



Samoa

— *Polynesian Diving in Upolu*

Text and photos by
Brandi Mueller



Looking out from the shore past To-Sua Ocean Trench on Upolu Island in Samoa. PREVIOUS PAGE: Seafan and soft coral in Samoa

Located in the Polynesian region of the South Pacific Ocean, the idyllic paradise of Samoa, which comprises the two main islands of Savai'i and Upolu and several smaller islands, is part of the Commonwealth of Nations. Brandi Mueller managed to venture to Upolu Island before the coronavirus pandemic forced countries to close borders and stay-at-home orders came into effect. She shares her experience exploring the natural beauty to be found in the Samoan islands, above and below the waves.

The small, nine-passenger, turboprop airplane violently shook us up and down like an amusement park ride. Out of the windows, all I could see were the gray clouds of the seemingly endless succession of storms that had been ravaging the area.

Those of us in the back of the small plane could see into the cockpit and past the single pilot's vision and his view was just as impenetrable with thick, dark clouds as what we saw through our windows. I let out a slightly insensitive giggle on one stomach-dropping descent through the air (I have little fear of airplanes and enjoy a good roller coaster every now and then). But I glanced to my left at a man, white-knuckling his thighs with his eyes closed, and made sure to not make a sound for the rest of the 35-minute flight.

Apia

Our destination was Apia, Samoa, and I was three days late coming in from Pago Pago, American Samoa because the airport had been closed due to a line of tropical storms and cyclones that just did not seem to stop. Several days earlier, my original flight from Honolulu to Pago Pago had also been delayed for 24 hours due to unsafe weather conditions, and when it was time to make this short hop, the storms just kept coming. Once the airport was finally opened, I was on the first flight over, but the weather had not suddenly changed to blue skies and sunshine, and when we landed in Apia, the clouds poured down on us, soaking through layers in my suitcases.

I was feeling quite successful having finally arrived, even with the weather.

The beach view from the Sheraton Samoa Beach Resort (above); Sopoaga Waterfall (top right)



The island of Apolima with Savai'i behind it (above); Pure Ocean dive boat at their dock (right)



After clearing immigrations and collecting my luggage, I headed out of the airport, contemplating to myself what a nice airport it was for such a small island, particularly because Talofa Airways (which I was on) lands at the domestic airport. Looking at the arrivals board, I noted a few flights from Australia and New Zealand and a bolt of panic rose up from my stomach. Oh no. We must have landed at the international airport, but I had told the manager at Pure Ocean Dive and Watersports to pick me up at the domestic airport.

Asking around, I discovered the domestic airport was still closed because of the weather, so the flight landed at the international terminal, which was a 45-minute drive from where I had asked to be picked up. A feeling of dread built up inside me that the kind person who volunteered to pick me up might be driving to the wrong place. Not to mention, I was already three days late and had been sending daily emails about cancelled flights and my undetermined arrival. I was feeling terrible for all the inconveniences I was causing.

As I fiddled with my phone, trying to get the international calling plan to work, Oli from Pure Ocean came walking up. He already knew the domestic terminal was closed and the specific terminal in which I would actually be arriving (it is amazing how first impressions and great customer service can calm the panic of a wayward traveler). He also seemed not at all concerned about my being three days late, as we loaded up my luggage and he drove me to the Sheraton Samoa Beach Resort where I would be staying and diving.

After checking into a beautiful ocean-view suite, I enjoyed a lovely outdoor dinner listening to the rain calmly falling and went to bed early. The plan was to dive in the morning, but the weather would dictate if that was going to happen.

Apolima
I opened my eyes to sunshine filling my room and it took me a second to process what the sun was after a week in the South Pacific of solid rain. Looking out the window, it did not even appear windy, so I put



Blueforce
MALDIVES & RED SEA

Are you looking for the best liveaboard cruise in Maldives and Red Sea?

You just found it!



Maldives



Sudan & Egypt



Egypt

WWW.BLUEFORCEFLEET.COM

FOLLOW US ON





View from the dive boat



Cliffs on Apolima Island (above); Looking out from the shore, past To-Sua Ocean Trench (left)

my camera together and piled up my dive gear before heading to breakfast.

The resort stretched out along a white sandy beach, with only the occasional palm tree breaking up the 180-degree brilliant blue ocean view and the largest island in Samoa, Savai'i, just a shadow in the background. The tables of the open-air breakfast buffet were arranged, looking out at the sea, and I could not help but marvel at the beautiful view. I wanted to slowly sip my coffee and take it all in, but with hopes the boat might go out, I quickly finished breakfast and headed to the dive shop.

It seemed that perhaps my weather-bad-luck was changing, and the dive crew was loading the boat as I arrived. Pretty soon, we were departing the island of Upolu,

heading out to dive Apolima. This extinct volcanic crater is the smallest inhabited island in Samoa, both in size and population, and it is located in between Upolu and Savai'i. Accessible only by boat and only by invitation, you cannot just show up at Apolima.

As the boat made its way closer to the steep black volcanic rock cliffs of the island, I was wondering where the people lived. A small community of about 80 residents was known to live on the island, and as we started to make our way around the island, a small opening appeared. A very narrow, rocky inlet led to a flat interior section of the island with houses. A treacherous landing to say the least, the remnants of a small vessel that met its demise could be seen smashed on the rocks to one side.

