

# Destination Samoa Islands & Tonga

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the inhabitants of the Samoan islands and Tonga must have the most beautiful eyes in the world.

The idyllic norm in all three of the small nations that are anchored to the bottom of the South Pacific involves lush, reef-fringed islands with sandy foreshores that almost glow in the tropical sunshine. Even when it rains, the sense of verdancy is so strong you can almost hear the *heilala*, *teuila* and hibiscus flowers stretching upwards. The pristine oceanic depths that thread through this Pacific enclave host thousands of species of marine life, from kaleidoscopic coral to the flukes of humpbacks that come to spawn their young in the warm waters.

Human life in the region is so passionately idiosyncratic that almost every encounter yields a memorable moment. Local women and men break into loud, spontaneous song in restaurants and in bus station throngs. Villagers casually swing intimidating bush knives by their sides as they walk along the roadsides. Kids sit on the scuffed tombs of relatives in their front yards as if they were outdoor furniture, and have a habit of yelling 'bye bye'. Games of rugby and volleyball are played with gladiatorial intensity on sports-grounds and -fields.

While snorkelling, diving, sailing, swimming, hiking, drinking, whale watching, feasting on seafood and talking about nothing in particular with loquacious locals, visitors to these islands quickly learn how to release their inner tensions and replace them with a paradisaical calm.



# Getting Started

Figuring out how much time to allow for a trip is the main issue confronting travellers to Samoa, American Samoa and/or Tonga. Think carefully about your priorities before settling on an itinerary. Are you happy to sit on a single beach for a few weeks? Do you have an irresistible urge to explore every hiking trail in one particular island group? Or are you interested in combining relaxed tours of the main islands with brief excursions to smaller, outlying places that take more time and flexibility to reach?

As with any Pacific destination, it seems a shame to take a relatively expensive flight direct from Europe or North America to either Samoa, American Samoa or Tonga and straight back again, unless your travel agent has unearthed a spectacular deal for you or your midnight fare-searching sessions on the internet have proved fruitful. Instead, consider stopping elsewhere in the Pacific in addition to your primary destination.

## WHEN TO GO

For the majority of the year, the climate in the Samoan islands and Tonga encourages visitors. Both Samoas lie near the equator, so conditions are almost perpetually hot and humid – the average annual temperature is 26.5°C in coastal areas, with a decrease in temperature as the land rises inland. Despite its great latitudinal range, Tonga does not experience dramatically diverse climatic conditions either, although Vava'u and the Niuaus are noticeably warmer than Tongatapu, and 'Eua is noticeably cooler (for different reasons). It's when the wet season and the odd tropical cyclone have to be factored in that things get a little less straightforward.

The most comfortable time to visit the region is during the dry season between May and October. Not surprisingly, this is when most of the major Samoan and Tongan festivals are held. This is basically considered to be the region's high season, though there isn't necessarily much

See Climate Charts (Samoa Islands p103; Tonga p183) for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Double-checking the visa situation (Samoa islands p110; Tonga p190).
- Hogwarts-strength anti-insect potion (ie bug repellent) to discourage mosquitoes (p199).
- Sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat to deflect fierce UV rays (p205).
- A travel insurance policy specifically covering you for diving, surfing, hiking and other high-risk activities (Samoa islands p106; Tonga p186).
- Knowing what your local embassy/consulate can and can't do to help you if you're in trouble (Samoa islands p105; Tonga p184).
- Your own snorkelling equipment (Samoa islands p101; Tonga p179), because it will often not be available for hire or, if it is, the quality may be poor.
- The ability to ask open-ended questions, particularly across Samoa. (Ask 'Where is the beach?'. Don't ask 'Is the beach over there?', to which the answer will always be a resounding 'Yes!', even if this is completely incorrect.)
- An inexhaustible supply of patience. You'll need it while waiting for objects to appear (buses, people etc).

