

Manu'a Islands



The expression 'Getting away from it all' must have been invented to describe a trip out to the trio of fantastically remote outposts of land, sand and reef that comprise the Manu'a group. These three islands – Ofu, Olosega and Ta'u – lie only 100km east of Tutuila, but may as well exist in a different dimension. Barely populated and with a volcanic heritage that has bequeathed them high, sharply defined cliffs, these islands are the stuff of tropical daydreams. Wander along sparkling beaches almost entirely devoid of any sign of human visitation, paddle your way around serene lagoons crammed with every imaginable species of coral and a myriad species of fish and other marine life, and sit on end-of-the-earth spits of land and feel the immensity of the ocean rolling away beneath your suntanned feet.

Although the lack of transport will slow you down considerably, that's just what the Manu'a Islands do best. Every activity here is guilt- and expectation-free, be it spending entire days leafing through a book in the shade of a favourite palm tree, having long, rambling conversations with complete strangers in the small traditional villages, or staring out to sea with not a single coherent thought cluttering your mind. You'll know that these are paradisaical places the moment you step off the plane or leave your sea legs behind on the boat, and you'll be hard-pressed to find a better spot to maroon yourself for a long, languid holiday.

AND GOD CREATED SAMOA

Samoans accept the scientific theory that most Polynesians migrated to the Pacific islands from Southeast Asia. They believe this applies to Maoris, Hawai'ians, Tongans, Rarotongans, Easter Islanders and Tahitians...but not to themselves. Their land is the 'cradle of Polynesia'. Samoa, they say, was created by the god Tagaloa, and their story is remarkably similar to the account given in the Book of Genesis.

Before the sea, earth, sky, plants or people existed, Tagaloa lived in the expanse of empty space. He created a rock, commanding it to split into clay, coral, cliffs and stones. As the rock broke apart, the earth, sea and sky came into being. From a bit of the rock emerged a spring of fresh water.

Next, Tagaloa created man and woman, whom he named Fatu (Heart) and 'Ele'ele (Earth). He sent them to the region of fresh water and commanded them to people the area. He ordered the sky, which was called Tu'ite'elagito, to prop itself up above the earth. Using starch and *teve* (a bitter root plant) and the only vegetation then available, he made a post for it to rest upon.

The god then created Po (Night) and Ao (Day), which bore the 'eyes of the sky' – the sun and the moon. At the same time, Tagaloa made the nine regions of heaven, inhabited by various gods.

In the meantime, Fatu and 'Ele'ele were adding men and women to the area of fresh water. Tagaloa, reckoning that all these earthlings needed some form of government, sent Manu'a, a son of Po and Ao, to be the chief of the people. From that time on, Samoan *tupe* (kings) were called *Tu'i Manu'a tele ma Samoa atoa* (King of Manu'a and all of Samoa).

Next, the countries were divided into islands or groups of islands. The world now consisted of Manu'a, Fiji, Tonga and Savai'i. Tagaloa then went to Manu'a and noticed that a void existed between it and Savai'i. Up popped 'Upolu and then Tutuila.

Tagaloa's final command, before he returned to the expanse, was: 'Always respect Manu'a; anyone who fails to do so will be overtaken by catastrophe, but men are free to do as they please in their own lands.' Thus, Manu'a became the spiritual centre of the Samoan islands and, to some extent, of all Polynesia.

HISTORY

Many Samoans believe that Manu'a was the first creation – the first land to emerge at the hands of the god Tagaloa. With the islands so favoured by Tagaloa, the Tu'i Manu'a (the paramount chief of these islands) would certainly have been held in high esteem by the Samoans, and indeed, many supernatural powers have been ascribed to holders of the title down through history. Many believe that, directly and indirectly, the Tu'i Manu'a was revered as the sovereign of all Polynesia. Although wars and fragmentations had split the islands, he was still a proud and powerful figure at the time of cession to the USA.