Diving

Our destination was not the village though, but instead, dive sites around the island. The boat slowed and my dive guide jumped in to check the current. It was mild and I geared up, back-rolling off the side of the boat. After we met at the surface and descended, all I saw was blue. As I slowly followed the dive guide down, out of nowhere, a massive school of giant barracuda came right up to us. It was like they were waiting to say hello. After I snapped a few photos, they got bored and left, and I could see the seafloor emerging into view at around 30m (100ft).

As we headed to the reef, massive sea fans, which revealed a deep red hue when I shined lights on them, dotted an underwater land-



A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

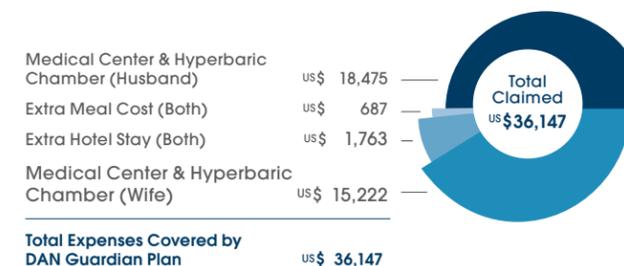
You are far from home and have nowhere else to turn. That's when DAN dive accident coverage can help.

DAN.org/JoinDAN



DCS in Maldives

A couple injured in Maldives relied on DAN's Guardian Plan to cover 100% of their claim. See the full story at DAN.org/Claim-Stories.



The scenario summarized above is offered only as an example. Coverage depends on the facts of each case and the terms, conditions and exclusions of the policy. Coverage may not be available in all states or outside of the U.S. Visit DAN.org for complete details.



scape, swirling with fish. Large hard corals covered the bottom and another large school of a smaller barracuda species overtook us and continued past, out of view. In amongst the hard corals were dots of brightly colored soft corals—not the massive draping kind you see in other

places, but numerous smaller patches, like puffballs brightening up the seascape.

While conditions were drastically better than I had expected, the effects of the storms remained in the form of swell. As we got shallower towards the end of the dive, we were tossed back and forth and

up and down in the waves. The surf made for a beautiful panorama of white water washing up against the island from below, as we completed our safety stop and headed back to the surface.

The boat was waiting right above us and the captain helped us back onto the boat. Back on board, we continued to circle the island and found another spot to jump in after our surface interval. With another slight current, we drifted along at that perfect speed where you are not going too fast but also do not have to work too much to keep going. It was very relaxing, with lots of marine life to see.

I finished my first day of diving around Apolima, feeling that the diving was just really nice. The water was warm, so a rash guard would have been fine, although I was comfy in a 3mm wetsuit. There were not massive reef structures but endless hard coral plains covering the sea bottom, which supported a lot of fish. Schools of fusiliers passed by. As we came around a corner, the current shifted, but we



School of reticulated dascyllus hovering over hard corals (above); Diver with huge sea fan on reef (top right), soft corals (top left) and school of great barracuda (left) at Apolima



**GANGGA ISLAND
RESORT & SPA**

MANADO - NORTH SULAWESI

More Than a Diving Paradise



www.ganggaisland.com



Exploring Upolu

Wanting to explore the island, I rented a car and prepared myself to drive around the island. But before they would rent it to me, I had to get a Samoan driver's license. While it sounded intimidating, it turned out to consist only of filling out a form with the information from my American driver's license and paying a fee of around US\$20, but I felt pride that I passed my Samoan driver's test.

