

## THE PERFECT 10

## UPOLU, SAMOA

## Trails of the South Pacific

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**01** The poster image for Samoa's main island of Upolu, To Sua Ocean Trench, is every bit as stunning as it appears in photos. A home-built timber ladder descends precipitously through a bush-clad sinkhole (technically a lava tube) to a small wooden swim platform suspended above a translucent turquoise pool. Steep enough to necessitate a three-point hold on descent, it's not as scary as it looks. Connected to the sea via an underwater cave, the ocean surge can be stealthy and strong so a rope across the pool provides welcome security. If you don't fancy climbing down to the pool, go for a picnic in the beautifully manicured tropical garden with shady trees and *fales* (breeze-catching open-sided shelters) and the magazine cover-worthy views of the coastline.

**02** Samoans are warm and welcoming, a principle of *Fa'a Samoa*, or the Samoan way, that governs everyday life based on respect for family, elders, community, church and environment. Tatau, or traditional tattooing, is still revered and performed using handmade tools. A rite of passage into adulthood, it signifies pride and commands respect, so it's a privilege to witness the painful process at the Cultural Village in Apia, the capital. Samoans love to entertain and Fiafia nights are a fabulous celebration of song and dance by proud, enthusiastic performers. Preceded by a buffet, the show starts with stories told through swaying hips and sensual hands, slowly building to the raucous clapping, slapping and stomping Fa'ataupati dance, and culminating in a whirl of spinning flames from fire performers.

**03** The pristine and unpopulated beaches in Samoa are owned by village residents who charge visitors a small fee in return for keeping them tidy, often providing *fales* and sometimes toilets. Lalomanu, rated by Lonely Planet as one of the top 10 beaches in the world, has blindingly white soft sand, crystal-clear water and numerous prettily painted *fales* under the palms. Salamumu rewards a bumpy drive with crunchy white-coral sand contrasted with black lava outcrops (fun for jumping off) lapped by aquamarine waves. The grotto at the end of Vavau is cocooned by bush-covered rock outcrops that attract a diverse array of tropical fish, making for fantastic snorkelling or just wallowing in the shallows imagining you are the only person left on Earth.

**04** Driving around Upolu is an adventure. You won't get lost on the one main ring road, but smaller unnamed roads that lead to secluded beaches are often difficult to identify, with signs faded to oblivion, non-existent or facing into the road. But getting directions from locals is part of the fun. Samoans now drive on the left side of the road, so the only challenge is negotiating potholes and avoiding errant dogs, pigs and chooks. The reward is a glimpse of everyday life in villages with lovingly tended gardens resplendent with yellow-veined crotons and pink cordy-



lines where you can purchase fresh fruit from roadside stalls. Be aware Sundays are sacred and some sites are closed.

**05** Due to the success of missionaries, the majority of Samoans are Christian. Each village has its own church, from humble to elaborate, and reflecting the Samoan love of colour with cheerfully painted trims and interiors. On Sundays the whole village attends morning service in their brightest whites and visitors are welcome. Even if you're not religious, listening to their joyful, harmonious singing is uplifting. Siblings look after each other while parents sing in the choir and the odd dog wanders in. White Sunday, in October, is Children's Day, and young members of the congregation are given pride of place and perform plays and songs. Ask at your accommodation for the closest church to visit and take a donation for the collection.

**06** Damsel, butterfly, angel, trumpet, parrot and Picasso triggerfish are just some of the kaleidoscope of outlandishly at-

tired tropical fish found in clear lagoon waters when snorkelling straight from beaches, thanks to government and village-based marine reserves. Namua Island is a favoured habitat of green turtles and for a small fee you'll be ferried to the island, have use of a *fale* and can snorkel over the shallow, protected reef in the company of these peaceful creatures. The village of Savaia manages a giant clam sanctuary about 50m from shore where you can float above clams up to a metre or more in size, with luscious curvy mantles speckled and spotted in iridescent green. Palolo Deep, near Apia, is a coral-walled hole in the reef teeming with fish 100m from shore.

**07** Apia is vibrant and colourful. Start at the Cultural Village for an insight into Samoan heritage and demonstrations of traditional skills such as *siapo* (tapa making), weaving and carving. Situated opposite is the visually arresting, architecturally charming Catholic Cathedral. Pop in to view the ceiling carved with traditional motifs. Then head to the fish market for the sheer variety of colourful tropical species caught by local fishermen. Move on to the Flea Market, where seamstresses sew vibrantly printed fabrics into clothing and tablecloths. Pick up some shell jewellery, colourful sarongs or inexpensive souvenirs. Observe the chaotic congestion of the adjacent transport depot where local buses, looking like rainbow-hued jukeboxes on wheels, vie to park or embark, some requiring a good old-fashioned push from passengers to get going.

**08** Cooling off in the island's lush interior at one of the many inviting waterfalls is popular with locals and visitors alike. Channel Samoan warriors of the past at their favoured swimming spot, Togitogiga Falls. Float

in the shallows at the top of the falls, lie in the rushing water for an invigorating natural spa or choose one of several waterholes that cater to peaceful swimmers and youngsters dive-bombing each other. Papapapaitai Falls is the tallest at about 100m. Sopoaga Falls is said to be the prettiest and best viewed from afar.

**09** Beside the Botanic Gardens in Apia, the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum provides an intriguing glimpse into his colonial life. Stevenson settled in Samoa with wife Fanny in 1889. He was well liked and became known as Tusitala, or writer of tales. The house they built, Vailima, reflected their love of Samoan culture, and is now a museum. Using old photos as reference, it has been furnished with period antiques and memorabilia. Energetic visitors can climb to his grave on Mt Vaea; [rlsmuseum.org](http://rlsmuseum.org).



## BEST BEDS

**10** Secluded in a sheltered bay on Upolu's southeast coast, Saletoga Sands Resort & Spa strikes the perfect balance of relaxed comfort, friendly service and cultural integration. Kiwi owners built the resort involving the local community, training apprentices during construction, employing island staff and engaging the village chief's wife as manager. Villas are spacious, garden shower rooms gorgeous and timber decks generous. It's only a couple of paces between pool and beach, and snorkelling from the jetty reveals an array of tropical fish. Local flavours are included in the restaurant menu and two small bars give sports fans and sunset-gazers their own dedicated spaces. Cars for hire by the day make exploring easy; [saletogasands.com](http://saletogasands.com)

■ [samoa.travel](http://samoa.travel)

Lalomanu, rated one of the world's top 10 beaches, main; Togitogiga Falls, above; White Sunday at church, right; To Sua Ocean Trench, left



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