The last Tu'i Manu'a ceded the islands in 1904, and in his will he stipulated that his title would die with him. By allowing themselves to come under the jurisdiction of a foreign power, the islanders at the centre of the Polynesian world lost much of the respect they had once been accorded, and the revered chief apparently decided that such a title would thereafter be su-

perfluous. He died on 2 April 1909. Many American Samoans, however, whether they live on Tutuila or abroad (even those who have never set foot in the Manu'a Islands), give their official address as Manu'a out of respect for the place that Tagaloa created before all others.

In January 1987 Manu'a was hit by cyclone Tusi, one of the worst storms in its recorded history. Ofu and Olosega suffered badly and many buildings were destroyed, but Ta'u was the hardest hit. All three villages on the island were reduced to heaps of rubble, coconut trees were decapitated and crops ruined. To compound matters, cyclones Ofa and Val ploughed through the Manu'a Islands in early 1990 and late 1991. Then, in late 2005, the eye of the massive tropical storm Olaf passed right over the islands. In 1993, between these natural disasters, the Ofu and Ta'u sections of the National Park of American Samoa were officially established after the signing of a 50-year lease with traditional owners.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Sinking into the coral garden that lies just a few lazy steps off sublime **Ofu Beach** (p127)
- Meditating on the extraordinary serenity of **Maga Point** (p128)
- Exploring the rainforests of Ta'u within the confines of the **National Park of American Samoa** (p129)
- Forgetting the 21st century in the place where Margaret Mead wrote her classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* – on Ta'u in the village of **Luma** (p130)
- Braving the jump into Asaga Strait off the **Ofu-Olosega Bridge** (p128)



■ POPULATION OFU & OLOSEGA: 700; TA'U: 800 ■ AREA: 65 SQ KM

INFORMATION

Bring your own snorkelling gear, reading material and any particular foods you may need for your stay. There are no restaurants on the islands. Ofu has a bank near the wharf and a basic medical clinic. The only post office on Ofu–Olosega is in Olosega.

In the northeastern corner of Ta'u is the tiny, sleepy village of Fiti'uta. The airstrip is here, plus several stores selling basic supplies, a post office and a bank.

If you plan to go hiking anywhere in the Manu'a Islands, first contact the **National Park Visitor Information Center** (☎ 633 7082; www.nps.gov/npsa/home.htm; Pago Plaza) in Pago Pago for the latest information on walking trails and conditions.

GETTING AROUND

Air

Ofu's airstrip is a 500m runway at Va'oto on the south coast of the island, squeezed in between the sea and mountains. Fortunately for travellers heading for Ta'u, the old 400m nightmare airstrip there – which had a cliff at one end, a mountain at the other and lots of quirky air currents in between – was replaced several years ago by a flash facility in a more suitable location at Fiti'uta.

Inter-Island Airways (Pago Pago ☎ 699 7100; Ofu ☎ 655 7100; Ta'u ☎ 677 7100; www.interislandair.com) usually only flies between Pago Pago and Ofu, and Pago Pago and Ta'u. But when demand is high, shuttle flights between Ofu and Ta'u are sometimes organised. If you're

planning to visit both islands, ask the airline about this possibility – the chances are slim but you may just save yourself those annoying extra flights back to and out of Tafuna International Airport.

For details of Inter-Island Airways flights to and from Pago Pago, see p147.

Boat

Both the **American Samoa Inter-Island Shipping Company** (☎ 633 4707) and the **MV Sili** (☎ 633 5532) service the route between Tutuila and the Manu'a Islands. You may be able to jump on one of the vessels while they are visiting Ofu or Ta'u and have them transport you to the neighbouring island, though we didn't hear of anyone doing this. Check with the companies involved to see if this is possible; see p148 for contact details.

Hitching

Getting around on the Manu'a Islands will involve sticking your thumb out more times than not. There are a few vehicles on the islands and few drivers will pass a walker without offering a lift.