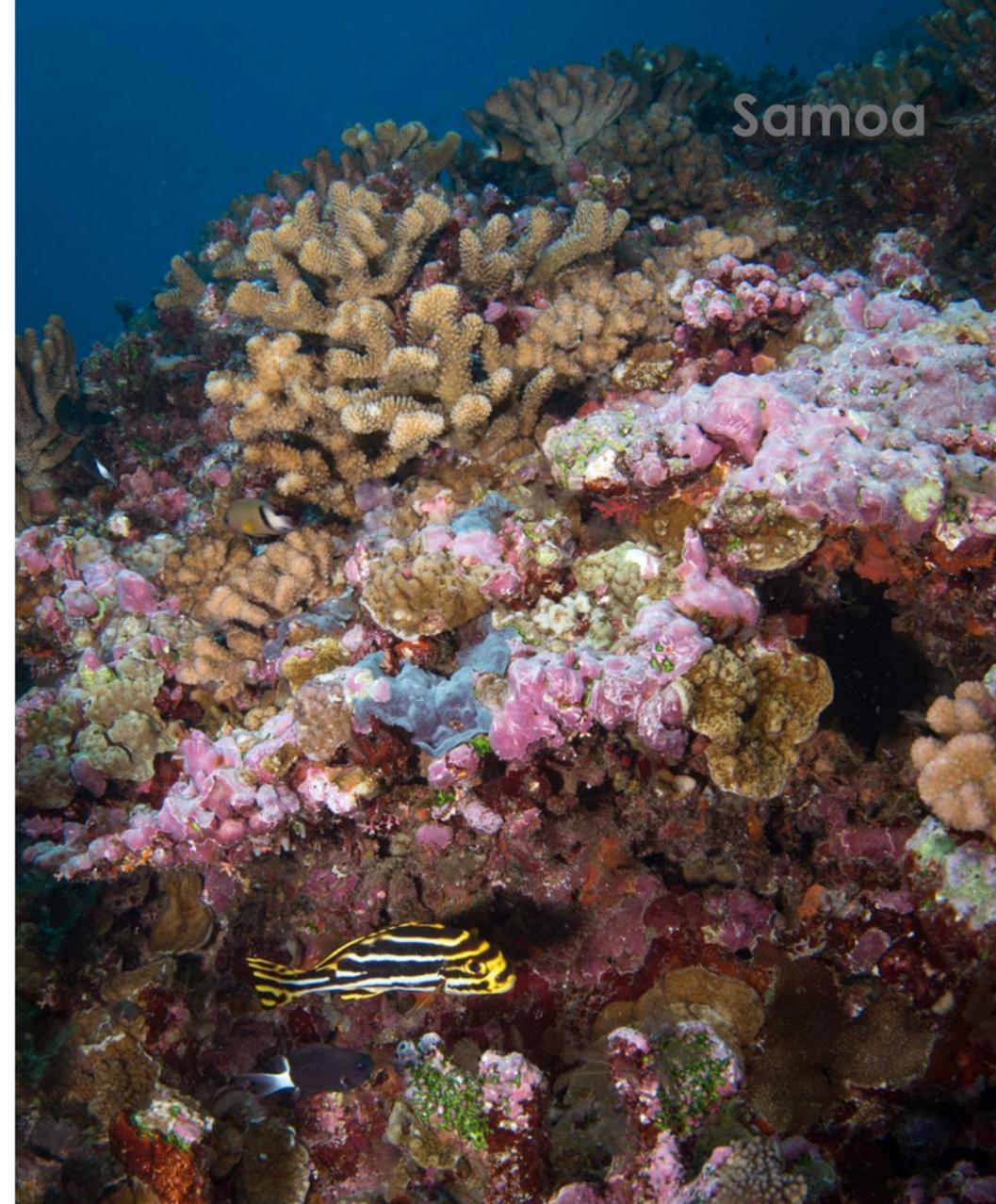
With 210km (130mi) of beach and roads allowing one to circumnavigate almost the entire island, I set out... on the left side of the road. I found this slightly humorous, having just come from American Samoa where



Hawksbill sea turtle at Apolima (above); Clark's anemonefish on anemone (top right); School of pyramid butterflyfish (top left); Tomato anemonefish with baby (far left); Reticulated butterflyfish (center)

kicked a bit into it until we got a bit farther and were mobbed by fish. White pyramid butterflyfish, with yellow edges, feasted on plankton in the water column, and a turtle swam by. There were also several anemones with anemonefish within.





Giant clam (left); Diver on wall festooned with hard corals (above); Arc-eye hawkfish (top center); Porcelain crab (right); Sub-adult oriental sweetlips on reef (far right); Giant moray eel hiding in reef (bottom right)

people drove on the right side of the road, and pondered why islands linked so closely culturally (and closely in distance) are so different in practicalities. Doing some research, I found that because Samoa has closer ties with New Zealand and Australia (while American Samoa has closer ties with the United States), far more cars with left-side steering wheels were being imported at cheaper prices into the country. So, in 2009, they decided to just change which side of the road they would drive. On 7 September 2009, they officially changed the law to drive on the left and even made a two-day holiday on the 7th and 8th to help reduce traffic while people started to get used to it.

I admire this move and several others Samoa has done over the years to make the way the country operates make more sense. This includes when, in 2011, the country changed its date and gave up a day by moving itself west of the International Date Line. Previously, Samoa was in the same time zone as American Samoa, but, again, due the country's close working ties with New Zealand and Australia, they were essentially losing two workdays a week, because when it was Monday in Australia, it was still Sunday in Samoa —so, no one was working. And on Friday in Samoa, it was already Saturday in Australia (and no one was working there). From a business standpoint, it made more sense to

change their time zone.

This makes it very interesting to fly from American Samoa to Samoa (which I did), as in a 35-minute flight (125km or 78miles), one goes through a 23-hour time change. Surprisingly, I felt no jet lag.

One last recent change occurred when Western Samoa decided to change its name to Samoa in 1997, dropping the "Western." This move upset the people of American Samoa as they said it "diminished its own identity." So, currently, the country is called the Independent State of Samoa, while American





Princess damselfish

Diver on reef with whip coral (above); The writer Robert Louis Stevenson's room in the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum (top right); The safe he brought to Samoa to store his writing and valuables (right); His wife, Fanny's, room (far right)

Samoa remains an unincorporated and unorganized territory of the United States.

Robert Louis Stevenson Museum

Robert Louis Stevenson (RLS), the Scottish author of the classic books *Treasure Island*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and many other great works, spent the end of his life in Samoa until 1894, when he passed away at age 44. Suffering from illness (possibly tuberculosis) since he was a child, RLS led a life of adventures and travel, and he made his way to the Pacific in 1888, settling in Samoa with his wife, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, and her daughter, son and mother in 1890. While in Samoa, they had a mansion built called Vila Vailima, which still stands today and currently serves as a museum, commemorating how he and his family may have

lived in Samoa, with original and replica antiques as well as a few first edition books.

Driving just out of Apia and up into the higher elevations of the center of the island, one can see that Vailima was built on a hill, with a beautiful ocean view and in the perfect spot to get trade winds to keep the home cool in the sweltering tropical heat. After removing my shoes (as the Samoans do), a museum guide took me through each room of the house and showed me the kitchen built behind the house (to prevent fires).

