

# DRIVING AT THE END OF THE WORLD

## A Samoan Road Trip

*"I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move."*  
**Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent five years in Samoa on advice from his doctor to recover from an illness.**

By STEVEN LANG

Stevenson's pertinent quote was inspirational for my own travels around Samoa. Come to this island in the South Pacific and you're forced to stop and admire the view. Perhaps this is why Samoan people are so relaxed, happy and altruistic. The abundance of beautiful vistas, turquoise waters and blissful beaches could make the most ill tempered man find serenity.

*"...The great affair is to move."* My affair started on a sunny Thursday via taxi from Tanoa Tusitala hotel in downtown Apia. My first stop was a

market full of local food such as taro, pumpkin and bananas. There was even tobacco and kava, the mild narcotic, which numbs the senses. The children milling around the stalls were as curious about me as I was about the flea market. My tour of Apia continued to Mulivai Catholic Cathedral. Missionaries introduced Christianity in the 1830s, arriving at a time of intense bloodshed between local villages, a familiar story when talking about South Pacific islands of yesteryear. These missionaries had better luck than some others such as Thomas Baker, who was eaten by cannibals in Fiji in 1867. When a

popular tribal chief Malietoa Laupepa accepted Christianity, it wasn't long before his followers fell in line cannibalism became a thing of the past. After taking in more Apia sights, I arrived at the Robert Louis Stevenson museum. His house was something out of a fairy tale, so apt for such an imaginative writer. Not only did he pen some of the finest works of literature during his time, but also he was able to write in Samoan. He had a long and loving relationship with Samoa and was charitable to local communities. By the time I had made the forty-five minute uphill trek to his grave I was drenched in sweat from the



thick Samoan humidity. The inescapable view of Samoa struck me again as I looked down over Apia and surrounding forest. There's this kinship I feel with Stevenson as a writer with wanderlust and a lover of the South Pacific islands. Visiting his grave at the edge of the world was a proper way to show my respect for him.

I took a driver for the rest of the afternoon. Alami, like many Samoans I encountered, was happy to help, smile and for better or for worse, refuse to say no to any request I might have. We drove 45 minutes east of Apia to the Piula cave pools located under the Theological College in Lufilufi

village. A five-tala fee got entry to a small network of caves in a cliffside. Swimming to the end of the main cave through water several degrees colder than I expected, a narrow entrance leads to another cave. After a few attempts to find the opening, several others and I gave it up as being too dark and unsafe.

When I came out Alami noticed I my back was peeling from a bad sunburn a week ago and, as a helpful Samoan, decided that it would be best to assist. There I sat, awkwardly accepting his gracious initiative to strip the dying skin from my back. Samoan hospitality at its finest.

Driving back to my hotel for the night, I spotted one of the oddest sights I'd ever encountered, the rotting carcass of a sperm whale not a kilometre off shore. The smell was affecting a local village so much so that there was a plan to tug it out to sea the next day. Humpback and sperm whales are common around Samoa, usually appearing from April to November to breed before heading to the colder waters of Antarctica. As morbidly fascinating as this was for me, I'm sure Samoans see this enough to simply classify it as an occasional nuisance.

Next day my destination was Lalomanu, to stay



the Taufua Beach Fales, traditional Samoan thatched huts, on the south east side of the island. I had arranged transport with a New Zealander named with the help of my skin peeling friend, Alami, an economical move as a taxi would've cost nearly three times as much. There's always an initial awkwardness getting into a car with a total stranger, but Dave had a stoic ease that made me feel comfortable.

We travelled the winding roads over peaks and through valleys, bend after bend revealing awesome sights.

Not ten minutes from Taufua Beach Fales, we stopped for lunch. If you ever find yourself on the southern coastal road heading eastward to Lalomanu, do yourself a favour and stop at the Seabreeze Resort for the best view ever from a café table accompanied by the finest cheesecake Samoa has to offer.

