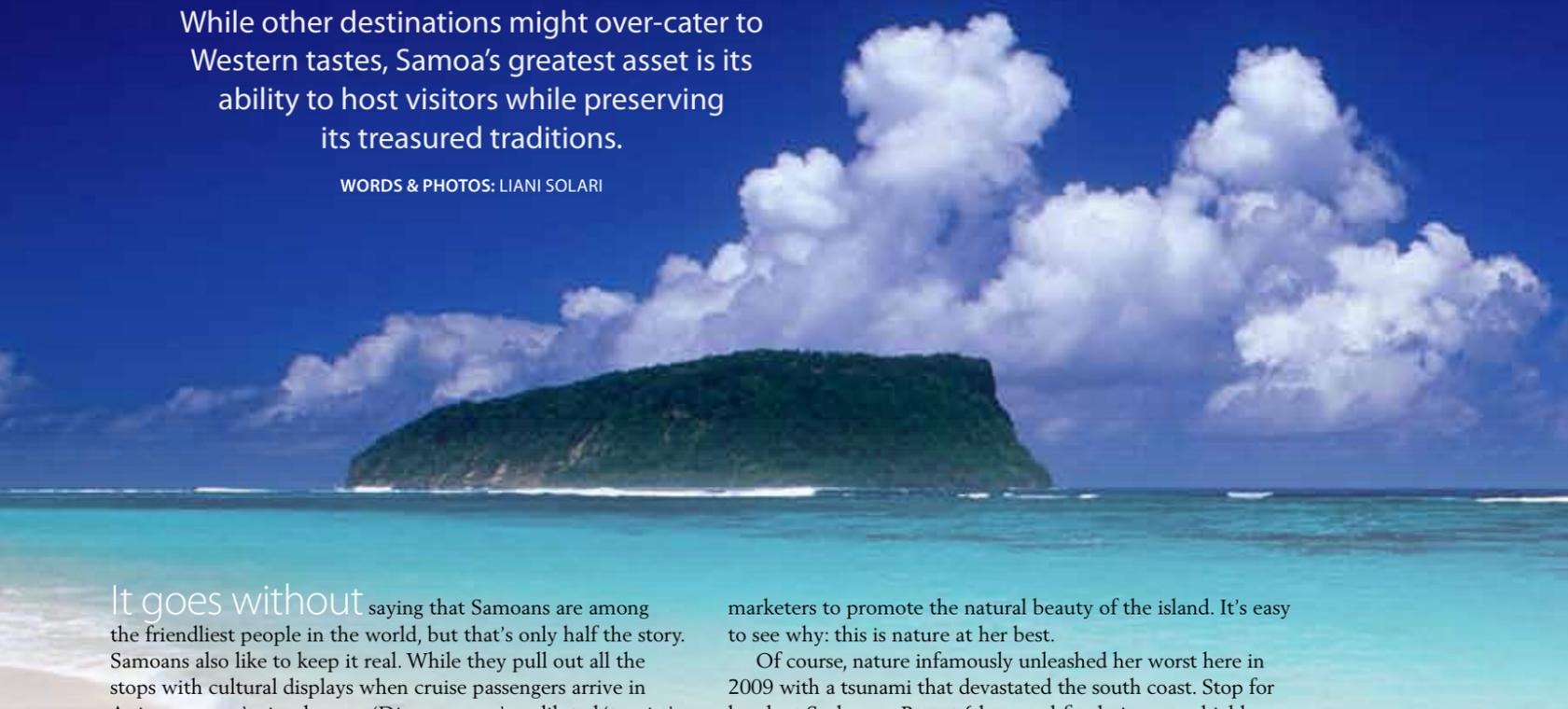


CRUISEY SAMOA

While other destinations might over-cater to Western tastes, Samoa's greatest asset is its ability to host visitors while preserving its treasured traditions.

