly yours.

LISA: Well, you don't really own it. Most land is owned by either the king, a noble or a first-born son. *Pa'alangis* (foreigners) like us just lease it. Our lease term for Fetoko Island is 50 years,



"It took dozens of fish to seal the deal. But it was worth the wait. And the fish."

with an annual payment of \$1,000 pa'anga, or about \$600 USD.

Q: Fifty bucks a month? Sweet mortgage.

LISA: It gets a little complicated. No one technically owned Fetoko. It had never been surveyed, for instance, so the government had to start from scratch. We decided to be patient, not pushy, and to try to follow Polynesian customs

Q: What are "Polynesian customs?"

BEN: A smile, a laugh or the gift of a

fish go a long way toward getting things done. For instance, we had to bring a fish to the governor in exchange for our conversation with him.

Q: How many fish sealed the deal?

LISA: Dozens and dozens. But it was worth the wait. And the fish.

Q: You didn't officially move onto the island until 2009, a four-year wait. What did you do to pass the time?

BEN: We knew we couldn't just sit in

the bar all day. We couldn't leave this opportunity either. So we built a restaurant on another island. We also started kart-safari and power-kayak tours, and built cyclone-safe moorings for yachts.

Q: How did you celebrate when the king finally signed your lease?

LISA: We threw a few dance parties. Then we sold our other businesses so we had the money to build here.

Q: You took up residence on an island that had been a picnic spot for Tongans. How'd that go over with them?

BEN: We still welcome them to stop over and visit. We hire workers from Ofu, the island just a few hundred feet away. But we'll always be foreigners.

Q: You have no roads, no cars and no other residents on Fetoko.

BEN: Yeah, it's quiet, though our two dogs and cat make noise tearing after crabs or fruit bats. We have projects: fixing a boat, building a fale, catching rainwater, tinkering with the solar panels. And now we're managing the resort, Mandala, that we opened in 2013.

Q: A resort on an island of two people.

LISA: The first fale we built was a tree-house — what better way to escape than living in a tree? The resort is supposed to be fun. That's why we have the cornhole boards front and center.

Q: Cornhole? As in beanbag tossing?

BEN: Exactly. We introduced the game to Tonga. We even host an annual cornhole tournament. The Tongans are naturals at it.

Q: What's harder, maintaining your own island or managing a resort?

LISA: Both. Supplies are tough to come by. When we built the restaurant, we had to do everything. It took 50,000 bags of sand, rock and concrete, and hundreds of boat shuttles from town.

Q: Nobody's feeling sorry for you.

LISA: Owning an island or a resort were never goals for us. This just happened.

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No One Told Us About ...

EYEBROW CONVERSATIONS

The Tongans are open — that is, if you can interpret their facial expressions. Entire conversations are conveyed with eyebrow movements, which can be disconcerting for visitors waiting for words.

PIGS AND THE RIGHT OF WAY

Fences are almost nonexistent in Tonga, so livestock roam free. Pigs are a main currency. They also cause a majority of accidents on the road. Ben had a spectacular motorcycle crash when he T-boned a massive mama porker last year.

QUIET TIME ON SUNDAY

No country has ever stuck its flag in the Kingdom, so Tonga's greatest influence has been Christian missionaries. Even today it's illegal to play loud music or conduct any type of business on Sundays.

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