### FAVOURITE FESTIVALS & EVENTS

- Heilala Festival (p185; July) – a three-week bash ending on the new king's official birthday
- Miss Galaxy Pageant (p185; July) – Tongan men get dressed up to party
- Teuila Festival (p105; September; [www.teuilafestival.ws](http://www.teuilafestival.ws)) – Samoa's major tourism-focused celebration
- White Sunday (p105; October) – when children run the show in both Samoas
- Tisa's Tattoo Festival (p105; October; [www.tisasbarefootbar.com](http://www.tisasbarefootbar.com)) – entrepreneurial spirit meets traditional art in American Samoa

difference between prices charged during this time and those charged over the rest of the year.

The region's wet season (ostensibly its low season) lasts from November to April. December and January are normally the wettest months across Samoa, while in Tonga, March tends to be the wettest month, especially in Vava'u. Remember, though, that most precipitation occurs at night and the main discomfort will be caused by a rise in the lethargy-inducing heat and humidity. The exception is the harbour area of Tutuila (American Samoa), where the famous Rainmaker Mountain ensures that the region receives over 5000mm of precipitation annually.

Both the Samoan islands and Tonga unfortunately lie squarely within the South Pacific's notorious cyclone belt. The season for tropical storms and cyclones is between November and March. Cyclones seem to occur, on average, every 10 to 15 years. However, in the early 1990s the Samoas were devastated in quick succession by two of the strongest and most destructive storms on record: cyclones Ofa and Val. The last big storm to hit the region was Olaf, which blew across the islands in early 2005.

If you plan to come during the December–January holiday period, when huge numbers of Samoans and Tongans return for the holidays (mostly from New Zealand, Australia and the USA), it's wise to book flights well in advance.

### COSTS & MONEY

Your daily expenses will be affected markedly by how you travel, the type of accommodation you seek out, the sorts of eateries you frequent and how often you end up clutching a cold beer/wine/cocktail. Your choice of activities will also dramatically alter your budget – sitting on a beach costs nothing (except perhaps a small day access fee), but going on a diving trip or a surf safari obviously requires significant expenditure.

In Samoa, if you stay in midrange hotels interspersed with the occasional night in a standard beachside *fale*, buy all your meals from restaurants and hire a car to get around, you'll probably pay a minimum of ST220 per day (per person travelling as a couple). If, however, you stay almost exclusively in *fale* (particularly those that include two or more meals in the overnight rate), do at least some self-catering and bus it around the islands, you'll pay considerably less.

Due to American Samoa's reliance on the greenback, the costs here are higher than in Samoa. Using the same rough formula applied to Samoa – mainly midrange hotel or motel accommodation, restaurant meals and a hire car – you can expect to pay at least US\$130 per person per day. In Tonga, for the same array of daily expenses you'll be looking at a minimum of T\$125 per person per day.

While travelling anywhere within this region, always carry a supply of small-denomination notes. Bus drivers, kiosk and cafe proprietors, and villagers accepting payment for beach use can't be expected to change big bills.

## Taxes

Samoa applies a 15% VAGST (Value Added Goods & Services Tax) to most commodities and to hotel and restaurant prices. This is almost always included in marked prices, though some top-end accommodation and eateries will add it to your bill.

All such prices in Tonga include 15% GST. All prices given in this book include these taxes.

## READING UP

### Books

Gavin Bell's *In Search of Tusitala – Travels in the Pacific after Robert Louis Stevenson* retraces the principal South Sea voyages of the Scottish writer, who settled on 'Upolu during the final four years of his life.

An entertaining account of travel through the South Seas is *Slow Boats Home* by Gavin Young, the sequel to *Slow Boats to China*. Combined, they recount the author's 1979 around-the-world boat-hop on vessels large and small. A good part of his journey is aboard a Tongan boat, and there's a well-observed Samoa chapter.

*Transit of Venus – Travels in the Pacific*, by Julian Evans, is a well-written account of the author's shoestring travels around the Pacific by boat and ship. It includes very entertaining chapters on the Samoas and Tonga.

A book travellers love to hate is *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* by Paul Theroux, in which the perpetually miserable author kayaks around South Pacific islands. Cynics will love the amusingly downbeat prose; Theroux is particularly hard on Nuku'alofa.

*Friendly Isles: A Tale of Tonga; 'Utulei, My Tongan Home; and The Tongan Past* by Patricia Ledyard Matheson all relate anecdotes of Tongan life and make easy, interesting reading.

