

Understand Rarotonga, Samoa & Tonga

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From foreign aid to political comings and goings, read up on the big issues facing the Cook Islands, the Samoas and Tonga.

HISTORY 211

Polynesian migration, Christianity, colonial influences, independence... This region's history is a real ripping yarn.

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A potent combo of centuries-old customs, strong family values and Christianity underpins local society.

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Unravel Polynesian mythology, starring the two most important gods: Tangaroa, the all-powerful creator, and Maui, the wily and resourceful hero.

THE ARTS226

Time-honoured artistic traditions endure, from tapa cloth production and intricate weaving to ebullient dancing and vibrant *fiafia* nights.

FOOD & DRINK230

It's an endless summer of eating and drinking in Polynesia: expect fresh fish, root veggies (taro, cassava, *kumara*) and tropical fruit, plus a muddy, magical concoction called kava.

Rarotonga, Samoa & Tonga Today

These island nations have much in common, but – strewn across a vast span of the South Pacific – they remain a varied bunch. It's not all kava, cocktails and good times here: political change is par for the course, and the complex ties between regional allies, both old and new, are strengthened and weakened all the time. Locals are proving resourceful, though, upping the tourism ante with innovative enticements to visitors.

Best in Print

Pacific Tsunami Galu Afi (Lani Wendt Young; 2010) Details the impact of the 2009 tsunami that devastated parts of Samoa, American Samoa and Tonga.

Patterns of the Past: Tattoo Revival in the Cook Islands (Therese Mangos and John Utanga; 2011) Getting inked in the Cooks, from past to present.

Blue Latitudes (Tony Horwitz; 2002) Retraces Captain Cook's epic voyages through the South Seas.

The Happy Isles of Oceania (Paul Theroux; 1992) Theroux kayaks through the South Pacific (try to overlook the mildly patronising title...).

Best on Film

Sione's Wedding (director Chris Graham; 2006) Four Samoan lads get up to mischief in Auckland.

The Orator (director Tusi Tamasese; 2011) Love, courage and honour: the first 100% Samoan feature film.

My Lost Kainga (director Tony Fuemana; 2011) Tongan film exploring the loss of language and culture.

Mutiny on the Bounty (directors Frank Lloyd, Lewis Milestone and Roger Donaldson; 1935, 1962 and 1984, respectively) Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian disagree.

The Political Landscape

Samoa staged its most recent general election in March 2016 – the country's first election since it hopped west of the International Date Line at the end of 2011 to align with key trading partners Australia and New Zealand. Sitting prime minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi of the Human Rights Protection Party, the top dog since 1998, was returned to power in a landslide victory. Electoral integrity in the 2016 election was bolstered by the 10,000-plus Samoans who registered to vote for the first time, many of whom were no doubt encouraged by new laws to improve voting confidentiality. In the lead-up to the election, penalties for illicit coercion, infringement on voting secrecy or otherwise cooking the electoral books were upped from a minimum of three months' to 12 months' imprisonment.

In Tonga, new King George Tupou VI has been settling into the hot seat. Tonga was rocked in 2012 by the sudden death of the new king's brother, King George Tupou V, aged 65, while visiting Hong Kong. Crowned only in 2008, he ceded many of his powers after ascending the throne to pave the way for democratic reform in the country. Some say this magnanimous move betrayed a lack of enthusiasm for the top job, suggesting that the king – something of a footloose bachelor – was more at home travelling overseas than, well...at home. But new King George VI, a deeply religious family man, has a much more earnest and caring reputation. His coronation in 2015 (postponed until this time so the country could raise the coin to bankroll the event with sufficient pomp) was a lavish affair, and he's been very well received by an adoring public. And in the wake of the 2014 general election, where Tonga's own brand of democracy again withstood the test of the proletariat, the pro-democracy riots of 2006 that tore up downtown Nuku'alofa seem a distant memory.