The walls were covered in photographs, taken from the 1880s to the 1890s, of the family and staff and of RLS with Samoan villagers. He had close ties with the Samoans, and they called him

"Tusitala," which means "writer of tales." In RLS's bedroom and writing room, there were bookshelves full of his books, including translated copies in every language, including Samoan. Several first editions were on display.

My favorite room was Fanny's, the only room never painted, as she had redwood logs shipped to Samoa for her room, so that she could be surrounded by the trees of her native California. Downstairs in the dining room, there was a massive safe—said to have been carried up the hill on the backs of many Samoans—in which RLS kept his manuscripts locked up, as well as other valuables.

Museum of Samoa

Also in Apia is the Museum of Samoa where I spent some time learning about the culture and history of the islands. On display were pottery and stone artifacts thought to be 3,000 years old, originating from the time when the Samoans first arrived on the islands. Tapa cloths, which are traditional barkcloth made from the paper mulberry tree and painted with intricate designs, were hanging on the walls along with information on Samoa throughout history. As one moved from room to room, the displays chronologically moved through time on the Islands.



Samoa





The giant swimming hole, To-Sua Ocean Trench, is accessed via ladder (above); "Fale," or "house," at Pure Ocean (top right); Sopoaga Falls (right)

Similarities and differences

Prior to arriving in Samoa, I had spent a few days in American Samoa, but unfortunately, I was unable to get into the water due to bad weather and was mostly confined to my Airbnb during Tropical Storm Wasi. But I was fascinated about the similarities and differences between these two very distinct countries, which are so closely tied culturally and physically. The museum shed some light on these differences, yet, the term *Talofa* (or *Hello* in English) was still heard on both islands, both cling to the traditions of the Samoan culture, and both live life *Fa'a Samoa* or "the Samoan Way."

While driving around Tutulia (American Samoa) and Upulo (Samoa), I observed that every village had at least one (but usually many) *fale*. *Fale* means "house" but refers to an oval-shaped building

with no walls, just pillars holding it up, and a thatched roof, lashed and tied together with plant fiber rope, usually made from dried coconut fiber. Originally constructed with no metal, now some also use modern construction equipment. They are still used today for meetings and gatherings, and I often saw people just hanging out in them, as I drove through the villages.

On the side of the road, I also often saw large metal tanks (similar to the large cylinders one might use to fill a lot of scuba tanks), hanging with their bottoms cut off, like a bell. I later learned that these were used to alert the village of something important. They also would be sounded to alert people of "Sa" (meaning "sacred"), which is a religious evening prayer curfew, usually around 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. each night. During this time, no one is allowed

to walk around the village, from the time the bell was sounded until the bell (or sometimes it was the blowing of a conch shell) was later sounded three times.

Samoans are deeply religious, and Sundays are a day of worship. Almost everything is closed for the day, although hotels and some tourist restaurants stay open. I even saw signs posted at beaches, forbidding swimming on Sundays.