OFU

The aerial introduction to the most beautiful of the Manu'a Islands couldn't be more dramatic if it was scripted. Buffeted by crosswinds, the plane drones towards a thin ribbon of flat land between the beach and

the southern slope of steep Mt Tumutumu. Its wings twitch frantically up and down a few times before the wheels finally hit dry land, and the plane scoots along tarmac bordered by a dazzling coral reef and a beach you immediately decide you want to kiss.

Ofu has lots in common with Olosega, the island to which it's joined by a short bridge. Both are made up of volcanic cones that have been buried by lava from two merging shield flows. During a long period of dormancy, deep valleys were carved out, leaving very high, sheer cliffs around the islands. The bight along the south coast of the islands was caused by the collapse of one wall of the caldera. The fringing coral reef here, part of the National Park of American Samoa, is one of the best-preserved reefs in the Samoas and offers sensational snorkelling.

OFU BEACH

Ofu's crown jewel is its south coast beach. It's surely one of the finest in the South Pacific: 4km of shining, palm-fringed white sand, and the only footprints to be seen other than your own are those of birds and crabs. This is the sort of place visitors to Waikiki and Surfers Paradise actually dream of.

The strip of beach stretching from 500m past Va'oto Lodge (p128) to the beginning of the Ofu–Olosega bridge, plus 140 hectares of offshore waters, comprise the Ofu section of the **National Park of American Samoa**. As you round a small point west of Vao'oto Lodge, you're confronted by a bewitching arc of sand sweeping around a glorious, coral-studded lagoon. At the far end, a magnificent backdrop is provided by the sharp summit of Olosega's highest peak, the 639m Mt Piumafua. Looking inland, sea birds drift across the sheer faces of immense cliffs. Best of all, you usually have the entire place to yourself.

Although the reef has suffered cyclone damage, attacks by crown-of-thorns starfish, and coral bleaching, it is considered to be one of the few healthy, intact reefs in all of the Samoan islands. Almost 300 species of fish and 150 species of coral have been identified here. Go out at low tide (at high tide, waves break over the reef and wash into the lagoon), and watch out for stinging flame coral.

The narrow strip of land that comprises the Ofu unit of the national park is an extremely important source of medicinal plants for the villages of Ofu and Olosega.

TO'AGA SITE

About 1km northeast of Va'oto Lodge, behind Ofu Beach, is the To'aga site, where in 1987 archaeologists found an unprecedented array of artefacts, ranging in age from the earliest times of Samoan pre-history to modern day. Pottery unearthed here has been dated to 1000 BC. Archaeologists reckon that virtually all the coastal flatlands and broad upland slopes of the Manu'a Islands are intensively covered in archaeological sites and features.

The To'aga excavations have been filled so there's nothing to actually see here, but the site also has legendary and spiritual significance for Samoans. In fact, the entire area of bush between the road and Ofu Beach is strongly believed to be infested with devilish *aitu* (spirits or ghosts). Wander down here alone in the dark and you're very likely to agree.

VA'OTO MARSH

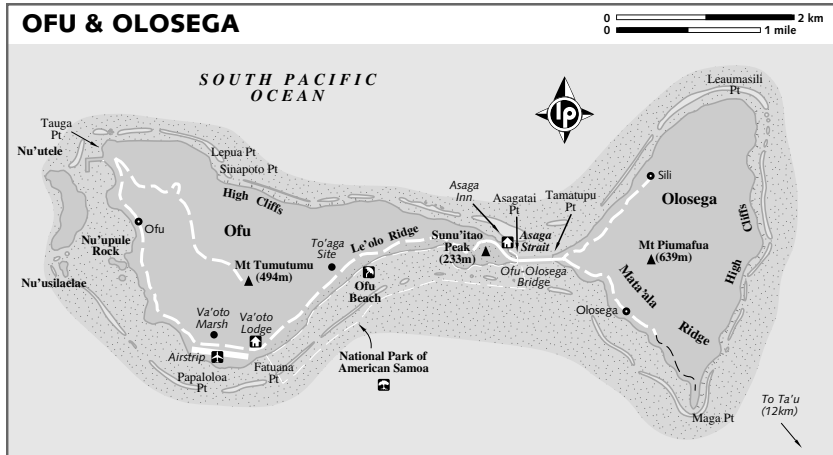
This 2.3-hectare bog beside the airstrip is notable for a rare herb called *tamole vai*. The marsh also contains more common plants such as primrose willow and beach hibiscus. There's a small taro plantation at its western end. If you're here at dusk, you'll probably see flying foxes gliding around the airstrip.