### CONDUCT IN THE SAMOAN ISLANDS & TONGA

As a foreigner, you will be considered worthy of respect as long as you behave appropriately as far as the locals are concerned. This can be frustrating at times. Samoans and Tongans will often keep themselves at arm's length in order to avoid the possibility of making you unhappy. They will often answer your questions with the response they suppose you'd like to hear, rather than with the truth, which they believe may upset you. But the better you become acquainted with the people, of course, the more relaxed they will become.

It is perfectly normal in the Samoan islands and Tonga for members of the same sex to hold hands and display friendship in public, but open displays of affection between men and women, married or not, will be met with disapproval.

Be aware that Sunday is the traditional day of rest and quiet. This is the day when tourists are generally not welcome in villages or on local beaches.

A concept that causes breakdowns in communication between Samoans and foreigners is *musu*, which may be roughly translated as 'moodiness'. An otherwise pleasant and vivacious person may inexplicably become quiet and sullen. If this happens, don't worry – you haven't committed some unforgivable faux pas, so don't react with apologies or questions. Your friend is just experiencing *musu* and will usually get over it soon.

For more tips on how to get along with the locals, see the boxed texts, p29 and p124.

*Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account* by Dr John Martin and *Tales of the Tikongs* by Epeli Hau'ofa should be mandatory companion reading for visits to Tonga. The former provides a fascinating historical background to many sights throughout the islands, while the latter is a collection of wry, satirical vignettes on life in 'Tiko'.

For a glimpse of American Samoan life in the mid-1970s through the eyes of a cynical American humorist, track down a copy of *Tales from the Margaret Mead Taproom* by Nicholas von Hoffman. It's illustrated by Garry Trudeau, the *Doonesbury* cartoonist.

*My Samoan Chief* by Fay G Calkins is a wonderfully entertaining account of how a young American woman deals with the often confounding customs of traditional Samoa after she moves there with her Samoan husband.

### Internet Resources

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Get started with summaries on the Samoas and Tonga, links to island-related sites and travellers trading information on the Thorn Tree.

**Matangitonga** ([www.matangitonga.to](http://www.matangitonga.to)) Provides lots of Tongan news and current affairs.

**National Park of American Samoa** ([www.nps.gov/npsa](http://www.nps.gov/npsa)) This excellent site has information on the park's homestay programme and local flora and fauna.

**Samoa Observer** ([www.samoaoobserver.ws](http://www.samoaoobserver.ws)) The website of the country's main newspaper is a good resource for news and current affairs relating to Samoa, as well as the Pacific region as a whole.

**Samoa Tourism Authority** ([www.visitsamoa.ws](http://www.visitsamoa.ws)) Samoa's official website, with lots of useful info and links.

**Tonga Visitors Bureau** ([www.tongaholiday.com](http://www.tongaholiday.com)) A good place to start looking for information, with lots of links that will be of interest to travellers.

### TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

If you enjoy snorkelling around reefs and getting glimpses of wildlife in their natural environments, then do your bit to protect them by not buying souvenirs made from endangered animals or plants – that means anything utilising coral (particularly black coral), shells (such as triton shells), turtles, sandalwood and the like. If you do buy such goods, it will probably be confiscated when you get back home anyway, due to international conventions banning trade in endangered species. Speaking of coral, avoid stepping on or otherwise damaging reefs while you're checking them out.

On the same theme, think carefully about visiting (and therefore supporting) any attractions that exploit wildlife, endangered or otherwise. The careful disposal of all nonbiodegradable rubbish should also be a priority for travellers. Anyone who has seen the rubbish that plagues beaches, parks and other public places across the Samoan islands and Tonga will need no further convincing of the importance of this. Also keep this in mind while you're quick-stepping it down a pristine walking trail. For further information, see p41 for the Samoan islands and p136 for Tonga.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### SAMOAN ISLAND-HOPPING

