



RECHARGE and Reset in SAMOA

By Jess McGlothlin



Found in the heart of the world's largest ocean, Samoa is located roughly halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand. Considered the heart of Polynesia, the nation comprises two main islands, Upolu and Savai'i, and seven smaller islands. You'll land in the capital, Apia, which is nestled in the harbor of Upolu, an island divided by rainforest-covered mountain peaks and bordered by white sandy beaches worthy of the finest tropical fantasy. Savai'i, lying just across the Apolima Strait, bears little resemblance to her sister island, instead offering rugged volcanic peaks and thick rainforest jungles.

Many visitors to Samoa will choose to stay on Upolu and day-trip to Savai'i. We'd recommend this, as it allows you to enjoy the culture in Upolu and also take in the beauty of crossing the Apolima Strait, the narrow alleyway that divides the two islands.

Upolu offers a true tropical escape blended with a taste of local urban culture. While many may simply be happy to plop onto one of the island's white sand beaches with a drink in hand, adventurers will find plenty of adrenaline-inducing activities, including hiking, surfing, diving, and snorkeling. Must-see sites within easy reach of Apia include the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum, Palolo Deep National Marine Reserve, Piula Cave Pool and the Papase'ea Sliding Rocks.

Don't miss the 40-minute tour of writer Robert Louis Stevenson's homestead—you can feel the energy of the place where the acclaimed novelist penned 14 tomes in a mere four years. (He is most famously known for works such as "Treasure Island" and "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.")

For those looking to be close to Apia's shopping and dining options—and for a taste of the islands' largest town—check into Tanoa Tusitala Hotel. The property is set on nearly 15 acres of lush tropical gardens and is just yards from Apia's waterfront and a few minutes' walk from the central business district. The hotel overlooks the harbor on Mulinu'u Peninsula and reflects

key elements of Samoan architecture and culture.

The Palolo Deep National Marine Reserve is a mere five-minute walk from Apia and offers a bounty of vibrant coral and fish species, easily viewed in an afternoon spent snorkeling. Forty-five minutes from Apia by car, the Piula Cave Pool is a crystal-clear freshwater pool that provides the ideal midday refreshment from the day's tropical heat. And before you head back to town for a shower and dinner, your internal child will enjoy sliding down the gorgeous natural rock slides at Papase'ea Sliding Rocks, located 15 minutes from the fine dining and bar scene in the country's capital.

Whether you choose to relax on the beach and soak up the sun or stay active and explore the jungles and beaches in your own novel-worthy adventure, you'll need to stay well-fueled. Traditional Samoan cuisine is centered on hearty, natural dishes that both tempt the taste buds and energize the body and soul. In local culture, sharing a meal is a social event that draws family and friends together in a celebration of the bounties of nature. It's hard to ignore the Samoans' relationship with food—as the sun rises in the east, young men paddle their canoes out in the lagoon to catch fish, while others go to plantations to cultivate and harvest ingredients for daily meals.

The ocean's bounty provides crayfish, snapper, mahi-mahi, octopus, tuna and more, caught that morning and served that evening. Plantations of bananas, taro, tropical fruits and vegetables promise island-style delicacies. The sheer freshness of the food means that savoring local dishes is an experience impossible to replicate at home. Don't miss an opportunity to dine with a local family (an experience your concierge may be able to arrange); you may sample fish wrapped in banana leaves and cooked over hot coals, served with fresh coconut cream.

Resorts offer traditional Samoan food, usually at their *fiafia* nights—festivities with traditional fire dancing and drumming. Delicacies on many traditional Samoan



Samoa Afa afa fire dancers. Photo by Alison Armstrong

menus at resorts often include palusami (young taro leaves baked in coconut cream) and oka (raw fish in coconut cream)—both are must-try dishes.

For some local lore, try Paddles, located on Apia Harbor, a lovely setting to meet the local expat community and enjoy quality, fresh seafood and tempting tropical drinks. Watch ships and smaller fishing vessels move in and out of the harbor while dining on fish caught earlier in the day.

Seabreeze Restaurant, located at the Seabreeze Resort on the southern side of Upolu, has received awards from Air New Zealand for its food and wine pairings, and is a popular destination for those looking to escape the traffic of Apia.

And for those midday bites while exploring the island, small local barbecue huts can be found with little difficulty. Offerings vary and are quite simple, but most will proffer some form of meat in a delicious sauce, accompanied by rice and plantains. Eating like a local is an experience in itself, so stop and enjoy a filling, authentic meal on the Samoan roadside.

Samoa is an outdoor lover's paradise. Whether your idea of adventure is trying a new cocktail while soaking up the South Pacific sun or snorkeling amid black-tip reef sharks, it's almost impossible to grow bored on this island nation.

Perhaps Samoa's most iconic experience is the To Sua Ocean Trench. A South Pacific dream come true, this vegetation-lined crater sinks about 98 feet into the ground and is filled with seawater. An underwater trench connects the crater to the sea. Accessible only by scrambling down a wooden ladder, To Sua is not for the faint of heart, but it promises a memorable South Pacific adventure.

Private and semi-private fishing charters are readily available from various locations on Upolu for anglers seeking to chase South Pacific pelagic species. The area's warm waters and year-round seasonal weather offer an attractive setting for deep-water anglers. Dive

and snorkel charters also cater to visitors, and can offer an intriguing way to explore the turquoise waters off Samoa's coast.

SAVAI'I

Once you've had your fill of the city life, take the ferry across the Apolima Strait to Savai'i for rest and relaxation. While it's the largest of the Samoan islands, it's home to just 43,000 people. Check into Le Lagoto Resort and Spa, which is bracketed by a secluded white sand beach and fringed by coconut palms and crystal-clear water. A boutique resort with just 10 bungalows and two family rooms, Le Lagoto offers the modern conveniences of a large resort in an intimate, idyllic setting. Spend hours soaking up the sun and tropical views, or refreshing your body in the gorgeous infinity pool. At night, fall asleep to the sound of palms swaying in the breeze in your bungalow. Fittingly, Le Lagoto is Samoan for "sunset"—and the sunsets at the resort are truly memorable.


Savai'i lacks the bustle of Apia Harbor, but it boasts its own fair share of excitement. Must-see sites are the stunning Afu Aau Waterfalls, the spectacular, Instagram-worthy Alofaaga Blowholes and the opportunity to swim with turtles at the turtle sanctuary at Sato'alepai. After being hunted for years and consequently becoming endangered, the turtles were provided a safe haven and swim in a brackish water pool at the sanctuary before being released back into the ocean when they reach adulthood.

Samoa's natural beauty is the fodder of daydreams—lush, fertile valleys where banyan trees tower above the tropical rainforest canopy and mysterious jungle waterfalls that drop into rivers, cutting jagged lines through the valley floor as they make their way to the ocean. And not to mention the steep volcanic cliffs dropping straight into the blue water.

Beyond the beaches, out into the blue lagoons, are the rest of the islands that make up the Samoa



archipelago, some inhabited, others with only wildlife, protected by the fringing coral reef that keeps the powerful force of the Pacific Ocean at bay.

Dotted amid the stunning natural beauty of the islands rest the nu'u (villages) and their churches, meeting houses and open fale (homes) encircling the traditional village green. These little villages and communities are home to the heart of Samoa—her people. For without the people, their culture and respect for the very nature surrounding them, Samoa would be a very different experience. 

Left: To Sua Ocean Trench. Photo by Don Read