

Pallidula



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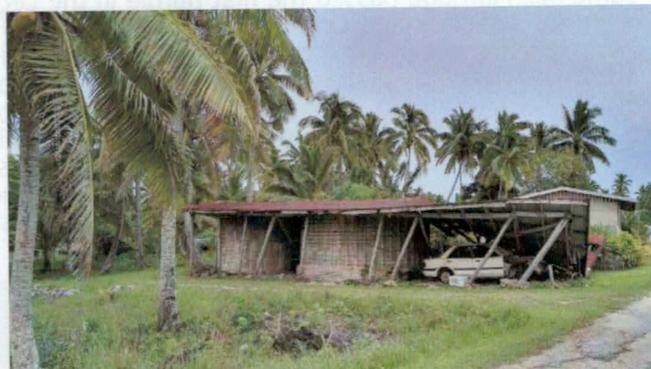
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Niue Island - a paradise for collectors?

by Felix Lorenz, photos by Jana Kratzsch

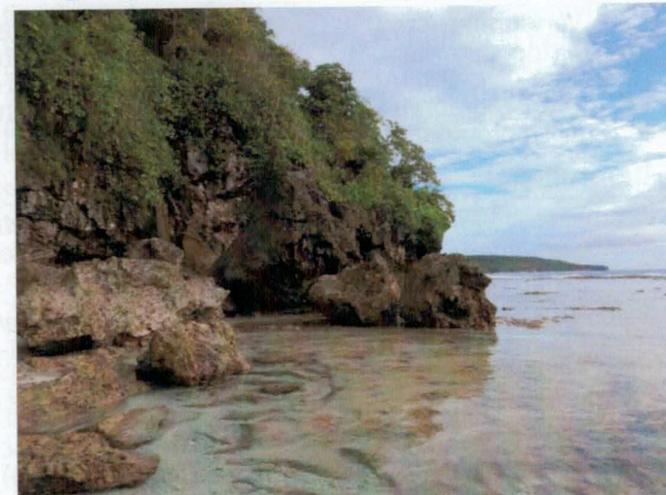
In February 2017 Jana and I visited the small island of Niue, located between the Cook Islands, Tonga and Samoa. It measures only some 30 by 40 km, and has a tropical climate with plenty of rain. Once a week, a plane travels back and forth from Auckland, New Zealand, with which Niue is affiliated politically. The island is a raised coral atoll consisting of Pliocene limestone rising from a depth of 4000 m to approxi-



