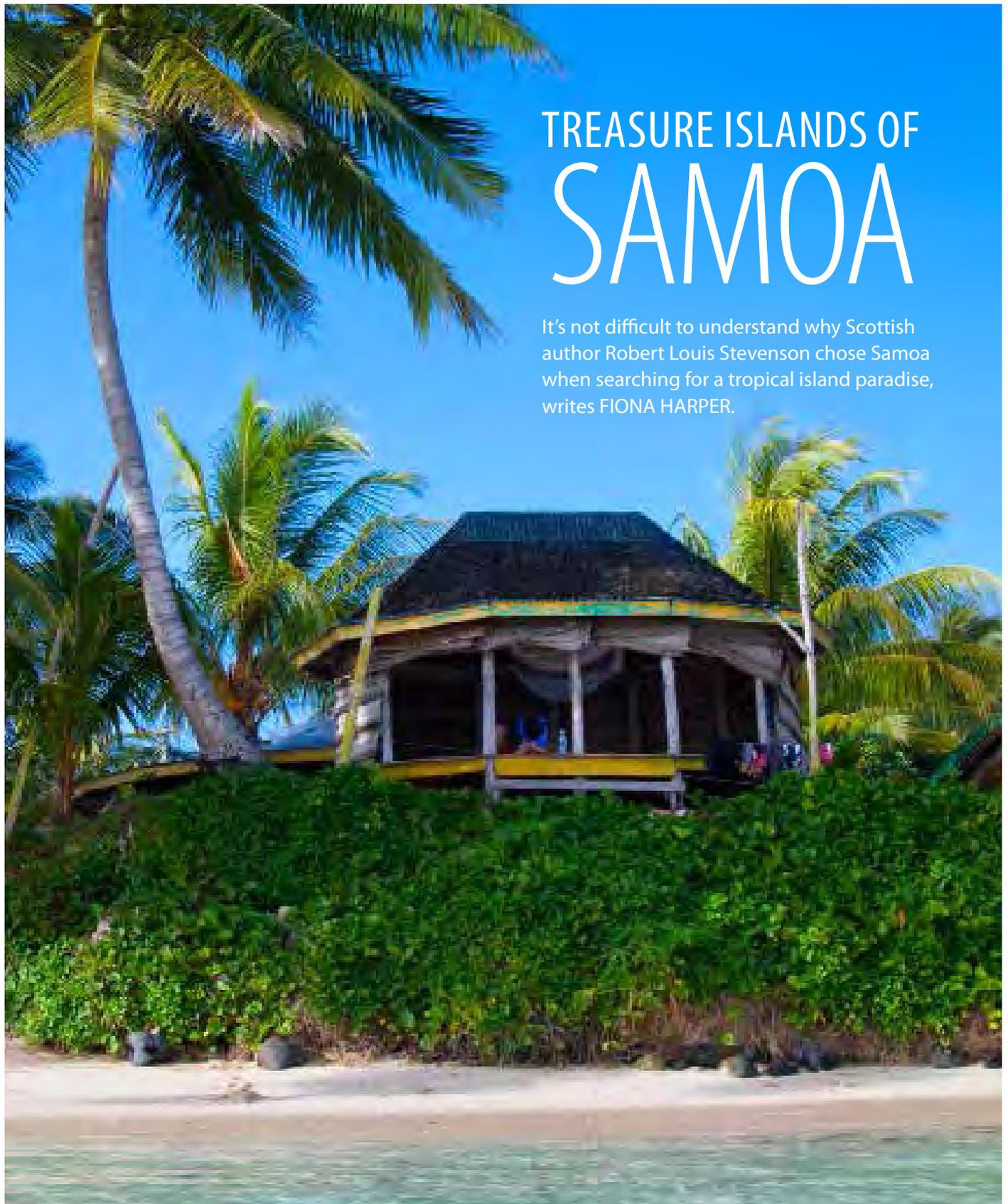


TREASURE ISLANDS OF SAMOA

It's not difficult to understand why Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson chose Samoa when searching for a tropical island paradise, writes FIONA HARPER.



DISCOUNTING HAWAII, TAHITI

and Kiribati before settling in Samoa, Stevenson built a hillside home on Upolu Island overlooking the South Pacific Ocean. Ill health meant he passed away just four years later in the land he quickly grew to love, where he noted "the people are friendly and the climate is good". Nothing

much has changed. Long overshadowed by cousins Fiji to the west and Cook Islands to the east, Samoa is discretely sashaying her rhythmic hips into the tourism spotlight.

Australian visitor numbers increased over nine percent in the past year, attracted by competitive airfares and good

value accommodation. Samoa Tourism Authority is working with travel trade with an annual educational tour, plus they're in the midst of developing a Travel Academy.

A gentle pace underpinned by Fa'a Samoa, a cultural tradition that translates to 'the Samoan way', life is mostly governed by respect and honour for family,

country and church. Religion dominates the culture with almost 100 percent of Samoans identifying as Christian. Indeed, at last count in 2011, according to Samoa Tourism's Jade Toomalatai, there were 362 churches to provide succour for a population of less than 200,000. Churches dominate the village landscape, often elaborate structures and always well maintained. Sunday is definitely a day of rest in a country that rarely gets out of first gear. For Sunday services children are immaculately attired, ladies wear flower-adorned hats and colourful pulatasi (matching tailored skirt and blouse) while men don button-down floral shirts and the traditional man-skirt known as ie faitaga. Visitors are welcome to attend Sunday services, which are worth a visit even for the non-religious, to enjoy rhythmic hymns resonating from the choir.