OFU VILLAGE & SURROUNDS

Just 2km north of the airstrip is Ofu village, which was completely rebuilt after being devastated by cyclone Tusi. Along the shore is a calm lagoon for swimming (ask permission), but avoid the pass between Ofu and Nu'utele Island just offshore, as the currents are powerful and dangerous. You can also swim off the cyclone-proof wharf near Tauga Point, but again, don't venture out too far and don't swim alone. It is possible to walk along the shoreline beyond Tauga Point to the wild north coast, but the going is over huge volcanic boulders and it's a very rough proposition.

MOUNT TUMUTUMU

The 5.5km track (if you can call it that) to the summit of Mt Tumutumu (494m) begins just north of the Ofu village wharf and twists and climbs up to the TV relay tower atop the mountain. It's possible to climb this tower to get the full view, but a large rock on the summit is an equally handy viewpoint.



AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Va'oto Lodge (☎ 655 1120; vaoto@hotmail.com; s/d US\$35/70; 📺 📶) Besides being exceptionally hospitable, this must be one of the few places in the world where you can watch planes take off through your bedroom window. It's set off a paradisaic beach where you can lounge in a hammock or go snorkelling for tiny electric-blue fish and the resident moray eel in a coral lagoon undisturbed by rips. Hearty (nontraditional Samoan) meals are prepared (US\$15 for three meals) and beer and other drinks are available. Laundry costs US\$2 per load. There are 10 big basic units facing the ocean from across the airstrip, each with en suites and firm beds. Bring plenty of insect repellent though, as the mosquitoes here are vicious.

This trail is often overgrown but is usually OK to tackle without a guide, and will take you around five hours to get to the summit and back. Wear long pants as some of the local vegetation has cutting edges. The dogs in Ofu village are a real problem so take a big stick with you or consider getting a lift to and from the start of the trail.

SLEEPING & EATING

Asaga Inn (☎ 655 1164, 655 1306; s/d US\$40/60; 📺 📶) Beside the Ofu-Olosega bridge, this inn was damaged by hurricane Olaf at the beginning of 2005 but was about to reopen when we passed through. The guesthouse has four comfy rooms and sits in its own compound, which includes a small shop. It's a hot walk from Ofu Beach, but you can always cool off under the bridge. Meals are available.

You may be able to arrange accommodation on Ofu through the National Park of American Samoa's homestay programme; for details, see p108. There's a basic store in Ofu village.

OLOSEGA

Olosega is virtually Ofu's twin island and shares the same marvellous encircling reef system. The two islands are separated by the 137m-wide Asaga Strait, which is crossed by a cyclone-proof bridge. Strong winds and

water currents are funnelled through this pass by steep cliffs on each island. Olosega has a very nice beach along its southwest coast between the pass and Olosega village.

There was another small settlement at Sili on the northwestern side of the island, in a location that was unfortunately fully exposed to hurricanes and heavy seas. Now only one determined family lives there.