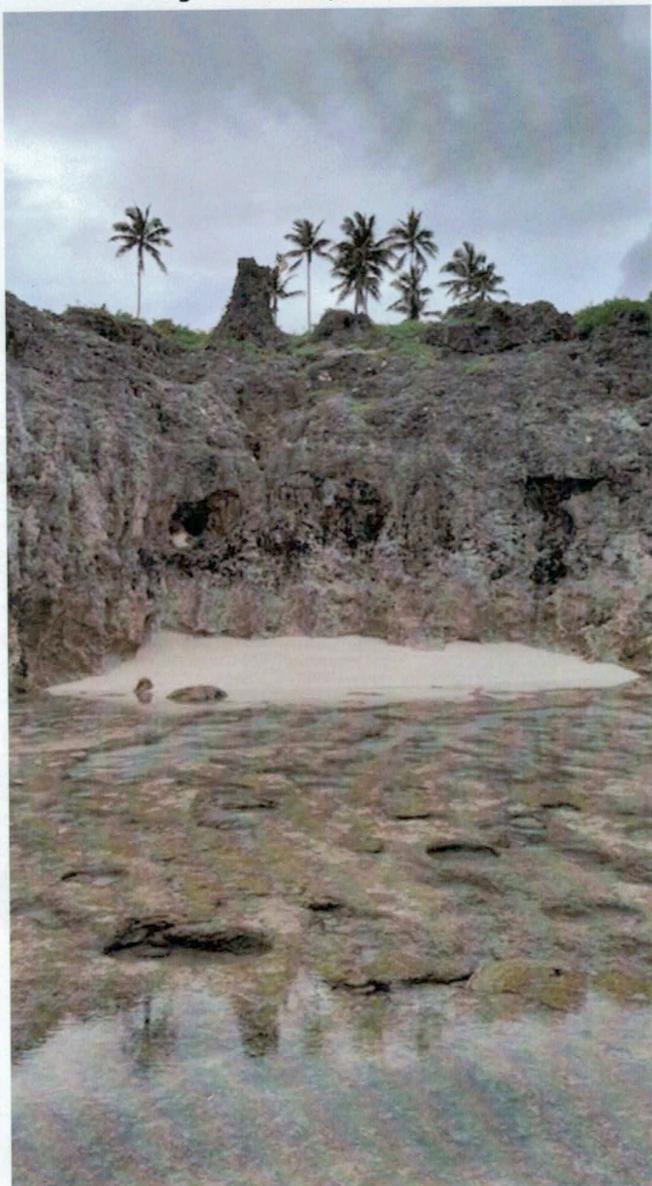
Abandoned house

Most of these "beaches" are only exposed and accessible during low tide. Only in two spots is it possible to swim in the sea, provided the weather is calm. Only one snorkelling site, a small pool in the north of the island, is accessible from the shore. There are 1400 native people living on the island, distributed over a dozen small villages. Everybody we met spoke excellent English and getting in contact with local people was easy and pleasant. The population of Niue has gradually gone down since the 1960s. Numerous cyclones have devastated the infrastructure and people left for New Zealand, where more than 20,000 Niue Islanders live today. Driving through the island you see abandoned houses and rotting cars taken over by vegetation everywhere.

Niue's architecture is best described as a random mix of tin sheds and containers in varying states of decay gathered around comparatively monumental white churches with extensive, lovingly curated lawns. Sunday is Church Day and all businesses on Niue are closed. When we first went to see the capital Alofi to buy some supplies we nearly drove past it. Most roads are full of potholes and accessing the paths that lead down to the sea may require a little bit of off-road driving experience, but the signage is comprehensive and visitor friendly, and after all, circumnavigating the island by car takes only two hours.



Rugged cliffs along the shoreline of Niue



Limestone cliffs and tide pools

mately 60 m above sea level. Steep rugged cliffs form the shoreline; only one sloping rubble beach, of about 100 m length, with a platform for launching boats, is located in the southwest of the island. In all other places, accessing the sea is difficult and requires climbing down narrow, picturesque, semi-paved jungle paths that lead down to flat intertidal reef plateaux. In many places there is a narrow sandy strip of beach where the plateau meets the limestone walls.



A pair of *Lyncina ventriculus* in a tide pool

There are several accommodations for tourists, ranging from simple to luxury. We stayed at the welcoming "Scenic Matavai Resort", situated above the sea in the southwest. Obtaining a rental car is easy and comparatively affordable, but the money required for food, drinks and accommodation is outrageous, to say the least. During the time of year we visited, there are not many tourists on the island and everything seemed relaxed and laid back. But during the high season it is supposed to be a madhouse of mainly Asian tourists that come for the whales: Niue is one of the few places worldwide where they still let tourists snorkel with humpback whales that migrate past the island from July to October.



A "rubber duck" is hoisted into the water with a crane

Scuba diving is offered by two operators, one located directly at our resort. Their gear is in excellent condition and the people operating it can only be described as great. Getting into the water requires a short drive, lifting the rubber duck into the sea with a crane, and calm weather. The diving is nothing special if you have seen other places in the general area. The rough seas do not allow a vibrant growth of coral, but there are usually isolated patches of coral around the island which do not seem to be bleaching a lot. There are basically no fish, and our dive operator told us that it has always been like this. A few sharks that stay in the distance, a parrot fish here and there, but that's it. There are surge channels and dive-throughs, and rock pools with sandy areas. Looking for shells means searching in these channels and pools, and what you will find is usually eroded by the surf. The fauna is typical for the general area, a

mix of species of the Samoan and Polynesian provinces. There is a single endemic species, *Haliotis jacnensis kershawi* OWEN 2012, which is about the most abundant shell to be picked up along the shores. In some places there are thousands of fresh dead ones, but we did not see a single living animal. They must be hiding in the deep crevices of the limestone reef edges. In the tide pools, *Lyncina schilderorum* IREDALE, 1939, *L. ventriculus* (LAM., 1810), *Mauritia depressa* (GRAY, 1824), *M. maculifera scindata* LORENZ, 2002, *Monetaria caputserpentis* (L., 1758) and *Naria poraria* (L., 1758) are the most abundant cowries. Interestingly, species common elsewhere are rare or absent on Niue, e.g. *Monetaria annulus* (L., 1758), of which we did not see a single specimen. The isolated