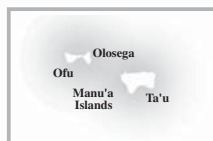
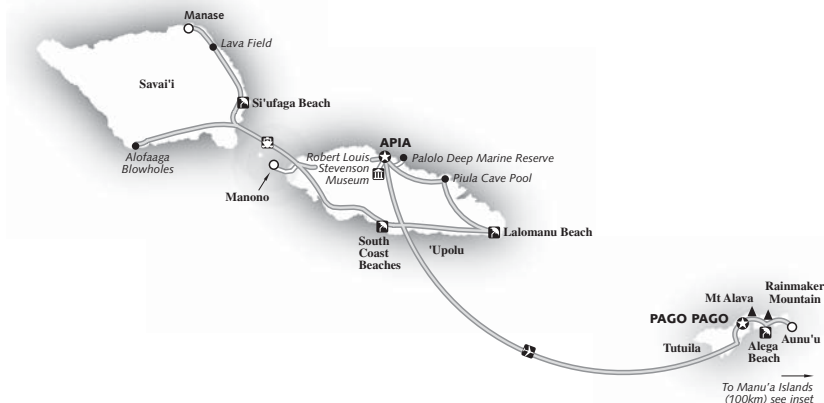
Two Weeks / Apia to Pago Pago

In Samoa, experience the delightful **Palolo Deep Marine Reserve** (p56), then head inland to the charming **Robert Louis Stevenson Museum** (p63). Back-track to Apia and head eastward to the seductive sands of **Lalomanu beach** (p65), with a pit stop at **Piula Cave Pool** (p65). Meander along **south-coast beaches** (p67) to laze in more beachside *fale* before boating out to **Manono** (p69).

Back on the 'mainland', catch the ferry to **Savai'i** (p71). Motor up the east coast, stopping for a dip at the beautiful beaches along the way. Now traverse the desolate **lava field** (p75) before depositing yourself on the sand at gregarious **Manase** (p76). Return down the east coast and continue west for the wave action at **Alofaaga blowholes** (p79), then recross Apolima Strait and fly to **American Samoa** (p81).

Admire the beautiful harbour setting of **Pago Pago** (p84), then climb **Mt Alava** (p88) for spectacular views. Maroon yourself on **Alega Beach** (p88), detouring for a close-up of **Rainmaker Mountain** (p87). Wind along the coast to Au'asi for a small boat to **Aunu'u** (p89) to explore its wild nature, before taking a slow ride back to Pago Pago.

The well-beaten Samoan path is lined with beautiful beaches, gorgeous snorkelling options, legendary sites and other natural trappings of tropical islands. Why come all the way to the Pacific to rush around? Take a few weeks to get into the Samoas' relaxed spirit.



## TONGAN HIGHLIGHTS

Two Weeks /

### Nuku'alofa to the Vava'u Group

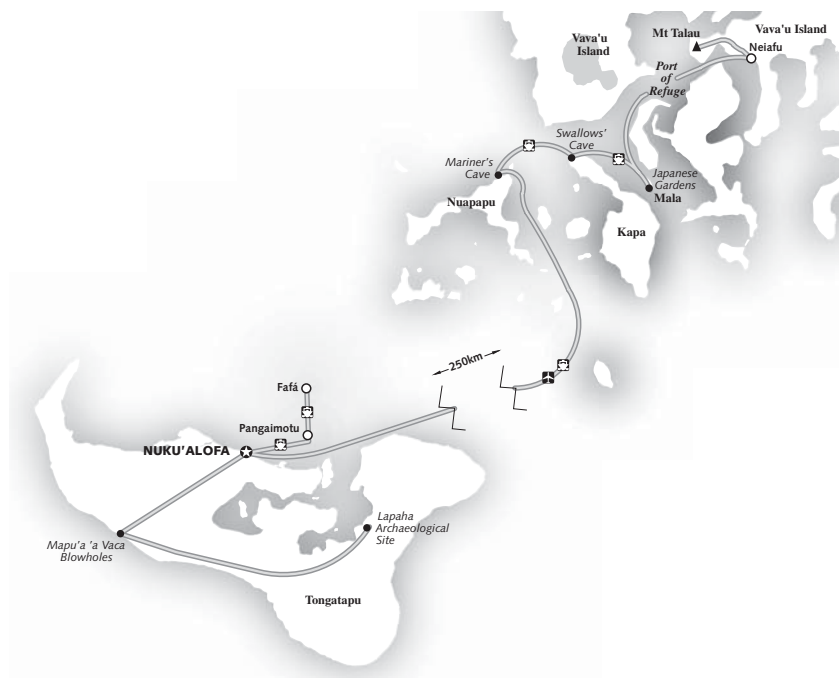
One classic route taken in Tonga involves a thorough exploration of the vibrant jumble of islands that make up the ever-popular Vava'u Group, followed by an investigation of plantation-studded Tongatapu.