In her 50th year since independence from New Zealand, much is changing in Samoa. 30 December, 2011 is significant for being non-existent, being wiped from the calendar entirely. Samoa switched time zones to align itself with trade partners Australia and New Zealand, moving forward 24 hours. Now just three hours ahead of Australian EST, Samoa



is the first country to see the sunrise rather than the last. But Samoans are an adaptable lot, rather used to change. In 2009 they switched from driving on the right side of the road to the left. Long before, they had dispensed with the Western part of the country's name to distinguish themselves from neighbouring American Samoa.

With last year's rebranding from

Polynesian Blue to Virgin Samoa, the national airline's partnership with Virgin Australia ensures direct links into Apia from Brisbane and Sydney. Aircraft livery has a distinct Polynesian flavour with traditional tatau design developed by a master Samoan tattooist. Inter-island connections were enhanced in June with Samoa Air relaunching flights between Upolu and Savaii Islands. Additionally,



EXPLORE SAMOA THE TREASURED ISLANDS.

Halfway between Australia and Hawaii across the glistening Pacific lies Samoa. Touch down and you'll discover you've stepped back in time, in a good way. Sure Samoa has all the mod cons you'd expect today. But it also has something completely unique. A way of life called Fa'a Samoa - the Samoan way.

It's a 3,000 year tradition based on respect for family, elders, village, church and environment. It also means we welcome visitors with a genuine warmth and friendliness. So as well as the spectacular scenery, pristine beaches and crystal clear coral lagoons you'll have an experience that'll stay with you for a long time.

Fa'a Samoa. The Samoan way.

www.samoa.travel





there is a reliable passenger-carrying inter-island car ferry between the two islands which takes one hour.

As the gateway, Apia is a colourful waterfront town that's worth spending a few days exploring. There are cafes and restaurants beside the marina, fish markets, retail outlets (including the ubiquitous McDonalds) and market stalls downtown, plus traditional tattooing, wood carving and weaving are on display at fales beside the Visitor Centre. Aggie Grey's Hotel & Bungalows have been hosting travellers (including English Royalty) since the 1930's, while Tanoa Tusitala Hotel has modern spacious rooms with a dash of South Pacific charm. But the real jewels of the Treasured Islands are to be found in the villages beyond downtown Apia.

Reopening in July last year, Seabreeze Resort (11 rooms) on the south coast of Upolu Island has swanky new beachside bungalows along with an overwater restaurant. Australian owners Chris and Wendy Booth spent the best part of two years rebuilding after the 2009 tsunami. The entire resort is wheelchair friendly including a ramp into the horizon swimming pool. Nearby, and almost 20 years in the planning, Aga (pronounced Anga) Reef Resort is a brand new

boutique property (19 rooms) scheduled to open prior to Christmas 2012. Waterfront bungalows, some located on the resort's own island, along with hotel style rooms and a grand Presidential Suite bungalow are perfect for honeymooners should prove popular with wedding groups.

Further west, Coconuts Beach Club Resort & Spa has also been rebuilt. A first for Samoa, six luxurious overwater bungalows will start hosting guests in early 2013.

On Savaii Island, the north coast's white sand beaches and coral reefs are perfect for swimming, snorkelling and diving, while the south coast attracts surfers. Le Lagoto Resort has resort-style accommodation, though for an authentic Samoan experience Tanu Beach Fales offer simple accommodation right on the beach. Little more than a mattress, linen and mosquito net on a raised platform above the sand, breakfast and dinner are included in the tariff. Suited to adventurous travellers, simple bathrooms are shared. At 13 degrees below the Equator, it's mostly warm year round, so that the absence of hot showers is no real inconvenience when a gin-clear ocean is mere metres away.

Offering much to suit independent travellers, Samoa is an easy fly/drive destination with good roads skirting the coastline. Traffic is light

Engage a Samoan in conversation and you'll soon find the whole bus taking a friendly interest. It's the Fa'a Samoan way to treat visitors with respect, warmth and kindness.



THIS IS
WHAT WE
CALL A
MORNING
COMMUTE

\$50 FLIGHTS TO VANUATU!

Are you a travel agent who needs a break? Discover Vanuatu on Air Vanuatu for \$50! visit: www.airvanuatu.com/agent for more details.

*Conditions apply. Taxes not included.



Air Vanuatu

Vanuatu

DISCOVER WHAT MATTERS
www.vanuatu.travel

– you’re likely to see more dogs, pigs and chooks roadside than vehicles. Colourful, open-sided local buses are a cheap and easy alternative to getting around. Simply hail a bus and tell the driver your destination. Engage a Samoan in conversation and you’ll soon find the whole bus taking a friendly interest. It’s the Fa’a Samoan way to treat visitors with respect, warmth and kindness. Untouched by mass tourism, it’s the kind of place savvy travellers like Robert Louis Stevenson dreamt about finding. As Australians, we’re fortunate that we have access to the Treasured Islands of Samoa just four hours away.

The writer was a guest of Samoa Tourism Authority

Images courtesy Fiona Harper

More information

- Samoa Tourism Authority www.samoa.travel
- Tanoa Tusitala Hotel www.tanoahotels.com
- Aggie Grey’s Hotel & Bungalows www.aggiegreys.com
- Seabreeze Resort www.seabreezesamoa.com
- Coconuts Beach Club <http://cbcsamoa.com>
- Aga Reef Resort <http://agareef.com/>

Best time to go: Annual Teuila Festival is on the first week in September www.teuilafestival.com