MAGA POINT

The 1.5km walk from Olosega village up on to Mago Point on the southern tip of the island will give you an unforgettable experience in beautiful isolation. To avoid dealing with local dogs, veer around Olosega village on the beach. After passing the rubbish tip, continue along the beach (which is composed of husks of dead coral) and look for the narrow trail that climbs steadily along the side of the hill towards the point. Bring a stick to clear the myriad spider webs draped across this trail, and wear good walking shoes to keep your footing on the loose rocks and soil. You'll eventually be abreast of the point's rocky outcrop down below. Sit down here to enjoy the magnificent view and wondrous sense of remoteness. The white bellies of boobies soar close overhead, rows of coral march away from the jagged point, and the southern shorelines of Olosega and Ofu are laid out for your appreciation, while to the southeast is the hulking outline of Ta'u surrounded by empty, limitless ocean.

From here, the trail descends to a beach, but few people head down there and we couldn't ascertain the condition of this part of the trail.

OFU-OLOSEGA BRIDGE

Local kids regularly jump off the Ofu-Olosega bridge and into Asaga Strait, letting the current carry them to shore. If you want to try this yourself, make sure you assess the water's depth and the strength of the current first. Looking down from the bridge, the water in the strait is usually spectacularly clear, allowing you to see large eels twisting near the shore.

SLEEPING & EATING

There is no official tourist accommodation on Olosega. Basic, expensive supplies – soft drinks and tinned food – are available at the store in Olosega village.

TA'U

Remote Ta'u is a hulking shield volcano, half of which has fallen away in the south, leaving an island that really looks like half an island. On the dramatic south coast, some of the highest sea cliffs in the world rise 966m to Mt Lata, the highest point in American Samoa. Much of the island is covered in dense rainforest and dotted with inactive cones and craters. Ta'u feels seriously remote and sees few visitors: the place to go if you want to lose yourself in virtually unexplored terrain.

NATIONAL PARK OF AMERICAN SAMOA

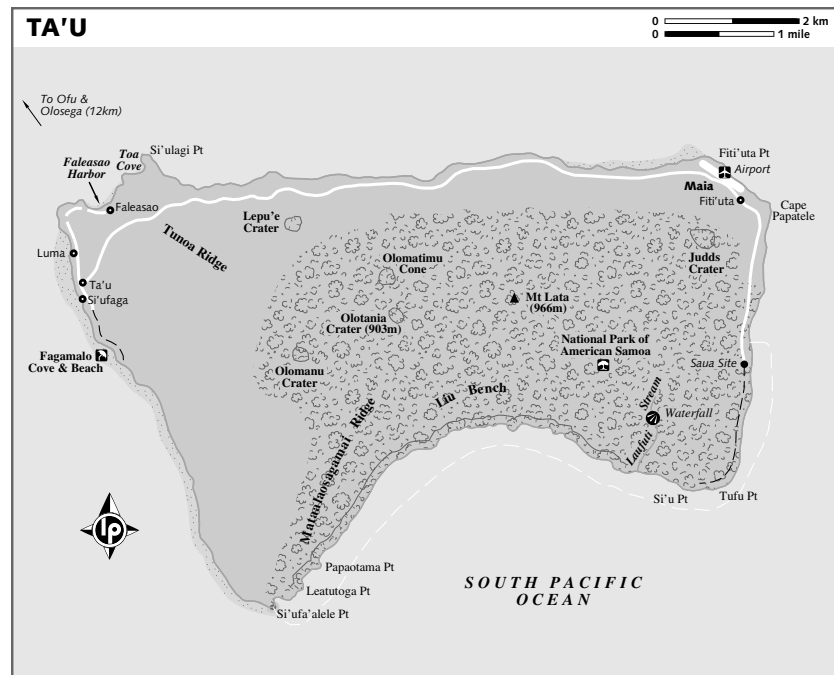
The Ta'u unit of the national park occupies 2160 hectares of land, comprising most of the uninhabited southern half of Ta'u, and 400 hectares of offshore waters. As would be expected, the protected area takes in some of American Samoa's most fantastic scenery. Ta'u is a shield volcano that has undergone dramatic changes. The

apocalyptic collapse of half its caldera left a spectacular escarpment along the southern side. On the northern slope, numerous craters and cones remained active after the big event, and continued to build that side of the island.