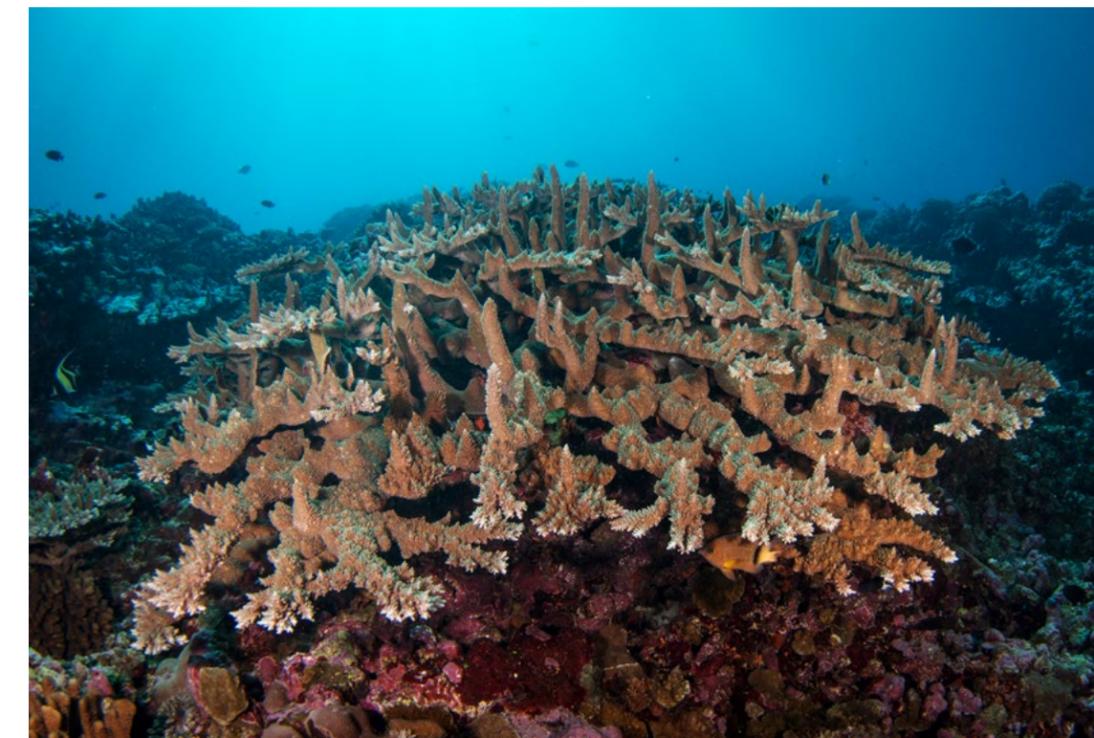
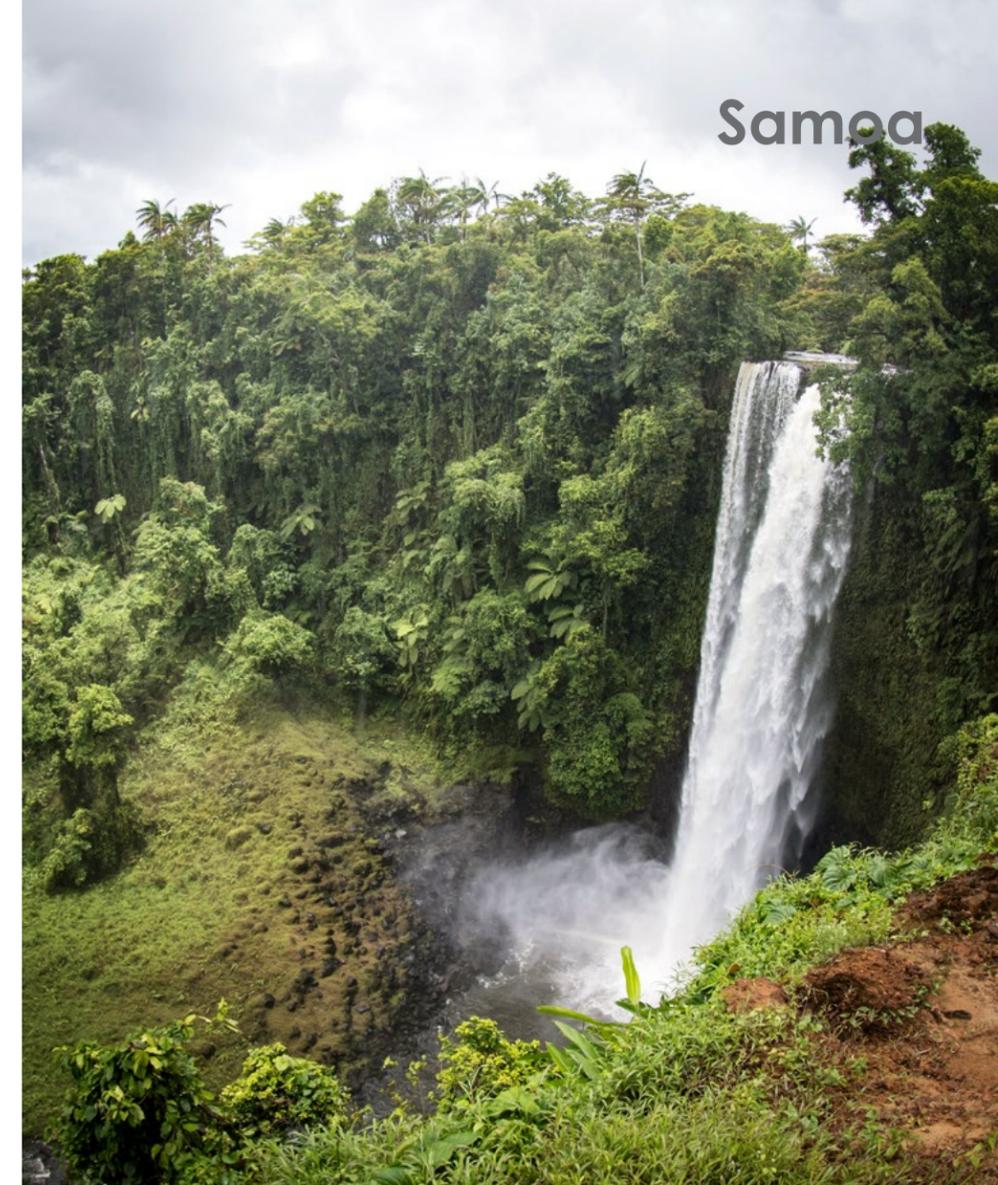
To-Sua Ocean Trench

Continuing my drive around the island, I reached To-Sua Ocean Trench on the southern coast. Meaning "giant swimming hole" in English, To-Sua is a cave, connecting to the open ocean, that can be reached via a descending staircase and ladder. From above, it looks like a giant hole in the ground, which it sort of is, but with plenty of beauty surrounding

it. The entrance is located within a native garden, and if you can pull yourself away from the giant swimming hole, you will find that the garden abruptly ends at a cliff with a spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean.

Resuming my driving tour of the island, I stopped at a few waterfalls (there are

plenty), and I soon became very familiar with "custom fees," which are customary fees visitors pay to access sights on private land, such as To-Sua, the waterfalls, and even several beaches. Each time I pulled off the highway towards a "waterfall" sign, I would be met in the parking lot and asked for 10 or 20 tala (about



Manono Island (above); Pufferfish (top center); Lobster (right); Hard corals on Apolima's reef (left)

crossed a small babbling brook and then turned into a very deep and slippery muddy path. I lost my sandals to the thick mud several times before giving up and walking barefoot until I reached the falls when a soft rain started falling, making the mud even worse. The waterfall was gorgeous, though, and green

Spanish Flu outbreak during which it suffered more than any other Pacific Island Nation, as 90 percent of the population got infected and over one-fifth of the population died. In nearby American Samoa, Spanish Flu was prevented entirely due to the governor quarantining the territory and not allowing any ships in. Samoa had no cases until the arrival of the SS *Talune* from New Zealand, and seven days later, the epidemic was uncontrollable.