WORDS & PHOTOS: LIANI SOLARI

Lalomanu Beach,
south coast, Upolu



It goes without saying that Samoans are among the friendliest people in the world, but that's only half the story. Samoans also like to keep it real. While they pull out all the stops with cultural displays when cruise passengers arrive in Apia, you won't simply get a 'Disney-esque' or diluted 'tourist' version of this Polynesian culture. It's the real deal at Samoa Tourism Authority's Cultural Centre in Apia, where locals ply age-old crafts and traditional cultural practices in *fales* (open-sided huts) designated to weaving, carving, fire-making and full-body tattooing. Witnessing a tattoo in progress in the *tatau fale* is considered a privilege for visitors, as this is no fashion statement but an ancient rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.

The insights you glean at the Cultural Centre will stand you in good stead to explore the rest of Upolu island. As cruise ships usually spend a day in Apia, there are plenty of onshore tours on offer. However, it's also easy to explore the island independently. Hail a cab or hire a car when you disembark and set your own south coast or north coast itinerary.

South coast for nature lovers

After the 30-minute drive from Apia to the south coast you'll be ready to stretch your legs on the steep wooden ladder that descends 30 metres into To Sua Trench, a turquoise swimming hole framed by a verdant sea cave, which is favoured by tourism

marketers to promote the natural beauty of the island. It's easy to see why: this is nature at her best.

Of course, nature infamously unleashed her worst here in 2009 with a tsunami that devastated the south coast. Stop for lunch at Seabreeze Resort (the wood-fired pizzas are highly recommended) and your antipodean hosts, Wendy and Chris Booth, will tell you how the intrinsic Samoan village system came to the fore when they decided to rebuild the 11-villa resort.

An afternoon dip at nearby Lalomanu Beach will have you marvelling at the pristine beauty of this photogenic stretch of sand dotted with beach *fale* accommodation, which ranges from rustic to premium, while you plot an extended visit.

North coast for history buffs

Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, famed for penning *Treasure Island* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, did just that in 1889 after 'shopping around' the Pacific Islands for a place to call home that would alleviate his lung condition and nourish his soul. Guided tours of Stevenson's immaculately maintained museum take in every original room of the house he built with the help of the local villagers. Reflecting Stevenson's ties to the motherland and his love for his adopted homeland, in the Tapa Room is a fireplace (obsolete in the Samoan heat) framed by walls covered with Samoan *tapa* (mulberry bark cloth).



Methodist church, Piula Cave Pool



Seabreeze Resort



Cultural Centre, Apia



Annual Teuila Festival, Apia



Robert Louis Stevenson Museum



To Sua Trench

When their beloved 'Tusitala' (teller of stories) died, the Samoans worked through the night to carve a path through virgin rainforest to the peak of nearby Mount Vaea, where Stevenson had asked to be buried. A degree of fitness and good walking shoes are required to make the pilgrimage to Stevenson's tombstone, as it's a steep scramble over rocks and tree roots.

Back in Apia, park yourself poolside at Tanoa Tusitala Hotel and order the Samoan *oka* (raw fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk) and an ice-cold Vailima, 'Samoa's very own beer'.

Another refreshing way to cool down after scaling the mountain is to take a dip in the freshwater Piula Cave Pool located directly underneath a Methodist church.

Sundowners at Apia Harbour

After a day of sightseeing, sundowners are in order. Paddles at Apia Harbour offers water views, renowned New Zealand wine varieties, a respectable cocktail list and a menu that channels the flavours of the owners' home town, Venice.

Your visit would be incomplete without experiencing the legacy of Aggie Grey, who founded the Cosmopolitan Club (as Aggie Grey's Hotel & Bungalows was known) in 1919 when New Zealand introduced prohibition in Samoa. Aggie's entrepreneurial spirit shone during WWII when she began catering to US Navy officers, who were stationed in the Pacific, with hamburgers, which they taught her how to make. As *Tales of the South Pacific* author James A. Michener recalled, "Aggie Grey's featured three prized assets in this haven from the shooting war: cold beer, great island music and a bevy of the most delectable young Samoan women..."

Wander past the accommodation *fales* named after famous guests such as Marlon Brando and William Holden, pull up a chair at the bar and order the Aggie's Surprise cocktail. When your drink arrives, kudos to you if you can get to the bottom of: (a) the fishbowl glass; and (b) the mystery of the ingredients.

As you return to your ship, it's likely you'll be hatching plans to revisit Samoa. The laid-back Pacific Island nation is like a new-found friend who compels you to get to know her better.