Ta'u's protected lowland and montane rainforests provide an excellent habitat for flying foxes and many native birds. Species include black noddies, white terns, white-tailed tropicbirds, Tahiti petrels, Audubon's shearwaters, Fiji shrikebills, friendly ground doves, multicoloured fruit doves, spotless cranes and the most important bird in Samoan culture – the *lupe* (Pacific pigeon).

Other native wildlife includes the Pacific boa, which lives only on Ta'u (in very small numbers); 13 species of amphibians and reptiles, most of which are geckos and skinks; and 20 species of land snail. It's believed that endangered sea turtles nest along the remote shorelines of Ta'u.

For more information on the national park, contact the **National Park Visitor Information Center** (☎ 633 7082; www.nps.gov/npsa/home.htm; Pago Plaza) in Pago Pago.



Saua Site

Halfway down the east coast of the island (about 2.5km from Fiti'uta) is the legendary Samoan site of Saua. This is where the god Tagaloa is said to have created the first humans before sending them out to Polynesia (see *And God Created Samoa*, p125). Tagaloa also crowned the first Tu'i Manu'a here.

Only volcanic boulders, wild surf and a windswept beach mark this very sacred place. Archaeologists have located the remains of an ancient village near Saua, as well as numerous grave sites between Saua and Si'u Point. More intensive surveys are yet to be carried out. During calm seas (usually from October to March) the offshore waters near Saua are used by Fiti'uta residents for fishing and reef foraging. Coral reefs are only found along the eastern shoreline of Ta'u.

Judds Crater & Laufuti Stream

The three-hour climb to Judds Crater in the island's northeast is best done with a local guide, as it tends to get submerged in undergrowth. For an encore, hikers can follow the rough track along the east coast as far as Tufu Point. From here it's possible to hike 2km along the shoreline (slow going over volcanic boulders) to Laufuti Stream, where there's a waterfall and a nearby spring. The southern coastline of Ta'u is so wild and pristine that it's worth a look even if you don't want to walk all the way to the stream. It's recommended that anyone going beyond Si'u Point take a guide.

TA'U VILLAGE & SURROUNDS

The main settlement on Ta'u consists of the villages of **Ta'u**, **Luma** and **Si'ufaga** in the northwestern corner of the island. It was

in Luma that the young Margaret Mead researched and wrote her classic anthropological work, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, in 1925. Also in Luma are the tombs of the last Tu'i Manu'a and several other early politicians. There are basic stores scattered around the villages, including a bakery in Ta'u. Further north at Faleasao is the harbour where the weekly cargo ship from Pago Pago drops off supplies (and the odd tourist). The waters off the northwest coast are treacherous. Three ancient **star mounds** have been discovered high on the ridges above Faleasao.

FAGAMALO COVE

The walk south from Ta'u village to the beach at secluded Fagamalo Cove is a pleasant way to pass a couple of hours. The track along the west coast can be muddy at times, but it offers some nice views of the cliffs above and pounding surf below. Mosquitoes, even at midday, are voracious, so don't forget to take repellent or you'll be miserable. The best time to go is in the cool of the morning, before the brilliant afternoon sun turns the white sand into a furnace of reflected heat.

SLEEPING & EATING

There used to be a pair of motels on Ta'u, but at the time of research neither were still in operation. Unless they reopen, or you're invited over by a local, the only possibility for overnight visitors is the National Park of American Samoa's homestay programme (p108). One of their recommended options is in Fiti'uta and costs around US\$50 per night; breakfast and lunch cost an extra US\$5 each, and dinner an extra US\$10.

There are no restaurants on the island, so bring any special supplies from Tutuila.