While I was reading about this event in the Museum of Samoa, I was also getting updates of COVID-19 cases occurring around the world. On arrival to Samoa, I was temperature-checked and passengers who had been to China, Italy, Iran, or coming from California in the United States were not allowed to enter. I had not left the Pacific in over two months and had not been in or traveled through any countries that had confirmed cases prior to my arrival in Samoa. But stricter measures were being taken every day, including halting cruise ships from docking.

The day I left Samoa, the Samoan govern-

US\$7-12). I was glad I brought some cash and small bills with me.

Sopoaga Waterfall was beautiful, and only a few feet from the parking lot. I also stopped at Fuiipisia Falls, which required a bit more work to reach. After parking my car and paying the fee, I was sent off along a grassy path, which

forest surrounded the area.

Traveling during COVID-19

As my trip in Samoa began in mid-February 2020, the island nation was already ramping up its protective measures against COVID-19. The country still has not forgotten the 1919



Pure Ocean's dive boat at Nu'uolopa, also known as Bat Island due to the flying foxes that live there (above); Fuiipisia Falls (top right)



Springer's blenny (above); A tiny blenny peeks out from the coral reef (left); Reticulated dascyllus (right)



Dot and dash butterflyfish on reef

ment cut flights in half and increased the number of countries not allowed entry to try and stop Samoa from becoming infected with the virus. Although I am sure this did harm to tourism, in a country with a vulnerable population and a health-care system that most likely could not support a pandemic, these were likely very good (and very quick) responses to protect Samoans from the virus.

Macro critters

On my last morning of diving in Samoa, I made the tough decision to put on my macro lens and capture some of the lovely reef fish I had been seeing on every dive. Samoa was a hard place to choose to shoot macro because every

dive had the possibility of seeing larger animals like turtles, reef and nurse sharks, as well as endless fields of coral. But during my dives, I was glad I did, as I chased around butterflyfish and tried to capture the many black and white dascyllus, which would hover above the hard coral only to dart back into the branches and hide whenever I was about to snap a photo.

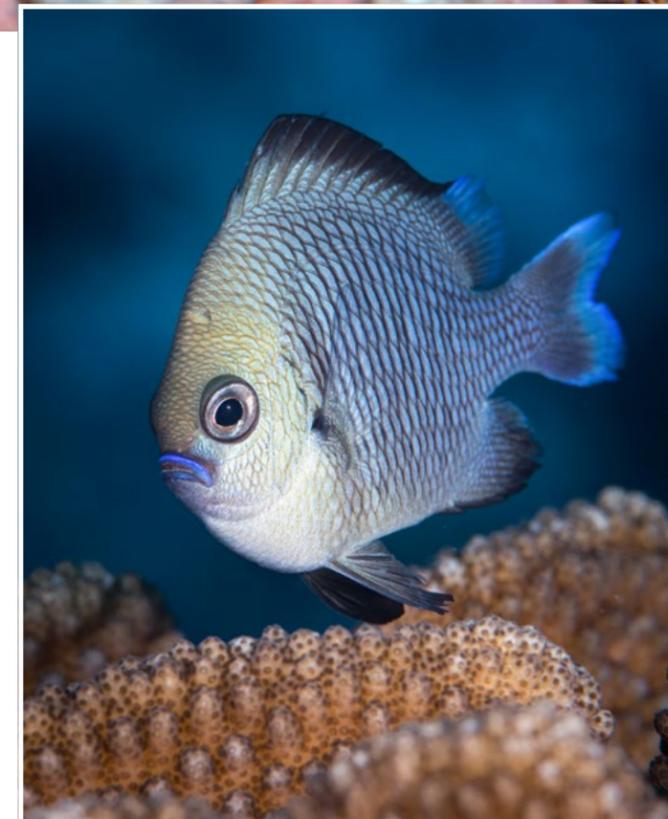
Throughout my dives in Samoa, I had occasionally seen a large blenny, with bright reddish orange spots, sitting on rocks or on coral. I made it my goal to get a photo of this one and probably bored my dive guide to tears as I stayed in one section trying to follow the skittish blenny. I did snap an image of one that sat still long

enough. There were also numerous different-colored giant clams all over the reef, ranging from purple to orange to deep blue.

With my nose in the coral, my dive guide called me over and showed me the tiniest blenny, smaller than a pencil eraser hiding in a small hole showing only his head. I am still not certain what species it was, but it sure was cute!

Snorkeling

Back on the boat, I was con-



tent with my macro morning and was debating in my head if I should spend the afternoon



THIS PAGE: Resort guests were treated to a traditional "Fia Fia," a dinner show with Samoan stories, music, song and fire dancing.

relaxing at the pool or the beach when Oli called from the office. He asked if I wanted to join a snorkeling trip going out in the afternoon, which would visit Nu'ulopa Island (also known as Bat Island, home to a conservation area for flying foxes). That seemed like the perfect place to fly my drone, so I quickly abandoned my visions of napping in a beach chair.

