

Title:

Samoa, Heart of Polynesia

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Summary:

The islands of Samoa are emerging as an exciting new South Pacific travel destination between Hawaii and New Zealand.

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Article Body:

The islands of Samoa are emerging as an exciting new South Pacific travel destination between Hawaii and New Zealand. This "Heart of Polynesia" is politically split into two distinct entities 80 miles apart. The country Samoa is a former German colony, captured by New Zealand in 1914 and granted independence in 1962. In 1997 the name was changed from Western Samoa to Samoa.

American Samoa is the only U.S. territory south of the equator. Annexed by the United States for use as a naval base in 1900, the territory no longer has any military significance. Instead, Pago Pago currently hosts the StarKist and "Chicken of the Sea" tuna canneries, making it the most important commercial fishing port under the American flag.

The Samoan environment is tropically lush, with green volcanic peaks plunging to brilliant coral reefs, an ecotourism paradise still unspoiled by mass tourism. Visitors often stay in open Samoan beach houses called fale (pronounced FAH-lay) and adopt the laidback local lifestyle. Swimming, snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking, surfing, deep sea fishing, and hiking opportunities are all close at hand.

Samoan culture is alive and strong, and local traditions can add another fascinating layer to your travel experience. Most Samoans are subsistence farmers who reside in small villages governed by chiefs (matai). The egalitarian ideals of this communal society place loyalty to family and religion above all. Visitors can sample this culture at the weekly "fiafia" island night dance shows staged at most of the larger hotels and beach resorts. Buffets of authentic Samoan dishes are an essential part of these events.

Samoa's climate is sultry, alternately sunny and rainy, but always hot and

humid. Cooling sea breezes make the shoreline the best place to be year-round. The nicest months weather-wise are May to September, "winter" south of the equator. The rainy season runs from November to April, with increasingly intense hurricanes sweeping in due to global warming. Yet you can get long spells of bright sunny weather even during the "rainy" season, and Samoa's excellent Vailima beer (created by German brewmasters) tastes best at this time of year.

Most visitors spend their time in independent Samoa, which is considerably bigger and less expensive than American Samoa. However the rugged scenic beauty of Tutuila, the main island of American Samoa, should not be missed. In recent years some of the most strikingly beautiful parts of the territory have been incorporated into American Samoa National Park. There's great hiking on Tutuila and wonderful snorkeling on Ofu in the seldom visited Manua Group.

Traditional Samoan culture is largely based on oratory, and it's no accident that several literary legends originated here. Robert Louis Stevenson spent the last five years of his life in Samoa and is buried on a hilltop above Apia, the capital. His mansion is now a museum dedicated to the author. Somerset Maugham's short story "Rain" about Sadie Thompson and the repressed missionary thrown together in a guesthouse at Pago Pago, American Samoa, has been adapted by Hollywood several times. The original guesthouse still exists, now an upscale restaurant and inn. In "Tales of the South Pacific," James A. Michener based the prototype of his character Bloody Mary on an Apia hotelkeeper named Aggie Grey, whose family still operates Samoa's largest resorts. Michener's book was later made into the musical "South Pacific."

Getting to Samoa is easy with direct flights from Hawaii and Los Angeles on Hawaiian Airlines, Polynesian Airlines, and Air New Zealand. Local ferries and small commuter planes ply frequently between the islands, and getting around by public bus or rental car is no challenge. Visas are not required by most visitors for entry to either Samoa, although a passport and onward plane ticket are mandatory.