

# Islands of Samoa

## Overview

Modern Samoa is geopolitically divided into two parts: the much larger, independent nation of Samoa — formerly known as Western Samoa; and the relatively small American Samoa, the only U.S. territory south of the equator. Even with different systems of government, the Polynesian people of both Samoas share a common language and culture, and the traditional hereditary chiefs still exert significant influence in the daily lives of the people.

Samoa lies south of the equator, about halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand, in the Polynesian region of the Pacific Ocean.



## Geography

Samoa which shares the Samoan archipelago with American Samoa, consists of nine islands west of longitude 171 W – Upolu, Savai'i, Manono, and Apolima, all of which are inhabited, and the uninhabited islands of Fanuatapu, Namu'a, Nu'utele, Nu'ulua, and Nu'usafe'e. Samoa is now officially named the Independent State of Samoa. Up until 4 July 1997, it was known as Western Samoa. The capital city is Apia.

American Samoa, a United States of America Territory, lies 40 miles east of Upolu. Tutuila, with its deep harbor at Pago Pago, is the main island and administrative center. The smaller islands of the Manu'a group – Ta'u, Ofu and Olosega – are located about 70 miles to the east.

Independent Samoa has 2,860 sq. km. of land, mostly divided between the two major islands of Upolu and Savaii. It is slightly smaller than Rhode Island. American Samoa has 199 sq. km. of land, most of it on the main island of Tutuila. It is slightly larger than Washington, D.C.

## Population

Samoa: 197,097 (2019); American Samoa: 55,222 (2019). Significant populations of Samoans also live in New Zealand, Australia, Hawai'i, California, Utah and Missouri.

## **History and Discovery**

Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen happened upon the islands in 1722. In 1768, French Admiral Louis de Bougainville visited the islands. He was so impressed with the Samoan's numerous canoes and their great skill in handling them that he gave Samoa its original European name, "The Navigator Islands." Germany took possession of the western portion of the Samoan archipelago from 1899-1914. At the outbreak of World War I, New Zealand troops took possession of the island country. Following WWI, the newly formed League of Nations gave New Zealand its mandate to administer the islands, which resulted in close ties between the two countries that still exist to this day. The newly formed United Nations extended New Zealand's mandate until January 1, 1962, when Western Samoa, or Samoa i Sisifo as the Samoans called it, became the first independent Polynesian nation. In 1997 the island nation officially shortened its name to Samoa.

Today, Samoa has a parliamentary style of government and an education system reflecting its former ties with New Zealand. In light of 19th century European involvement in the Pacific, the traditional chiefs of eastern Samoa ceded their islands to the United States in 1900. The U.S. Navy administered the islands until after World War II, at which time the Department of the Interior took over. Today, American Samoans have a U.S. style of government and education, and sends a non-voting representative to the U.S. Congress. The people are U.S. Nationals who can freely travel into the United States.

## **Language**

Samoan and English are the main languages spoken in Samoa. Samoan is a major Polynesian dialect, and as such, is similar to Hawaiian, Tongan, Tahitian, Maori and other island languages. It is not necessarily mutually intelligible with the other dialects, although many words are identical or nearly identical, with identical or similar meanings.

Reduplicated words — such as Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa — are common in Polynesian languages; but many people do not realize that the letter 'g' in Samoan represents the unreleased 'ng' sound as in the English word 'singer' — not the released-G sound as in the word 'finger.'

Also of interest is the fact that the sounds represented by the letters 'k' and 't' are completely interchangeable in vernacular Samoa without changing the meaning of the words. For example, there's no meaningful difference between talofa and kalofa, which both mean 'hello.'

Most Polynesian languages also use regular and longer-sounding vowels, with the latter sometimes marked with a macron over the letter. Polynesian long vowels are not to be confused with English long and short vowels, as in the words "hate" and "hat," respectively.

While English vowels can actually be lengthened in pronunciation, that doesn't change the meaning of the word; whereas in Samoan the use of a long vowel vs. the same vowel in its regular form changes the meaning of the word. For example, mama means 'ring,' mamā means 'clean' and māmā means 'lightweight' (please note we're using a European-style umlaut over the long vowels since most computers do not have fonts with macron capability). So, if you want to impress a Samoan, lengthen the first vowel in the word Sāmoa.

## **Village Life**

**Samoan Tattoos** - Tattoos, or pe'a, demonstrates the strong ties many Samoans feel for their culture. Samoans have practiced the art of tattooing for both men and women for over 2,000 years. To this day, a man's tattoo extensively covers from mid-back, down the sides and flanks, to the knees. A woman's tattoo is not quite as extensive or heavy. The geometric patterns are based on ancient designs, and often denote rank and status. The va'a or canoe, for example, stretches across a man's mid-back.