With plenty of shallow reef teeming with fish, Samoa has some great snorkeling. But I was excited for the

snorkeling surface interval on the small island known for its bat population (Fun fact: Bats do not like drones). The small island was covered in palms and other trees, and I learned it was sometimes used as a cemetery for high chiefs.

Samoa music and dance

After the island visit and more snorkeling, I got back to my room to change quickly and make my way to the "Fia Fia." Roughly translating to "celebration" or "happy," the Sheraton Samoa Beach

Resort does a weekly traditional dinner show with Samoan dancing and music.

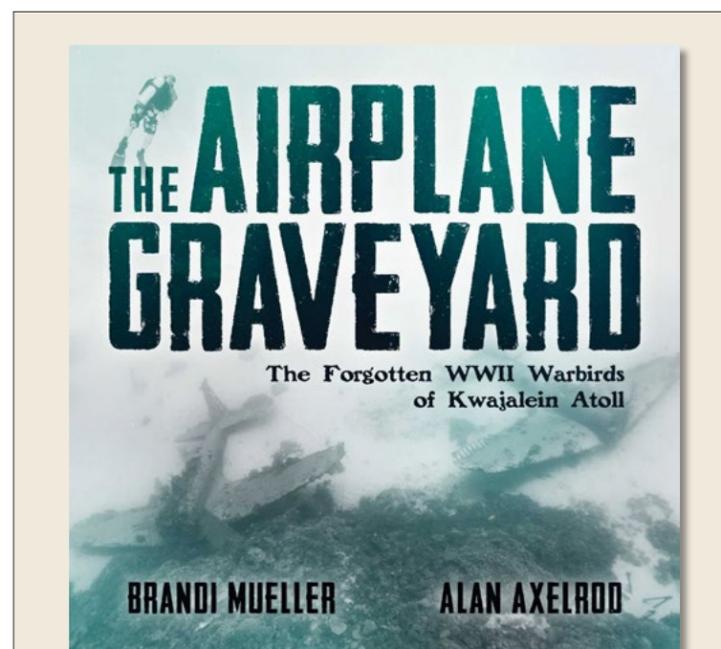
While we guests sipped cocktails and enjoyed traditional Samoan cuisine, several stories of Samoa were relayed to us via music and dance. The highlight of the evening was the fire dancers at the end of the show.

Since I was flying out the next day, when the forecast also called for rain, this seemed like a perfect way to end my trip to Samoa. The sun was setting over the tranquil blue ocean, and I was

already making a mental list of things to come back to do and see: Do more hiking, visit Savai'i, and, of course, do more diving. ■

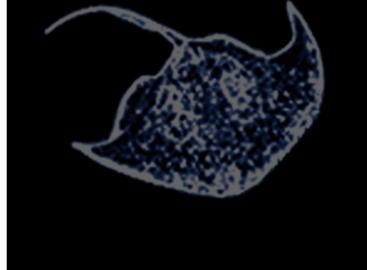
Special thanks go to Pure Ocean Dive and Watersports and the Sheraton Samoa Beach Resort.

*American underwater photographer, dive writer and regular contributor Brandi Mueller is a PADI IDC Staff Instructor and boat captain living in Micronesia. When she is not teaching scuba or driving boats, she is most happy traveling and being underwater with a camera. Mueller's book, Airplane Graveyard, featuring her underwater photos of forgotten American WWII airplanes at the bottom of the Kwajalein Atoll lagoon, is available at: **Amazon.com**. For more information, please visit: **Brandiunderwater.com**.*



Never before published in book form, see extraordinary images of the forgotten American WWII airplanes resting on the bottom of the Kwajalein Atoll lagoon, from award-winning underwater photographer Brandi Mueller. Available on: **Amazon.com**

fact file



Samoa



History Research suggests Samoa has been inhabited for over 3000 years and the islanders most likely followed the Polynesian migration throughout the Pacific. Genetic and cultural studies show strong ties between Samoans, Fijian and Tongans. First contact with Europeans was in the 18th century. In the 1800s, whaling vessels frequented the islands and missionaries started arriving in 1830. The Germans, British and Americans all had vested interests in Samoa in the late 1800s and it was thought war would break out until a storm in 1889 destroyed the warships, ending the conflict. In 1898, fighting broke out again and was resolved at the end of 1899, with the United States taking control of the eastern islands (now American Samoa) and the Germans taking control of the western islands. The British gave up claims in exchange for Tonga, the Solomon Islands south of Bougainville and some parts of West Africa. When WWI broke out, the British convinced New Zealand forces to seize control of German Samoa, and New Zealand ruled from 1914-1962. In 1962, Samoa was granted independence, signing a friendship treaty with New Zealand. It was the first small island country in the Pacific to become independent. In 1997, the government changed the country's name from Western Samoa to Samoa. Government: parliamentary republic. Capital: Apia.