Jungle path

position of the island results in a somewhat low diversity. The wave-swept rocks support mainly species that favour open ocean conditions. Subtidally, there are the typical smaller species found in such habitats, including *Cryptocypraea dillwyni* (SCHILDER, 1922) and *Ipsa childreni* (GRAY, 1825), but always dead and often eroded. We were told that *Textilia adamsonii* (BRODERIP, 1836) can be found there but we did not see even a fragment. Instead, *Harmoniconus mcbridei* (LORENZ, 2005) is quite abundant on the rocky walls of the surge channels at 5-10 m. We collected a small box of dead cowries and shells of other families, mainly at the places where we could access the sea. Very little worth taking was found diving. After the heavy storms the week before, the beaches were covered in shells and garbage, which we took with us and later disposed of.

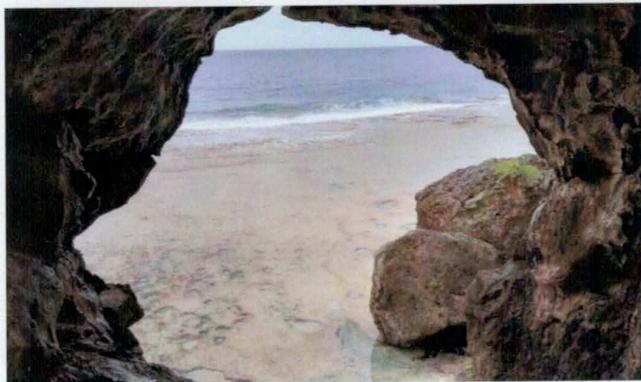


A surge channel



Coral reef at Niue

Among the shells we collected, none was larger than 3 cm, about 90% was badly eroded, but there were about a dozen specimens containing the freshly dead animals. To prevent these from rotting, I pickled them in pure alcohol and air-dried them. We prepared a box to post them home, as our next destination was Rarotonga and we did not want to carry them around with us. In the printed visitors' brochure "your island guide" there is a line stating "All food, animal and plant products, plant material (...) must be declared to the Quarantine Office (...) for a certification". So, I went there and presented the box. Like 99% of all Niue Islanders we met, people



The beach

were very friendly and humorous. The shells were inspected and approved, and a big badge was taped around my box which was now ready for the post office two sheds down the road. The morning after all that had happened, we were waiting for our plane at the departure hall at the airport. My name was called out and I was led through a security door to an officer of DAFF (Niue Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries). He confronted me with my box, its stamps and the precious badge ripped open and its contents all spread out. I was informed that he believed my card placed in the box as reference of address "could be a fake" [sic] and the expression on his face told me he regarded me as a smuggler and bio-terrorist. Even a small bag of sand Jana had taken as a souvenir was a "you cannot take this!" And no, they would not refund the 127 NZ Dollars I had wasted on postage.

Living *Gastridium geographus* (L., 1758)

Would you expect to break any rules by picking dead shells from the beach and having them approved by quarantine - especially in view of the facts that key chains made of coral are sold locally, spear fishing is allowed, as is "swimming with whales"? Also, smashing *Turbo* shells for fishing bait is OK and a common practise. At least the export of coconut crabs (*Birgus latro*) is now being discouraged.

Anyway, it all became a lengthy conversation with that officer, who in summary told me the shells will be thrown back onto the beach because they are of no use for education and the fauna of Niue is well



Weather warning

known: two people from National Geographic were there and had looked at everything...

Having said all this, I would strongly recommend to the Niue Department of Whoever-Is-In-Charge to make sure that visitors like me, with an interest in shells, are given precise information on the Niue website and brochures, explicitly stating that it is forbidden to take sand, dead shells, and so on. Also, to train officers to act in a consistent manner. In conclusion, we will not go back to Niue simply because there is not very much for us to see or do if picking up shells from the few beaches they have is illegal.