



The Other

The only U.S. territory south of the equator is wildly beautiful, mindfully welcoming and

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Samoa

strangely overshadowed

The island of Ofu offers the southernmost national park in the United States and, the author says, the prettiest beach in the world.



Am I the only one aware our boat may be sinking?

Because here's the thing: I know the math of horizons at sea; the island we left has almost disappeared, and the island we're headed to is a mountaintop, nothing more. I wonder if I should point out what a good idea bailing would be.

But it isn't necessary. These thoughts are all the fault of sleepless nights. Tossing in bed for the last few months, thinking the past year had been terrible and the most terrible thing about it all had been me. Plain and simple, I had been far from my best, and I desperately needed a reminder of what "best" meant.

Then another thought: To find my own best, I need to see the best of my own country. You know, purple mountains' majesty, fruited plain, all that stuff. Which means a trip to the national parks, the places that, as Wallace Stegner wrote, "reflect us at our best, rather than our worst." And the park I'd never thought of visiting, perhaps the most majestic of all, is just over this boat's bow. Right now, however, the shining sea is getting way too close for comfort.

Here's what you do to get to the southernmost national park in the United States: First, spend considerable time on a westbound plane. Then take another long plane ride, surrounded by extremely large people, headed southwest. Take a final plane to where Margaret Mead did her fieldwork and the god Tagaloa created the first people. Get in a homemade catamaran with an engine more suitable for a small lawn mower. Cross an hour and a half of open sea. Sink as slowly as if you were sailing in oatmeal, and with great relief, watch a pair of islands rise as jungled mountains that look like what's left after someone took a whack at them with a giant ice-cream scoop.

From there, I accept a ride from one of the locals who has turned out to see why a boat has appeared, docking under the shadow of Foisia, once a hero and now a great big rock, who watches for threats coming from afar.

And at last, the reward: "This," says park ranger Darren Doderer, "is the most coveted stamp for visitors in all of the Park Service." It reads, "National Park of American Samoa, Manua Islands." We're certainly not in Texas, or Florida. We are below the equator, on the islands of Ofu, Tau and the territory's main island, Tutuila — land the Park Service set aside "to preserve and protect the tropical forest and archeological and cultural resources of American Samoa, and of associated reefs, and to maintain the habitat of flying foxes."

Maybe not exactly what Teddy Roosevelt had in mind when he created the national park system, but personally, I like that we have a park for flying foxes. I like that a lot. Makes me feel downright patriotic. After all, what's better than giant bats that look like flying foxes?



Is this America? Empty hiking paths, dramatic sea caves and unfettered landscapes — American Samoa radiates edge-of-world beauty, with unique ties to life in the United States.







Maybe this: While driving on Ofu, the island's lone road moves in and out of the park like needle stitches on cloth, depending on who wanted to lease their land to the government and who didn't. This is the only national park that's borrowed, not owned. The few people who live here seem to be in a permanent state of relaxed napping, and things are so quiet the local dogs look like their heads are going to explode if they see two cars moving at the same time, since it's just way too much effort to have to chase them both away.

The coolest thing about the National Park of American Samoa on Ofu, though, is a perfect stretch of unbroken sand, shaded by three-foot batwings, by palm trees and coconut crabs that look like extras from 1950s horror movies. Mountains curve around in a Polynesian cliché, as if this is the spot all the other islands tried to imitate with their landscape. Fish swim confetti patterns in shallows as clear as a flattened aquarium, and over it all, white fairy terns make air currents their playground.

And on what is, far and away, the best beach I've ever been on anywhere in the world, I am all alone, because a) even though it is a national park, one of just 58 in the entire country, not many outsiders are willing to go through what it takes to get here; and b) this particular beach has way too many ghosts for locals to want to hang out on it.

Wow, I feel good. My country 'tis of thee, indeed.

A sculpture of Charlie the Tuna looks over Pago Pago

Bay with fishy benevolence when park ranger Sarah Bone suddenly says, "Wait, I've got to listen to this." She turns up the radio as the Emergency Broadcast System test comes on. You know, that annoying horn followed by the stentorian announcement, "This has been a test ..."

