

TONGA HUMPBAC WHALE SWIM

What to Pack

Vava'u, Tonga — 8 nights — A David Girsh photography expedition

Alright team. Here's the rundown on what to bring to Vava'u. I've run this trip enough times to know exactly what you'll be glad you packed and what'll just sit in your bag, so have a proper read, it'll save you out there.

A couple of things to know up front. We're on the water a lot, and the days are long. You'll be hopping in and out chasing whales, the wind picks up on the boat, and between drops you cool down faster than you'd think, even on a sunny day. Sort your warmth and your in-water kit and you'll have the time of your life.

The water gear (the bit that matters most)

If you've got your own gear that fits you, bring it. Comfort over a long day beats everything. If you're missing something, tell me well before we fly and we'll sort it.

- ☐ **Mask.** Bring one that actually fits your face, a leaky mask will wreck your day. A low-volume freedive mask is ideal. Throw in some anti-fog, or just use spit or baby shampoo, whatever you trust.
- ☐ **Snorkel.** Keep it simple, a basic snorkel is all you need, nothing fancy.
- ☐ **Fins.** We're not swimming hard or chasing whales, but there's the odd bit of swimming here and there, so a comfortable pair of open-heel fins makes it easy. Bring neoprene socks so you don't rub raw.
- ☐ **Wetsuit.** The water sits in the mid-20s and feels lovely. Your suit doesn't need to be a full one, a shorty does the job, it's more about sun protection than warmth. For the wind on the boat between swims, that's what the jacket further down is for. A 3mm is the sweet spot for most people.

Tip: a hooded vest or beanie-style neoprene hood is a small thing that keeps the cold ones in the water way longer. If you run cold, bring one.

Staying warm and dry between swims (don't skip this)

This is the bit people forget and then regret. The wind on the boat is what gets you. You're wet, the boat's moving, and it turns chilly quick.

- ☐ **A proper jacket.** A windproof, water-resistant shell or spray jacket is honestly one of the best things you can pack. It's the difference between a comfy day and a miserable one.
- ☐ **A warm layer.** A hoodie or fleece to throw on between swims and for the ride back in.
- ☐ **A change robe or poncho towel.** Those big towelling change robes are brilliant for warming up and getting changed on a moving boat. Bring one if you can.
- ☐ **A beanie,** if you really feel the cold once you're out of the water.

Sun and salt

- ☐ **Reef-safe sunscreen** (mineral or zinc based), nice and high SPF. Please leave the regular stuff at home, it's bad for the reef and the world these whales live in.
- ☐ **Wide-brim hat.**

- ☐ **Polarised sunnies with a strap**, or you'll be donating a pair to the ocean.
- ☐ **A long-sleeve sun shirt or rashie.**
- ☐ **SPF lip balm.**
- ☐ **A light, quick-dry towel.**

Your camera kit (this is your show)

- ☐ **Way more batteries and cards than you think.** You'll shoot more than you expect, every single time.
- ☐ **A laptop and hard drives.** Back up every night, two copies if you can. Don't fly home with the trip of a lifetime sitting on one card.
- ☐ **The little stuff.** Lens cloth, silicone grease, a blower, and a float strap on anything you'd hate to lose.

On land and in the village

Tonga is warm and welcoming, and it's a deeply Christian country. A little respect goes a long way.

- ☐ **Modest clothing for the village**, shoulders and knees covered once you're away from the beach and the boat.
- ☐ **Know that Sundays are sacred and quiet.** Most things close, it's a rest day, and I've got a plan for us.
- ☐ **Casual, comfortable clothes** for warm days, plus a layer for cooler evenings.
- ☐ **Comfortable walking shoes or sandals**, and a pair of reef shoes.
- ☐ **Toiletries and a small first-aid kit**, band-aids, blister plasters, antiseptic, and any personal meds in their original packaging with a few extra days' worth.

The boring but important stuff

- ☐ **Passport** valid for at least 6 months beyond our travel dates.
- ☐ **Travel insurance that covers in-water activities.** This one is not optional, please sort it before you come.
- ☐ **Flights** booked and saved to your phone.
- ☐ **Copies of your passport and insurance** on your phone.
- ☐ **Cash, in Tongan pa'anga.** Vava'u runs largely on cash and ATMs are limited, so bring enough for the week.
- ☐ **Seasickness tablets** if you're prone to it. Take them before you get on the boat, not after.
- ☐ **A reusable water bottle.** The sun and salt sneak up on you, stay hydrated.
- ☐ **A dry bag** for your phone and valuables on the boat.

Power: Tonga uses the same plugs as Australia (Type I, 240V), so no adapter needed if you're coming from home. Travelling from elsewhere? Bring a Type I adapter.

Can't wait to get you out there with these giants. Any questions, you know where I am.

David