

HISTORY

Mysteries of ancient Samoa

Despite missionaries trying to outlaw the 'pagan' practice, tattoo traditions continue, remaining an integral part of Polynesian tradition. By Fiona Harper



From ruling queens to pyramids and tattoos, Samoan culture remains strong and defiant.

Archaeologists still haven't figured out the significance of Samoa's ancient Pulemelei Mound, though speculation abounds around the mound whose base is a little smaller than a rugby field. What is known is that this volcanic stone structure was built on Savai'i Island sometime between 1100 and 1400 AD. Around the same time Parisians were paving the cobbled streets of Paris outside the Louvre, Samoans were methodically stacking multiple layers of basalt into a pyramid-like structure. The structure appears to be aligned with cardinal directions, leading some to speculate that the mound is linked

to Polynesians' great navigational ability. Perhaps the mound was used in religious ceremonies or as a burial monument? Or, was its use more practical, constructed as a lookout platform for warriors to scope out the surrounding sea to ward off invaders?

Samoans have inhabited their particular piece of paradise for around 3,000 years. Savai'i Island is considered by some to be the cradle of Polynesian civilisation: could it be that Polynesians' migration routes across the Pacific originated from the island's Pulemelei Mound?

Samoans, Tongans and Fijians ruled the Pacific Islands

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long before Europeans arrived, building important cultural relationships along Royal bloodlines. According to legend, feisty Queen Salamasina, a 15th century warrior descended from Samoan noblewoman and Tongan chiefdom lineage, defied royal protocol by ditching her betrothal to Chief Tapumanaia in favour of eloping with an untitled commoner. Eventually forgiven for her defiance after producing heirs who enjoyed privileged status, Queen Salamasina's long held peaceful reign was notable for its absence of warfare.

These days Samoa's gentle pace of life is underpinned by Fa'a Samoa, a cultural tradition that simply translates to 'the Samoan way'. In Samoa, elders are revered. Respect for family, country and the church guides day to day living. Visit any of the 160 or so villages across the islands and you'll notice how prominent houses of worship are. Elaborate churches dominate villages, forming the central hub for the community. Sundays are a nationwide day of rest in a laid-back country that rarely gets out of first gear.

Christianity arrived in the South Pacific in the early 1800's, making a significant impact on island life. Christian missionaries frowned upon customs like tattooing, with which both men and women had adorned their bodies for thousands of years. Despite missionaries trying to outlaw the 'pagan' practice, tattoo traditions continue, remaining an integral part of Polynesian spiritual and cultural life today. The Samoan geometric designs featuring triangles and checkerboards and lines in arches or spirals adorn the belly, back, arms and legs.

Visit the Samoa Cultural Village in downtown Apia during the annual Teuila Festival and you'll likely witness traditional tattooing first hand. Be warned though, it's not for the faint-hearted. The tattooed is supported by friends and family while the tattooist labours over his creation for hours, possibly days, as the artwork takes shape using traditional tools. Supporters are tasked with providing physical and emotional support as well as holding the skin taut and wiping away blood, which tradition decrees should not drip on to the earth.

Searching for a South Pacific idyll around the same time missionaries were distributing their Christian message across the Pacific was author Robert Louis Stevenson, who chose Samoa for his tropical island home. He had already dismissed Hawaii, Tahiti and Kiribati as unsuitable. Purchasing land on Upolu Island, he soon became involved in local politics, with his opinion sought out due to his wisdom and worldliness. Inspired by the friendliness of Samoans along with an agreeable climate, Stevenson completed a number of literary works in the four years before his untimely death.

Little has changed, with today's visitors to Samoa attracted by the same friendly locals and tropical climate that appealed to Stevenson. However, the small island nation wedged between Fiji and the Cook Islands is no stranger to change. Ten years ago, Samoa switched from driving on the right-hand side of the road to the left. Long before, they had dispensed with the 'Western' part of the country's name, becoming simply Samoa to distinguish themselves from neighbouring American Samoa.

Then, in 2011 Samoa ditched its previous time zone, moving ahead 24 hours to align itself more closely with New Zealand and Australia.

The capital Apia is more a laid-back waterfront town than capital city. Adjacent to the marina where colourful boats bob at their moorings, cafe and restaurant patrons spill out onto a pitted pavement. Ladies carrying woven baskets filled with fruit and vegetables fresh from the market wander past. School children peer through glassless windows of buses adorned with brightly coloured murals. Aggie Grey's Hotel & Bungalows, named after its half Samoan half-Scottish owner who built the hotel in the 1930's, is the epitome of South Seas glamour.

The names of famous former guests adorn the bungalows out the back: Marlon Brando, James Michener, William Holden and

Gary Cooper have all been immortalised. But the real jewels of Samoa are to be found well beyond the city limits of downtown Apia.

On Savaii Island, the north coast's white sand beaches and coral reefs lure swimmers, snorkellers and beach walkers. Elsewhere, a rugged coastline is punctuated with surf breaks and blowholes, tidal pools and mysterious ocean trenches filled with sea water the colour of aquamarine. Everywhere Fa'a Samoa is evident in the leisurely pace of life, the friendly smiles and the ever-present invitation to sit a while and chat in the shade beneath a swaying palm tree.

Is it possible those 12th century warriors keeping watch from atop Pulemelei Mound were simply trying to keep Samoa's ample treasures all to themselves? 🌴