Head straight to the paradisaical Vava'u Group, Tonga's activities playground. On **Vava'u** (p162), climb up to the peak of **Mt Talau** (p166) for some amazing island views and to map your path through the Port of Refuge. Then join a chartered or bare-boat yacht and sail around the islands of the group. Change your anchorage each night and jump off board each day to snorkel at the various sites. A multiday guided sea-kayak tour is another superb option. Spend some time exploring the **Japanese Gardens** (p172) off Mala and swim into **Swallows' Cave** (p172) on Kapa. Experience the magical fog of **Mariner's Cave** (p172) on Nuapapu before moving on to idyllic islands further south. Arrange your charter to sail through the Ha'apai Group en route to Tongatapu, or catch a short flight.

On **Tongatapu** (p143), have a quick look around **Nuku'alofa** (p146) and then visit the island's fascinating archaeological excavations, including the **Lapaha archaeological site** (p153), followed by the energetic **Mapu'a'a Vaca blowholes** (p153). Then get yourself in holiday mode by spending a day or two snorkelling, swimming or just being lazy on one of the resort islands to the north of Tongatapu, such as **Pangaimotu** (p154) or **Fafá** (p154).

See the relevant destination sections for information on transport options around each island grouping. For details of transport between Tongatapu and Vava'u, see p191.

The Vava'u Group is an enticing cluster of islands – some topped with emerald green and with sheer basalt walls plunging into the protected waters, others ringed by idyllic swaths of sand and coral reefs. Take your time and let the wind fill your sails.



# ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

## INTO THE SAMOAN WILDS

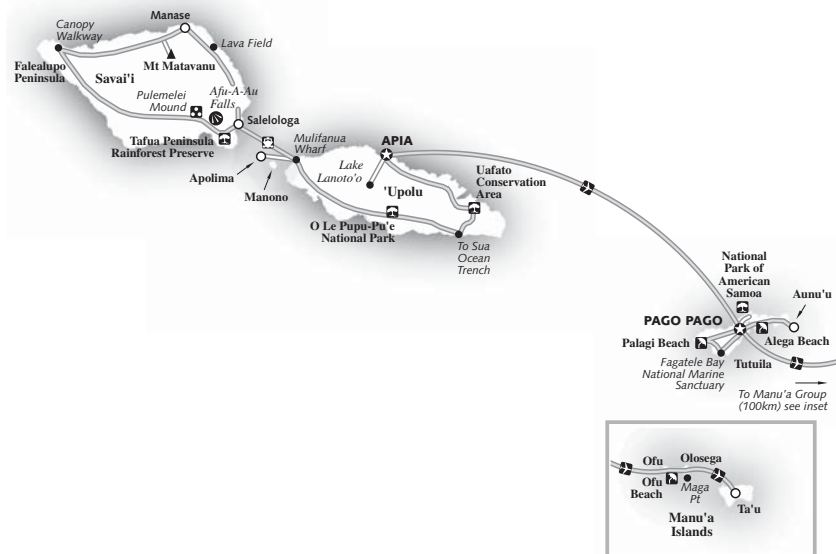
One Month / Apia to Ta'u

Most of the region's fascinating sites lie off the main coastal roads: in the middle of plantations, on the slopes of ruptured volcanoes, and on far-flung satellite islands. From **Apia** (p53), take the Cross Island Rd to eerie **Lake Lanoto'o** (p64). On the north coast, rattle into the remote **Uafato Conservation Area** (p65). Peek into the sublime depths of the **To Sua Ocean Trench** (p65) and explore an overgrown trail in **O Le Pupu-Pu'e National Park** (p67). Then organise a visit to spectacular **Apolima** (p70) before sailing for Savai'i.