Samoan oral tradition generally recognizes that two Fijian women, Taema and Tilafaiga, introduced the practice of tattooing. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, starting in 1830, all Samoan males got a traditional tattoo. Though the early missionaries did not succeed in outlawing the practice, which they considered as defacement of the human body and heathenish, they eventually succeeded in refocusing the custom on the sons of chiefs.

In Samoa's cultural past most males were tattooed between the ages of 14-18, when it was determined they had stopped growing, so the designs would not stretch and suffer in beauty. Today, there has been a strong revival of traditional tattooing in the past generation, not only in Samoa but throughout Polynesia, often as a symbol of cultural identity. The Samoan word for tattoo is tatau which means "correct or workmanlike." It also signifies the correct quadrangular figures in reference to the fact that Samoan tattoo designs do not include circular lines, although other Polynesian tattoo motifs do. Early Englishmen mispronounced the word tatau and borrowed it into popular usage as tattoo.

Traditional tattooing is a painful process. The Samoan tattoo master dips his cutting tools into black ink made from the soot of burnt candlenut shells, and then punctures designs into the skin. The cutting tool, or "needle," consists of a short piece of bamboo or light wood with a piece of tortoiseshell bound at right angles at one end. A little bone comb is bound to the lower broad end of the tortoiseshell. The larger the comb, the greater the area on the skin is covered with fewer strokes. The master uses a small mallet to repeatedly tap a short-handled instrument. The process takes days, and is sometimes partially accomplished over longer periods, with recuperation in between.

Tattoo designs have changed to include freehand symbols such as the kava bowl representing hospitality; the characterization of the Samoan house, or fale, signifying kinship; emblems of nature — shells, fish, birds, waves, centipedes; and the traditional geometric lines and angles of different lengths and sizes.

**Samoa Houses** - In modern Samoa many homes are now constructed using western materials and designs; but still each village, indeed usually each extended family in Samoa, traditionally has a fale talimalo (guest house) and/or a fale fonofale (meetinghouse) where the chiefs convene. Sometimes they are one and the same. The exact size and lavishness is determined by the power and position of the families and village.

Samoa custom traditionally requires families and villages to offer passing visitors hospitality, extending to overnight accommodations. Such visitors may enter the guest house at any time for a short rest. The immediate family will respond with time-honored traditions and quickly prepare food and water for the visitors. After the guests are fed and rested, the chief will politely inquire about the purpose of the unexpected visit and the intended length of stay. Should the guests choose to extend their visit for a day or two, they are treated with kindness and consideration and provided bedding. The chief offers any further help if needed.

When pre-arranged guests arrive, the immediate or extended family, or even the whole village will make sure the proper protocol is carefully and accurately conducted. They will prepare leis (which the Samoans call ula), food and special decorations. Included will be a welcome ceremony, the elaborateness of it depending on rank and importance, especially of the chiefly guests.

The floor of a guesthouse is typically covered with flat, smooth round-shaped river stones which have been found ideal for balancing the temperature of the building. On hot, humid days, the stones cool the building; on cooler days they retain the sun's heat to keep the building warm and comfortable. For comfort, mats are placed over the rocks, starting first with thicker coconut leaf pola, topped with finer-woven laufala made from dried pandanus leaves.

The many posts which encircle the interior of this building have much greater significance than holding up the roof. Whenever any meetings are held in the building, certain participants always sit with their backs to a post, the exact one being rigidly determined by the persons' rank, family, and home village. Other minor participants sit on mats spread around the outside rim. The post 90 degrees to the left side of the entrance is for the highest-ranking person in the visiting party, usually the chief. The post opposite that person is for the highest-ranking person of the home village, again usually the chief. The posts immediately next to the entrance way are for the chiefs' representatives or spokesmen,

known as their talking chiefs. The first two posts on the left side are for the other local talking chiefs. An equally significant post is the fourth post on the left side, or the stranger's post. A stranger coming unannounced to a meeting can summarily walk up to that particular post and rightfully demand that it be surrendered to him. The three large posts in the middle are also important, for from there any food to be served during the meeting is dispensed.

This building is also referred to as the fale fono, or chiefs' meetinghouse. In the Samoan tradition of diplomacy, the fale fono is always round. Discussions include monitoring the performance of individual families who are expected to abide by the rules and laws approved and passed by a council of chiefs. In addition, every family is required to participate as a village unit and cooperate in such things as securing public safety; beautifying yards and homes, keeping prayer curfew each morning and evening and observing the Sabbath; planting taro patches to encourage self-reliance, growing food crops including breadfruit, bananas, yam, and sugarcane; and raising pigs and chickens.

The rock foundations of guest houses are usually elevated, sometimes as high as 5-8 feet: In general, the higher the foundation, the more important the chiefly title and rank of the family and/or village. The height of foundations symbolize the dignity and respect accorded a high chief. It will usually take a master builder, or tufuga and his crew a month to complete such buildings.