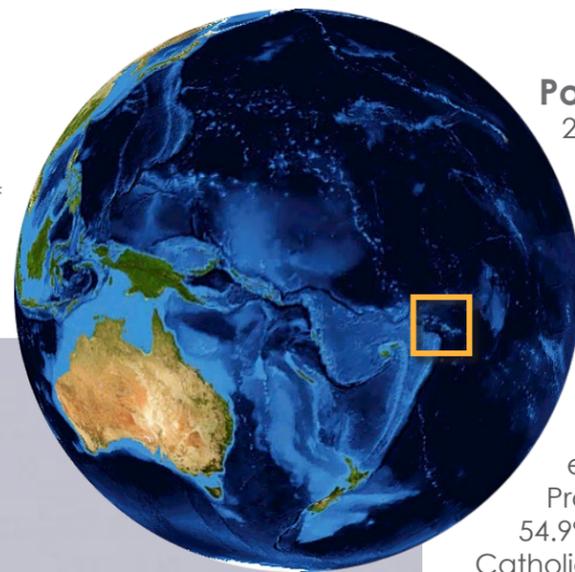
Culture Samoans take their culture, protocol and custom seriously and religion is woven in tightly. Sunday's are reserved for worship and almost everything closes. Hotels and some tourist restaurants stay open, but even most attractions (including some beaches) are closed. Many villages have a "sa" or curfew each day around 6pm where all activity must stop and you cannot walk around the village. If visiting villages, women should cover shoulders and knees. Traditional lava lavas (large pieces of colorful cloth wrapped around the waist and covering past the knees) are popular for both men and women. Bikinis and even swimsuits are not recommended at public beaches and if worn in the water covering with a lava lava or sarong right before entry and after exiting the water is expected (they are fine at hotels and resorts). Shoes are removed before entering fales or homes. If visiting villages, it is wise to ask hosts about protocols.

Geography Samoa lies south of the Equator and comprises two large islands and three islets in the Polynesia region of the Pacific Ocean. Although the islands were created from volcanic activity, only the island of Savai'i is still active with the last eruption occurring in 1911. Upolu and Savai'i make up 99% of the land area and Apolima, Manono and Nu'ulopa are three islets in the Apolima Strait. Coastline: 403km.

Lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0m. Highest point: Mount Silisili 1,857m. Natural hazards: occasional cyclones and active volcanism.

Environmental issues Like so many island nations, Samoa faces many environmental threats. Overfishing from commercial trawlers has depleted the fish stock and locally destructive dynamite fishing still occurs. Deforestation for agriculture and homes is occurring and because most of the population's infrastructure is low-lying coastal areas, sea-level rise is likely to be a problem. Increase in number and severity of cyclones has been an issue. Coral reefs are also at risk and previous cyclones have destroyed large areas of coral. Increased water temperatures have led to coral bleaching episodes. Invasive species are a problem including the giant African snail which destroys vegetable roots and other agriculture. Taro leaf blight, an infectious plant disease, decimated the island food staple and overseas export with taro production decreasing over 95%. Merremia vine and Mikania micrantha are aggressive weeds that out compete native plants and inhibit crop

RIGHT: Location of Samoa on global map
BELOW: Location of Apia on map of Samoa



Population 203,774 (July 2020 est). Ethnic groups: Samoan 96%, Samoan/New Zealander 2%, other 1.9% (2011 est). Religions: Protestant 54.9%, Roman Catholic 18.8%, Mormon 16.9%, Worship Centre 2.8%, other Christian 3.6%, other religions including Baha'i and Muslim 2.9% (2016 est). Internet users: 58,508 or 29.4% (July 2016 est)

Currency Tala (SAT)
Exchange rates:
1 USD=2.77SAT,
1 EUR=2.99SAT,

1 GBP=3.42SAT, 1 AUD=1.77SAT,
1 SGD=1.94SAT
Currency can be exchanged at the airport, banks and some hotels and ATMs are available at these points, but prone to running out of bills. Credit cards are accepted with fees by major hotels and restaurants, but cash only at smaller establishments and entrance to beaches and waterfalls.

Language Samoan (Polynesian) and English.

Phone/Internet Cell phone and data coverage is quite good with 4G around Upolu and Savai'i. SIM cards are available on arrival at the airport for two telecommunications providers, Bluesky and Digicel, and plans are generally inexpensive. Hotels and some restaurants provide wifi for free or at a cost.

Travel/Visa No visa is required for most travelers for 60 or 90 days, depending on nationality. Travelers must have a passport valid for six months after departure date and an onward ticket. Currently, proof of measles vaccination is required.

Getting there Samoa receives international flights from Honolulu, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji and American Samoa, and ferry service from American Samoa.

Health & Safety Check with your state department for travel advisories before your trip. Tap water is not safe to drink but bottled water is easily obtained. Be cautious when partaking in community kava ceremonies in case unsafe water is used. Samoa has had its fair share of mosquito-borne disease outbreaks including Chikungunya in 2015 and has the mosquito species that spreads Dengue and Zika (both of which have occurred), so avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. There is no malaria. Routine vaccines are suggested and due to a recent and devastating outbreak of measles on Samoa, documentation of having received the vaccine is required upon entry into the country. Crime rates are low, but petty theft may occur. Lock cars and do not leave valuables in view or unattended at beaches. Watch out for and avoid aggressive stray dogs.

Decompression Chambers
AMERICAN SAMOA (nearest):
Lyndon B. Johnson Tropical Medical Center at LBJ Hospital Fagaalu, Tutuila Island
Phone: (684) 633-1222

Web sites
Samoa Tourism samoa.travel ■
SOURCES: LONELY PLANET: RAROTONGA, SAMOA & TONGA (2016), PURE-OCEAN.COM, SAMOA.TRAVEL, SHERATONSAMOORESORT.COM, US CDC, US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, US DEPT OF STATE, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, XE.COM