The unincorporated U.S. Territory of American Samoa has an undeserved PR problem. Think Hawaii 50 years ago. No crowds and a jungle of almost all native plants, with flowers the size of Frisbees. Plus lots of giant bats.

But these charms are hidden, says local Erika Radewagen. "Any map you look at, we're in the fold."

Even for those few who have heard of it, there's a glitch, still deeper than the fact that the main city's name, Pago Pago, is proof either the early missionaries couldn't spell, or they were lousy linguists, because it's pronounced Pango Pango.

The truth is, the territory's very name eliminates all bragging rights. Where do you want to claim you've gone: the independent nation of Samoa, or the territory of American Samoa? Same people, same cultures, islands merely 40 miles or so apart, yet somehow, "American Samoa" comes off sounding as thrilling as a drive to the corner market.



Outside of the U.S. government, the tuna cannery is the largest employer in the territory. And while rowing clubs and cricket are steeped in competition, family time trumps all.

Never mind that the corner market here has maybe 30 kinds of *pisupo* corned beef and a glass case full of Hostess Cup Cakes. American Samoa is very much itself. Kids may use the same textbooks as kids in Topeka, but each evening, the island comes to a dead halt for the pause of *sa*, “sacred time,” when young men prowl the streets to make sure everyone else is indoors with family, a daily reminder of what matters most.

These values exist in downtown Pago, which lies along “a great harbour big enough to hold a fleet of battleships; and all around it, high and steep, the green hills,” wrote W. Somerset Maugham in “Rain.” Again, it’s a PR issue: Western Samoa got Robert Louis Stevenson; American Samoa got one Maugham story about a bad girl gone worse in a downpour.

At the head of the harbor are surprisingly few reminders of why Sarah and I are listening to the Emergency Broadcast System. Because of Sept. 29, 2009, when it wasn’t only a test. When American Samoa got whacked by a tsunami.

“I ran up that mountain,” Sarah says, pointing above. “From there, it just looked like water coming up and down. It was still and quiet. But it had the whole force of the Pacific behind it.”

The tsunami destroyed buildings on Pago Pago Harbor. But “it brought us together,” says transplant David Herdrich. “No waiting for the government. We took care of things.”

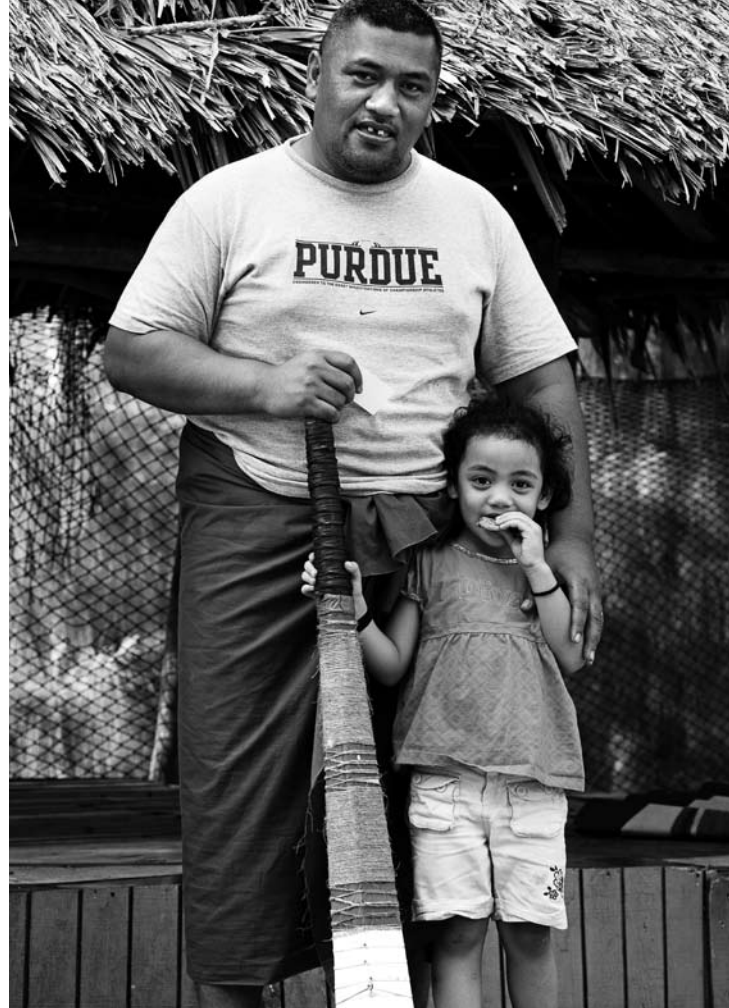
Damage wasn’t limited to Pago. Because the trigger event was a local earthquake, villages around Tutuila Island got hit.