The tufuga supervises the construction including the correct measurements of all poles, beams, choice of thatching leaves, amount of sennit rope and performance of the workers. The roof is traditionally thatched with sugarcane leaves and when properly prepared and attached the first time, will last 10-15 years. The cone-shaped roof allows rain to easily fall to the ground without the moisture permeating the leaves and causing leaks inside. During sunny days the high dome allows the heat to rise and seep through the thatching, cooling the house. The open walls of the house allow breezes to flow freely. During rainy or windy weather, or when privacy is required, coconut leaf blinds can be lowered.

Even though such buildings are reserved for important purposes, they remain open and empty most of the time. Samoans accept this fact and acknowledge that their guest and meetinghouses stand ready as places of refuge for anyone in need of help. In the highest sense, these buildings represent the power, prestige, generosity and hospitality of the families who build them and their affiliated villages.

Traditionally, the maota tofa, or high chief's house is the largest and most elevated house in a village, signifying the chief's prestigious position. As with other Samoan buildings, the high-domed roof helps cool the house. A high chief's house was usually simply furnished. In ancient Samoa only a chief of the highest rank would sleep on a bed in one end of this building. The bed consisted of mats piled up to a desired height of comfort.

Because finely-woven mats are exchanged as items of wealth in Samoa, the more mats a chief possessed and displayed, the richer he was. Such mats are still important as a method of paying tribute at weddings, funerals, and other public events. The chief's pillow was traditionally made of bamboo or other wood. Samoan legend has it that sleeping on hard surfaces gave Samoans their erect, strong and straight stature.

The tunoa, or Samoan kitchen is a man's domain. Preparing and cooking food the Samoan way is considered physically demanding, including the daily preparation of coconut meat and milk, which is essential in many Samoan dishes. A fa'atoaga, or Samoan garden is usually planted close to the tunoa, providing the family with staple foods such as sugar cane, bananas, taro, tapioca, sweet potato, and breadfruit. Cocoa is also grown in Samoa, prepared locally and drunk full-strength. Pork, chicken, fish and shellfish of all kinds are the most common meats.

Once all the food is prepared, some of it may be cooked. For faster preparation, Samoans often boil green bananas, taro, breadfruit and other produce. Otherwise, they will bake their food in an umu or covered steam oven. Hawaiians traditionally cook their food in an imu, which uses the same principle as a Samoan umu, but the imu is done in a hole in the ground while an umu rests on top of the ground. A Samoan umu typically has four logs arranged in a square. Kindling and firewood go inside the square "box," with the rocks piled on top. When the fire has heated the rocks until they're white with ash, any remaining charcoal debris is pushed aside and the food is carefully placed on the rocks. Fire resistant leaves are used to sheath the food to protect them. The whole oven is then covered over with banana leaves and other insulating materials. The food takes a couple hours to cook.

Samoans traditionally eat two hot meals a day: In the morning they boil food over a fire and in the afternoon the men prepare an umu.

**Coconut Cracking** - Samoans traditionally husk a coconut by firmly thrusting it onto the sharpened end of a stout stick, which is securely planted in the ground or otherwise wedged upright. After piercing the husk, they hold the coconut against the stick with one hand, and press down with the other, separating off sections of husk. This motion is repeated until the entire husk is stripped off the coconut.

All coconuts have a face with one of three seams running between the two "eyes." The point of the seams form a "nose," and the "mouth" is below the nose. While the "eyes" are shell-hard, the mouth is always the softest part of a coconut, even a dried one, and can easily be punctured by something sharp and thin. To crack the coconut open, Samoans use a rock, stick, or back of a heavy knife. Simply locate the seam that runs between the "eyes," turn the coconut sideways, and strike that seam along the coconut's "equator." One good whack should do it. Of course, some or most of the relatively clear "juice" is going to spill out.

Samoan men also scrape the mature coconut flesh before squeezing out the coconut milk, which is creamy and milky white in appearance, hence the term coconut "milk." They usually give the left-over shreds to the chickens or pigs.

Normally, Samoans only drink the juice of young, sweet coconuts, which can sometimes develop a natural effervescence. To do this, they simply cut off the top of young green coconuts, without husking it. Other times, they may husk the young coconuts, puncture the "mouth" or crack off a small portion of the top, and enjoy one of nature's finest natural fruit juices.

### **Interesting Facts**

The Samoans are known throughout Polynesia as the "happy" people because of their enjoyment of life and their good-spirited nature. Famous author Robert Louis Stevenson, known in Samoa as Tusitala or "story-teller," fell in love with the happy and giving spirit of the Samoan people and settled here. He is buried on Mt. Vaea in independent Samoa.

Samoa and American Samoa are on different sides of the International Dateline. Samoa sees the beginning of each day and American Samoa sees the last of the same day.