Delve into the **Tafua Peninsula Rainforest Preserve** (p79) before visiting the **Afu-A-Au Falls** (p79) and **Pulemelei Mound** (p79). Continue west to **Falealupo Peninsula** (p77) to trudge across the **Canopy Walkway** (p77). Head east to **Mt Matavanu** (p75). Relax at **Manase** (p76) before returning to 'Upolu.

On Tutuila, head for the **National Park of American Samoa** (p88). Go south to explore the pristine **Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary** (p87), then travel beyond Leone at least as far as beautiful **Palagi Beach** (p87). Recross the island, stopping at **Alega Beach** (p88), then visit **Aunu'u** (p89). From Pago Pago, fly to Ofu to experience stunning **Ofu Beach** (p93) and **Maga Point** (p94). Your last stop is the remote rainforest grandeur of **Ta'u** (p94).

To travel into the Samoan wilds is to weave your way between ancient Polynesian sites, quicksand lakes, collapsed calderas and some of the most beautiful beaches in the Pacific. Take two weeks, but a month would build in the flexibility required for trips to outlying islands such as Apolima and the Manu'a Group.





## SLOW BOATS AROUND TONGA One Month / Nuku'alofa to the Niuas

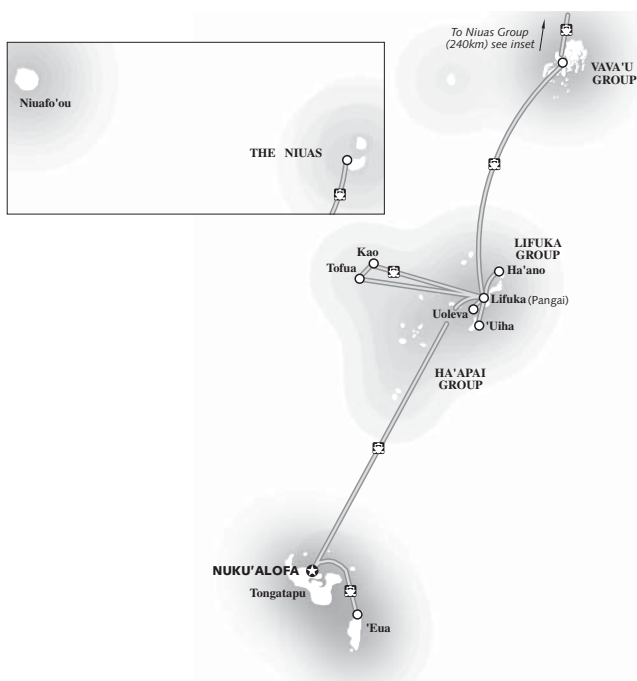
There's no better way of enjoying the peaceful solitude of Tonga's wonderfully isolated islands than to stow away on slow boats around the region, jumping off whenever the urge strikes you.

After spending a little time acclimatising to the tropics in **Nuku'alofa** (p146), head out to nearby **'Eua** (p155) and spend a few days (or why not a week?) hiking through the island's lush rainforests and exploring its caves and sinkholes, where you'll sometimes have to climb huge, tangled banyan trees to get out. From Nuku'alofa, clamber aboard the ferry and head for the coral charms and soothing serenity of the scattered, low-lying **Ha'apai Group** (p157). Spend some time absorbing unexploited Tongan culture on friendly islands in the Lifuka Group, such as **Ha'ano** (p161) and **'Uiha** (p161), then shack up in a beachside *fale* on budget-oriented **Uoleva** (p161). Embark on a trip out to volcanic **Tofua** (p162) to hike up to the crater rim, and to nearby pyramidal **Kao** (p162), where you can scuba dive its blackened drop-offs.

If time is not your scarcest commodity, continue via the sundry physical distractions of the **Vava'u Group** (p162) to the remote **Niuas** (p174), three remote volcanic islands where you'll find lava fields, untrammelled ridges and languid locals.

See the relevant destination sections for information on transport options around each island grouping. For details of transport between Tongatapu, the Ha'apai Group and the Niuas, see p191.

**Take as long as you can to get lost in the South Pacific of old. Discover 'Eua's tropical rainforest, the Ha'apai Group of stunning, far-flung and low-lying sand and reef islands, and the charm of slow-moving, unexploited Tongan culture.**



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