There are still signs of the tsunami’s impact driving from village to village. Maybe an island with about 20 miles of road shouldn’t have villages, but that’s one of the beauties of Tutuila: From the industrial side of Pago, it takes only 15 minutes to drive past the stench of the tuna cannery to a village that feels like the end of the world, the place where dragons are, right before you fall off the map. Where the few U.S. politicians to visit have been roundly berated for not bothering to wave when they drive by people. How could they be so rude?


And at the very end of the road — through the village of Vatia, where we dutifully wave at some guys cutting up a tree in the middle of the road — there’s another section of the national park.

We walk past lots of houses showing the scars of repair when neighbors came together after the wave, and finally onto an untouched rocky beach, wild waves crashing, the horizon curving like a magician’s bent spoon.

The sky is the same color as a pair of cherished eyes I know back home, and I think of ways to tell her about this. How good it is to be in a place where time with the people you love, time taking care of your family and neighbors, is considered sacred.



THE TERRITORY'S
NAME ELIMINATES
BRAGGING RIGHTS.
WHERE DO YOU
WANT TO CLAIM
YOU'VE GONE:
THE INDEPENDENT
NATION OF SAMOA,
OR THE TERRITORY
OF AMERICAN
SAMOA?



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AMERICAN SAMOA
HAS A MONITOR-
ING STATION FOR
AIR QUALITY.
THE NUMBERS ARE
SO PURE THIS IS
THE STANDARD BY
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AIR IN THE WORLD
IS MEASURED.





I'm awakened by the sound of bats overhead, weaving

patterns through the colossal Southern Cross. As my lavalava threatens to leave me to the trade winds, I'm not thinking about the past, or this island of Ofu. I'm thinking how if we allow ourselves, we can do way more than we think we can. And I'm fairly sure that's what Roosevelt wanted to preserve with the park system. Reminders of how big both we and our world can be.

So I go back to the haunted beach. Although there should be plenty of ghosts — leftovers from a village once here, people who liked this spot so much they skip the afterlife parties for this view — the closest I see to one is an octopus, which changes colors every few seconds, and then simply becomes invisible, no way to tell it apart from the world.

I stand in the water, the waves lapping at my ankles, while yellow and blue fish swim closer, as if to look at my tattoos. For the first time in a long time, I feel like I can breathe.

Which is not a bad thing to do here. On nearby Tutuila Island, NOAA has a monitoring station for air quality. The numbers are so pure, this is the standard by which all other air in the world is measured. This territory is the baseline.

After I get home, I will check books and film clips, and finally e-mail NASA, trying to chase down a moment in history. Because here in these waters where the seven islands of the territory rest as lightly as punctuation, the Apollo lunar missions splashed down in what

— Mission Control told Apollo 12 was “a nice little section in the South Pacific reserved for you.”

What I will try to find out is this: When the astronauts splashed down — these men who proved we can accomplish anything by putting their footprints on the moon — when they climbed out, were they still breathing canned air, or were they breathing this, the scent of jungle and beach and ocean? The best air in the world, the scent of this far-flung bit of America, of home?

I suppose it really doesn't matter. Breath itself is enough. Because it is always possible to find yourself something you didn't mean to be, lost in a sinking boat, looking at mute stars far too far off. It's always possible to make yourself less. But it's not necessary. If you're lucky, no matter how far you go, eventually you land, take a deep breath, the sky reaches above and you're everything you want to be. And right where you want to be: on a perfect beach with giant bats. ■ ISLANDS.COM/americansamoa



Wild welcomes: Bright beaches, towering mountains and inviting smiles are all part of life on American Samoa. So are flying foxes with five-foot wingspans, soaring the air above.



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