Lalomanu is the quintessential idea of a soothing tropical paradise. Fales line the idyllic beach and nearby Nu'utele Island (or as I called it, Nutella island) is clearly visible across sparkling, crystal water. A large fale filled with happy tourists bask in the atmosphere. I never thought I'd make it to the edge of the world, to such waters, such islands.

*"We are all travelers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is an honest friend."* Stevenson was right once again.

As a solo traveler, you hope to meet people, ideally people you can call trustworthy friends. I met Michael and Evi in the large fale. They were German and for whatever reason – that I grew up in a German household, or maybe because of previous positive encounters with German travellers – we connected quickly.

Together we watched the fiafia show, essentially a traditional Samoan dance to greet visitors. Male Samoans gave a strong, physical performance while the women danced with gentle joy. Then all the men in the audience were asked to come on stage and dance. I was less than willing, as my dancing is about as competent as a drunken monkey. Nevertheless, there we were, shirts off, imitating with careful precision the moves of Samoan men twice my size and grace. Somewhere, out there on the internet, is a video of me doing this. Don't judge.

A group of German compatriots and Ester, a Czech friend I met at the fiafia, agreed to join me on a trip around the island the following day. After meeting Jazz, German owner of a local car rental shop, we were off, our destination, west. As far as we could go. *"I travel not to go anywhere, but to go."*

A quick 10 minutes later on Main South Coast Road we made our first stop, at To Sua Ocean Trench. It's consistently voted one of the most surreal places in the world. A 20 tala entrance

fee each allowed us to see a deep, awe inspiring hole in the earth created by volcanic activity and filled with blue ocean water.

Down a steep yet sturdy ladder we discovered there's really nothing quite like swimming in a volcanically formed trench. Like the Piula cave pools, there was an opening to another cave, but this time, through an act of sheer determination, I swam six metres underwater to the other side to see the small cleft that leads into the Pacific.

Ten minutes more westward from To Sua, off Le Mafa Pass Road, we found the stupendous Sopoaga Falls surrounded by the usual lush greenery. We took our usual selfies in front of it like any proper band of millennials before continuing west.

The rain was picking up something fierce so we decided to turn back before reaching the giant clams on the far west side of the island. A shame, because the clams are huge and seeing them in their natural environment would've been fascinating. If you make it, be warned; don't touch the clams as they close quicker than you can say "Talofa".

On the ride home, hands firmly gripping the wheel in the heavy downpour, I noticed Samoans happily playing volleyball or strolling down the street as if it was a sunny day, or busy tending to dinner for their families.

There's an element of island life that I hold in



high esteem. Daily matters are reduced to their most elemental. There is no disconnect with the natural environment or people. For example, in a more urban setting we might be forced to work with spreadsheets or PowerPoint presentations but at the end of the day, what tangible quality can be shown for it? In Samoa, much of the work is done by necessity with a community of people helping. Lunchtime? Pick the coconut and catch the fish and something concrete is accomplished at the end of the day and shared with love ones. The Westernized world can learn a thing or two from the Samoans.

There are, however, things that non-Samoans can find difficult, such as the power structure and ability of chiefs in certain villages to enforce regulations such as fining men for not shaving or women for wearing pants rather than skirts, while dogs and cats are generally treated more as nuisances than useful pets. There is little industry apart from tourism. There are obviously two sides to paradise. To return to Apia, I took one of the retro buses that have been in service for more than 30 years and seem to have a whimsical timetable. There's a lot to see on the island of Upolu that

needs more than the six short days I had, especially during the wet season. There's the Return to Paradise Beach where the Blue Lagoon was filmed, the Aganoa Black Sand Beach that can only be accessed by 4x4 and provides great snorkelling, and Samoa's largest island, Savaii, which has a quarter of Samoa's population and is where you can visit the Taga Blowholes and swim with turtles. But I built enough splendid memories of Samoa to never forget the wonder of driving at the edge of the world.