

Subject/ Area: Samoa

Samoa, the correct title of western Samoa, is refreshingly clean and beautifully tended, the people more robust and spontaneously friendly, the services and goods abundant, and the whole atmosphere of the 2 islands, like a breath of fresh air

Deciding to take a break from American Samoa, we made the 80 miles from Pago Pago harbor to Apia harbor on an over night sail, tied up to the sea wall as instructed by Port Control when we called in outside the harbor, then kept a fender-watch in the surgy conditions, as we waited for Customs, Harbor control, Agriculture, and Health officials to arrive. Costs in Mar. 2004: Harbor fee: \$25US, or 75t (Samoa Tala) payable on check in or at check out; Customs: 33t flat fee payable on check out. We were not required to have an agent. Port control arranges for all officials on check in. (on check out, you must see yourself: Customs, Immigration, and Port Control, in that order. Agri. only if you have a pet.) Have plenty of copies of the crew list, since each official wants one or more. Agriculture wanted a list of any live plants, and health certificate for pets (which will not be allowed ashore). The anchorage is off the harbor closer to shore, between two large can buoys. We chose a depth of 20 ft, and the anchor dug in well to the mud/sand bottom for the 3 wks we were there. The anchorage is fairly protected by the sea wall and the reefs, but there is always some movement from swell, more, if the wind is in the northern or western quad.

The low rate of the Samoan tala makes it one of the great values around, even with the present low rate for the US dollar in Mar 2004 (\$1=2.67SAT). We decided to leave Sloepmouche anchored safely in Apia and do our exploring from there. One of our first contacts as we walked from the port to the town center was Steve, and the folks at the Traveller's Lounge, a welcoming place for tourist and yachtie alike, offering travel assistance, internet access, a place to relax, or to savor a cool drink or a luscious ice cream after a full day of touring. We arranged a day tour with his company, Green Turtle Tours, which operates a bus that, everyday, visits over a dozen different sites all around the island of Upolu.

At one of the sites, Lalomanu, at the southeastern end, we met, Tai and Sili, owners of Taufua Beach Fales, (41051 / 78888)who were very genial, and convinced us to come back and spend time on the beach, and snorkel, and enjoy their "Fia Fia" (island) night, and stay in an open-air "fale" (thatched-roof shelter) for the night. We normally do not like to leave the boat and the comfort of our own bed, but after seeing the place, and hearing the testimonials of guests, we gave it a go. We caught the bus at the Fish Market, on the seaside, just past the clock tower in town. We took the 2:00 pm bus because the 4:30 bus is usually packed with commuters. The beach and snorkeling was fun. Dinner was a highlight, and as we discovered from the other guests, a daily delight, as Tai, our hostess, is a dynamite cook, serving Samoan portions. Taufua is known for its great food, which is included in the low accommodation price. (Lobster is a common dinner item .) Our fia fia night was really a preview of coming attractions, as they are just developing it. The dancers were staff members, who like most Polynesians, learn dancing at an early age. Samoan dancing is much different from Tahitian or Cook Island dancing, so, even if you've seen dance shows there, it's worth seeing the Samoans. Tia and Sili have just add water sports/ tour activities to their establishment, run by their children. They are the only ones to access the scuba diving in this area of the island. We had a delightful night with a cool refreshing breeze, plenty of stars, no bug bites, and the sound of the surf and lapping waves. We had no rain, but the fales do have rain and privacy shades.

Other attractions on Upolu:

We visited on our own: Papaseea Sliding Rocks, a series of 3-4 drops where the water skims over the rocks making slippery slides, ending in deep emerald pools. (not to be missed!). Piula Cave Pool,

a fresh water spring seeping out of an old lava tube close to the sea on the grounds of a Theological College. Take an UW light, and explore the cave, then dive and swim through a passage to another part of the cave. The best treat is the underwater view through the sparklingly clear water back to the entrance. Palolo Deep, the marine reserve just off the point that forms Apia bay, is a natural 50' deep hole crowned by very shallow reef where colorful small marine life abounds around the edges of the drop-off. It's great for snorkeling. Be sure to go at the end of a rising tide to get clear water. Ask directions to get to these places from the Tourism Office, or the Traveller's Lounge because some locations are far from town and not well signed. At many attractions, a small entry fee of usually 2t/pp is charged for the local village.

Dining:

One can splurge a little (or a lot!) here, as restaurants are a real bargain. We ate lunch at a place where the locals eat, right across from the Mc D's and got a curry & rice plate for less than \$1 US! In general, a nice restaurant that would charge around \$25 US for the main course in the States, charges \$25 tala (t), over 2.5 times less! Aggie Grey's, (22880) one of the poshest places on the waterfront charges only 60t, 55t, and 45t, for their 3 special nights during the week. We experienced their Fia Fia night, with dance show, a true Samoan extravaganza, followed by a sumptuous dinner buffet with some specialties I'd never seen at any other island night buffet. Tiafau Restaurant, (28284) at the Millenia Hotel on the peninsula, features a delicious Lobster Mornay (36t). Thinking, "small chunks of lobster meat in a mornay sauce", I was floored when at least a 1.5 lb lobster with extra meat in the body, was placed before me overflowing the plate! The sauce was perfection. They also have fish, steak, and chicken. The only authentic Thai restaurant, SIAM, (76302) just established in early 2004, is hosted by Yo and Bo who bring their skills from Thailand, using fresh ingredients to make Thai classics that literally tingle the taste buds.

