

The new surfer's paradise



Craig Tansley rides high on Samoa's world-class reef breaks without the crowds of Indonesia or Hawaii.

Flawless 1½-metre-high waves – the kind every surfer drew on the school exercise books of their adolescence – are wrapping through a narrow reef pass with ridiculous monotony, yet my arms are so tired I can't lift them to catch another wave.

My surf guide can't understand why I refuse to go in; he's calling to me from the skiff, sensing my fatigue. But how could he understand? If I had the strength I'd explain: surfing in Australia has lost some of its magic as competition for waves on the east coast has soured the mood.

Even when we travel throughout Indonesia, Hawaii and Tahiti, surfing has been swamped by surfers desperately competing for that allusive perfect wave. But my guide is Samoan; how could he understand? To him, this is just another day.

Surfing in Samoa still makes you feel like a pioneer. Despite a theory even many Hawaiians believe that the sport of surfing originated in Samoa more than 2000 years ago, few Samoans surf today. There's almost no surf industry at all. Just imagine, no Quiksilver, no Billabong, no Rip Curl – it's best you bring a spare surfboard with you.

Unlike French Polynesia and Hawaii, where territorial locals rule local breaks, Samoans have yet to understand why we wish to go

Trip notes

Getting there

✦ Virgin Samoa has three direct flights each week from Sydney to Samoa's capital, Apia, with flights starting from \$399 a person, one way. 13 67 89, virginsamoa.com; 1800 611 163.

More information

samoa.travel.

beyond the reef. But Samoa has all the physical characteristics of a surfing icon. It's surrounded entirely by coral reef, onto which deep, far-flung ocean swells break on numerous reef passes. What's more, unlike Hawaii, which only attracts decent swell in its winter, you can surf year round in Samoa.

Samoa has two distinct seasons, but the water's warm all year. The dry season from May to October attracts huge swells up to three metres in height, and during the wet season, from November to April, the swell size tops out at 1½ metres. It's up to surfers to determine which season suits their ability. But it's worth noting that beginners should approach Samoa with extreme caution; razor-sharp reefs offer little room for error, although Samoa lacks the life-threatening breaks for which Hawaii and Tahiti are famous.

There are world-class surf breaks all over Samoa's main two islands: Upolu and Savaii.

Most surf camps and hotels are set up on Upolu's south coast, where the most consistent waves break on some of the island's best reef passes. Luxury surf resorts have been set up along this coastline, giving surfers and their families more options than the simple wall-less fales surfers stayed in when they first arrived here in the 1990s.

At resorts such as the Sinalei Reef Resort and Spa, no luxury is spared for guests, with access to lagoon-side bars and restaurants, swimming pools and day spas. For surfers who prefer to rough it, wall-less fales beside the lagoon are also available.

But for those who like to feel like intrepid explorers, the big island of Savaii beckons. Less developed than Upolu, locals still reside in traditional villages abiding by local custom. There are few visitors on Savaii and even fewer surfers. On Savaii's northern and more remote southern coastlines, there are surf breaks that have still not been named, or surfed.

Accommodation is often in simple fales, but there's also a choice of more-luxurious hotels and pensions, where surf guides will meet surfers to take them to secluded, deserted reef breaks.



Swell party ... from top, a perfect reef break; luxury lagoon escape; Olomoe Falls.

Photos: Getty Images; Alamy

However, should you fall on the reef, medical services would be limited; the traditional method – cutting a lime in two to scrub the wound clean – is preferred on Savaii.

In peak season, when experienced surfers chart swells approaching from Hawaii, reef breaks in Samoa can get a little crowded, but with more than 40 known reef breaks in Samoa, solitude is only ever a short boat ride away.

The writer travelled courtesy of Samoan Tourism.



Surf resorts

Samoa has an increasing number of surf resorts to meet the requirements of every type of surfer. Most upmarket surf resorts are on Upolu's south coast.

✦ **Sinalei Reef Resort and Spa** A five-star luxury resort with day spa that's situated 300 metres' paddle from one of Samoa's best right-hand reef breaks, Coconuts. Surf guides are also available to take surfers by boat to seven world-class breaks in the immediate area. sinalei.com.

✦ **Coconuts Beach Club** Beside the Sinalei, Coconuts has all the luxuries of a high-end island resort but caters for surfers, with surf guides available to take surfers to nearby reef breaks or drive around Upolu to the best break. cbcsamoa.com.

✦ **Salani Surf Resort** With room for only a maximum of 12 guests at a time, Salani Surf Resort is on Upolu's more remote south-east coastline. Surfers have three six-metre skiffs at their disposal, with surf guides available to transport surfers to secret local breaks. salanisurfresort.com.

✦ **Maninoa Surf Camp** Stay in simple fales built 10 metres from the lagoon beside Sinalei Reef Resort and Spa or in beachside apartments with access by boat and paddling to Samoa's most consistent reef breaks. maninoa.com.

✦ **Aganoa Beach Retreat** On the island of Savaii, this basic resort sits beside a reliable reef break, allowing surfers to paddle straight out front or to take runabouts with surf guides. samoa.travel/accommodationview.aspx?id=23.

✦ **Savaii Surfaris** Stay in more upmarket accommodation on Savaii and be picked up by surf guides who will take you to the best breaks on the island. waterwaystravel.com/surf_samoa/savaii/.

Five other reasons to visit Samoa

1 Discover Samoa's waterfalls Samoa has some of the south Pacific's best waterfalls – from 100-metre cascading falls to gentle, family-friendly swimming holes. Try a "waterfall crawl" on Upolu's south coast, taking in Papapapai-Tai, Togitogipa, Sopoaga and Fuiipisia falls. However, it's on Savaii where you'll find the Pacific's most spectacular waterfall, Afu Aau.

2 Experience tradition Most locals still live in simple villages, adhering to local law presided over by chiefs in a system known as Fa'a Samoa. Visitors can gain an insight into Polynesian culture by taking part in traditional Sunday feasts.

3 Local delicacies Food is so important to Samoans that the entire country shuts down each Sunday to prepare its weekly epic feast. Try local favourites breadfruit, taro, green bananas and pork cooked in an underground oven (umu). Or try traditional oka – raw fish marinated in lemon juice and coconut cream or lu'au, taro leaves with coconut cream.

4 Ideal for families Samoans place enormous importance on the family and have a special affection for children – youngsters will be smothered with love. The country offers family-friendly accommodation options from basic to five-star and because deeply respected local chiefs rule communities under Samoa's unique Fa'a Samoa custom laws, crime is almost entirely non-existent.

5 Visit the resting place of one of history's most famous literary figures Robert Louis Stevenson spent years searching the world for his ultimate hideaway and finally found it on the island of Upolu. Visit Stevenson's final resting place, with its sweeping views over Samoa's capital, Apia, and the colonial homestead he lived in – now a museum for visitors.