



Samoa





by Keith Cardwell

Eel Eggs and Fireflies

opposite page

Top: Feeding time at turtle pond.

Bottom l-r: Nemo's cousin poses for the camera; the soon to be artificial reef (the good ship Nongoonmanda).

above:

Top l-r: exiting the cavern at the Piula cave pool; the beach off Coconut Resort.

Above: Home of Robert Louis Stevenson.

An uncommon diving destination which offers a truckload of other exciting adventures including jet-skiing, kite surfing and Hobie cats - besides blinding Nemo's cousins with a camera's flash.

Upolu is the 'south island' of Independent Samoa and has a population of approximately 175,000, the busiest area being its capital city Apia. The 'north island' of Savai'i has a population of about 70,000. Samoans have a brilliant handle on life and prefer the calmness and gentility that evolves from a non-confrontational existence. Without doubt, truly 'Pacific' islanders.

There were two significant sights I immediately saw in Apia that had opposite effects on my emotions. The first was how clean the inner harbour was - the proverbial gin clarity but without the oil slicks and plastic bags I've witnessed in many coveted diving destinations so full marks Apia! The other sight that had me amazed was a religious enclave I drove past each time I was entering the main city area. This enclave was punctuated by a huge church with a frontal column topped by a golden statue about two metres tall giving the entire monument a reputedly US\$50 million price tag. A unique building competing with many other 'Houses of Worship' on average every half a kilometre apart around virtually





the entire perimeter of Upolu island. Without doubt the “Bible Belt” of the Pacific!

In stark contrast, and driving from the dive shop into town, the homes (Falés) along the roadside appear similar with the majority of them quite open to the public eye. And I mean literally open! These can be described as taking up a small flat area probably equal to half the area one would have for a conventional three bed-roomer except there are no internal walls. They have a thatched roof, sometimes topped by a few sheets of galvanised iron and rocks to keep the roof on in case of high winds and supported by a dozen or so sturdy posts around the rectangular perimeter of the dwelling area with the outside walls being made from woven palm fronds. These woven walls are rolled up during the day then down they come to shut the night out. This contrast between many of the ‘houses of worship’ and the parishioners’ Falés, is quite radical.

Eel eggs

In keeping with the religious feel for the place, the dive staff were exhorted to ‘go forth to yonder lakes and collect ye the bounty of eel eggs contained therein’. Although there are nearly always eels, the nature of the ‘eel eggs’ collected is given away by the dimples and names stamped on them. Tru-flite and Spalding seemed to be frequent handles. These lakes of course are water traps on the lush and well cared for 18-hole golf course, and, well, you’ve guessed what the eel eggs are! This course



*top: A church in the Pacific’s Bible Belt.
top right: Fales (note the few in the background also).
above: Tai and Velonika and children in their Fale on Manono Island.*



right: Entrance to Piula cave.
right below: What looks like Australian 'jungle perch'

is only a five-minute walk away from AquaSamoa and contained in the new grounds occupied by the new Aggie Greys Beach Resort. The income from eel egg collection is a great bonus for the collectors who get about 50 cents an 'egg'. They collected over 600 on that particular day. And that's not a bad little perk for diving in 'close-to-no-viz' water with the only threat being rubbed up against by long wriggly things. And when the regular hourly rate is a bit over \$3 an hour, being assaulted by wriggly rubbers is a risk well worth taking.

Piula Cave Pool

Short, shallow and full of the evidence of mischief. This 'cave' has its entrance under the grounds of a Methodist Theological College where a freshwater spring flows out from the cave and through a rock wall to the adjacent beach. But in 'diving-speak' it's not really a cave. It's a cavern. Although it extends back about 75 metres, the visibility allows easy sight of the entrance at all times even when going through an adventurous and relatively narrow connecting wall into another part of the 'cave'.

And this other part of the 'cave' is what makes one curious about the activities that go on there judging by the number of lavalavas (sarongs) lying on the bottom. The water running out of the cavern is crystal clear and has schools of fish that look very similar to the



jungle perch found in the Far North of Australia. The bottom is stony so allows for very clear photography.

Fireflies

There were quite a few places where we could eat and enjoy the local entertainment. None was so bold as the Laumei Fiaga Bar close to the markets

in Apia city. This holds regular Fire Dancing performances and the night we went we were privileged to see the recently crowned World Champion Fire Dancer, Vaela'a Iloa performing. And what a champion! Twirling those burning sticks it looked like he was the master of a million fireflies following him flawlessly in a gyrating, fast moving dance that made me dizzy and





FACT FILE: SAMOA



Climate: Two distinct seasons. The dry season runs from May to October.