Transport:

Getting around is fairly easy, there are local buses, the same style as in American Samoa, but with more limited service. Catching the outbound buses at either the fish market, or the vegetable market, depending on destination, is easy; it's the return that's tricky since, usually, the last buses back to Apia leave early afternoon and the schedule is not set, it's just whenever they happen to pass. Taxis around the town proper and to the small airport are cheap, (2t-5t) and taxis are abundant. To the E end, costs 60t-70t, for it is a long ride. The bus costs around 25-30t, I believe.

Provisioning:

Samoa's best provisioning bargains are to be found at the fruit and vegetable market, and the fish market, and if you're not opposed to Samoan beef, (lean and tender) the butcher shop in some of the supermarkets. Also the bread is a fantastic bargain, and better than Pago Pago. Other foodstuffs not produced on island are about the same US dollar price as in A. Samoa with some things cheaper, some things more expensive, and mostly you'll find New Zealand/Australian brands. There are two food stores of note: AQM (23946) and MD's Big Fresh. AQM is a gourmet store with many specialty items you'll not find again until New Zealand. Here, you'll find fine cheeses, curries of all nationalities, specialty rices, beautifully trimmed and presented meats, and the most picture perfect produce, as well as a selection of NZ wines. They are located on the cross street originating at the Clock Tower, heading inland. MD's Big Fresh is a very convenient supermarket for us yachties, as it is right across the street from the gate to the Port. They have the basic groceries, but they also have some nice refrigerated and frozen items catering to us "palangis", such as lunch meats, yogurt, and brown and serve rolls. I bought some fresh mushrooms for not an outrageous price, and what a palatal pleasure they were! Another nice store to know is Lucky's Foodtown, as it has a nice in-store bakery (ask what days they make different items), and the butcher dept, has local beef at reasonable prices.

Air Travel: You might find that flying to the US is cheaper if you fly from here rather than A. Samoa. If you buy your ticket here, you pay in tala, which may come out a better deal with the exchange rate, and different travel taxes. Surprisingly, this tiny island country has a major international airline, Polynesian Air. (22737/8) They have inter island flights to A. Samoa, Tonga, and Niue. Polynesian Air also has flight plans to Seattle and San Francisco, avoiding the horrors of Los Angeles. They also have flights to Savaii, just next door, and special low-season rates to New Zealand and Australia.

Savaii:

We took Polynesian Airlines from the small airport in Fagalii, only 10 minutes away (5t by taxi) from the port. Oceania Travel and Tours (24443) arranges day trips, (or longer) including flights, transfers, breakfast, and the tour guide. Our guide, Warren, a retired geologist and free-lance guide, met us at the Savaii terminal. He admonished us for only allowing one day for the island since his chosen home has so MUCH to offer. Still, he good naturedly took us to lava flows, lava tubes, a village embedded in the 1902 flows, and the grave of a virgin that the people believe was saved from the flow by divine intervention. As we drove North to the most recent lava fields, looking at sites of interest along the way, we gained insight into why the island is as it is, and why the people have become like they are. We also saw "beach resort row" where the largest accumulation of places to stay are located, and we had time to make a quick trip to the south where Warren showed us the Mu Pagoa waterfalls which tumble over the edge of an old lava flow and drop into the sea. The volcanic nature of the island also provides many villages with fresh water pools that seep out of the ground at sea level. If you have a few days time to spend, and/or you like to explore and learn, ask Oceania Travel and Tours for Warren and he can include you in one of his tours or arrange to visit those features that most interest you. If you have only one day and/or you just want to get a glimpse of as many "famous sites" as you can all around the island, perhaps you'd be happier with a Green Turtle tour, which employs its same formula as on Upolu.

We can't say enough good things about Samoa. Even if you spend most of your time in Pago Pago waiting for parts or packages, make time to visit at least Upolu. The greeting you get will be warm and genuine. We would urge you to learn about Samoan culture (Fa'a Samoa) before you arrive in any of the islands of Samoa. The land, family, church, and village chiefs are the basis for a very strong traditional culture, much stronger, and restrictive than in French Polynesia or the Cooks. Permission should be asked, and traditions and local practices respected. (This also applies to American Samoa.)

They aren't prejudiced against yachties yet, although, sadly, we still heard a few comments to the effect that it was we who brought in marijuana, and last season, a yachtie molested one, or some, young boys, and was prosecuted and jailed. We are dismayed at the frequency that many ills are blamed on sailboat people, and we must emphasize again, and again that we SSCAers and other responsible cruisers MUST not just leave a clean wake, but must make our host islands and ports aware of the majority of positive effects and actions that we bring. The acts of a few can spoil the welcome for the rest of us, who must also analyze our own actions every time, to see them from the viewpoint of the local population. Don't just come and take the best and leave your garbage behind. Give some service to the island or islanders and make sure the word gets round that we aren't just transient leaches.

June 2004

Luc & Jackie on s/v Sloepmouche