Wet season runs November to April. The temperatures range from the low 20 degrees Celsius to the high 20s. Light summer clothing is appropriate all year round.

Currency: The Samoan dollar (Tala) and cents (Sene).

Official Languages: Samoan is the national language, but English is the official language of business.

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left: Vaela'a Iloa - world champion fire dancer.
above: barracuda off the rock.

wondering how soon it would take me, if I'd been trying the same routine, to burn the restaurant down!

Goldfish

Back in the water there were quite a few adventures to be had. With my passion for freshwater diving and finding out that there was a lake in the centre of the island, I was keen to have a crack at it. At an altitude of 762 metres above sea level it was reputedly stocked with goldfish by German settlers in the 1800s. Eventually, after crawling and bumping along a narrow one-way track that ended up in a suspicious looking boggy bit. We presumed we'd been given a bum steer. But not so! We found a paddock of long grass smothering a low and unnaturally shaped piece of wood which was the signpost we had been looking for. 'Carpark'. With a further 1½ hour hike through bush and the lateness of the day a decision was made to abort until my next visit.

Nongoonmanda - the first deliberately sunk wreck for divers in Samoa.

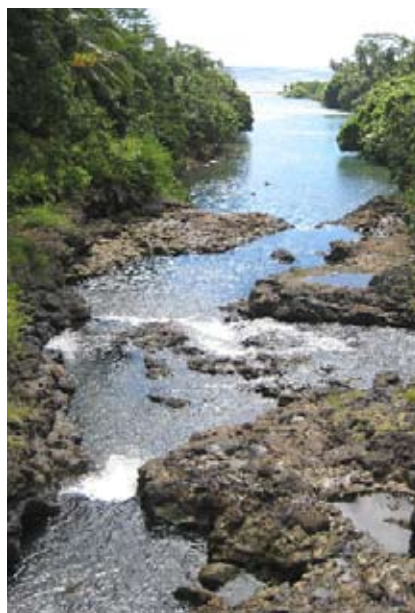
The final paperwork is being completed for the curtain call of an old, tired fishing vessel that will grace the bottom of a 30-metre dive site presently bereft of anything other than coral. This is a dream being realised after a long two-year set of negotiations with the polities and marine authorities.

Divers will be able to watch its progress from steel clunker to artificial reef attracting we can only guess what. I can't wait for that next trip to see just

who/what has taken possession of this valuable underwater real estate.

A Sea Mount

Having caught a nice dogtooth tuna the previous day hopes were high for a repeat haul. We were to be a bit more adventurous going out into the deep blue where birds were working. At 10 kms offshore and where the depth sounder was reading 'far too deep for diving' we got a shock when in the middle of nowhere we pinged a flat area of 25 metres depth that came suddenly up from a little over 300 metres. A whirl of thoughts ... sea mount, drop-off, big beasties, unknown currents, and of course, stupid and ignorant navigation and not using a better chart! Skeptical as I was I made a big effort the following day to locate a decent chart that covered the area more thoroughly. In the Harbourmaster's office I found the chart that made my blood rush. It's chart # NZ865 and what we found wasn't marked on the chart. This both excited



and disturbed me. Sure, it's great to be the first to dive a site like this, but it reminded me of how Anchorite Rock was found in the Hauraki Gulf out of Auckland, New Zealand. (Oops! to a visiting submarine). Look it up! And in keeping with the way my goldfish dive went it's on the 'must do' for my next visit.

But a lot more neat diving!

We started diving the day after landing in Samoa and continued on until the day before we left. (Yes, we did wait 24 hours + before boarding the plane home) Most of the last day was spent at the markets buying truckloads of trinkets and other assorted kitch.

Samoa's diving was marvellous. When I read the usual description of 'pristine, gin clear, virgin waters, sharks, whales, mantas etc ...' better described and written, I get a visual impression of a broken record. Or is it déjà vu? There's certainly plenty of all this at Samoa but what really got my adrenaline going was the fantastic drift dives that offered the occasional whirlpools spinning one slowly around like a sock in a washing machine. Yahoo! And huge phalanxes of barracuda escorting me through it all while passing schools of highly coloured butterflyfish.

What's written will never come close to the fun and adventure of doing it yourself and discovering unexpected and exciting things that make life hum. Samoa's a great place to start and well worth the effort to put on your list of 'must-dive' places. AquaSamoa provided a consistently active dive and watersports programme for me. They were professional, safe, and friendly.

Signing off until my next assault on the 'north island' of Savai'i...

