



# Island Time

## Getting things done at the National Park of American Samoa

By Sarah Bone and Mike Reynolds

The phrase “island time” is often used to describe a carefree life imagined while on vacation. Island time evokes images of coconut palms and beaches, no deadlines and no cares in the world.

Island time, however, is a real part of life in many places. It reduces the stress of society, but it creates interesting challenges for those working within another culture’s norms. The National Park of American Samoa, located in a remote United States territory in the South Pacific, is one of those places. Working there is an interesting experiment in meeting the expectations of a federal agency while living day to day in a far flung place.

The park was established by Congress in 1988 as the 50th national park. It protects the rainforest, coral reef and culture of American Samoa. The enabling legislation mentions the

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▲ Park staff, in traditional dress, perform an ‘Ava ceremony, an important custom of the Samoa Islands.

fruit bats, or flying foxes, repeatedly. These bats have three-foot wingspans, fly during the day and are the only native terrestrial mammals in Samoa. They are the park’s charismatic megafauna — move over, bears and bison!

The National Park of American Samoa is unique among national parks because the federal government does not own the parkland or water. An important aspect of Samoan culture is communal land ownership of village lands. The park leases these lands from the villages. The 50-year lease payment encompasses about one-third of the park’s annual budget. The land is leased from seven villages on three islands. About half of the 11,000-acre park is located on the main island of Tutuila; the rest is on the remote Manu’a Islands.

The Manu’a Islands are only 50 miles east of the main island of Tutuila, yet another world away. Life there is more traditional than in Tutuila and just getting there can be an adventure. When we first arrived, there were 30-minute flights three times a week to each island. The charter flight is on a tiny, ancient plane that

routinely breaks down. It’s not subject to the kind of safety thresholds that the National Park Service supports when flying its staff. These flights are notoriously unreliable and the half-hour flight somehow can take all day. You have to arrive early to make sure you are on the flight, and then flights never take off on time. Life simply moves on “island time.”

One time we were bounced off a flight to the island of Ofu because the people ahead of us in line were too heavy. The weight limit had been met and despite having paid for the trip in advance, we were left at the airport. Other times a ticketed passenger is bounced off because someone with a higher social rank, like a village chief or a preacher, shows up. You can’t make reservations for the return flight until you are in Manu’a, so you can never be sure you will be able to return at all.

Flights to Ofu eventually ended, and everyone with business or homes in Ofu or Olosega (connected by bridge to Ofu) relied on the flight to Ta’u instead. You must hitchhike across Ta’u from the airport to the harbor in the back

of a pickup or walk the 7 miles. Once there you must convince a local fisherman with a boat to take you across 6 miles of open ocean to Ofu. The boats are partially homemade, 20-foot vessels with no safety equipment. It is the personal decision of the fishermen if they want to make the ride, not to mention weather and fuel restrictions. When you arrive in Ofu, be ready to repeat the trip backward to return to Tutuila. Any one of the links in the chain could break and then you are out of luck and stuck on a remote island. This transportation scheme greatly inhibits the park's ability to manage more than half of its acreage.

Manu'a also can be an administrative challenge. There are no banks or ATMs in Manu'a because all transactions are handled in cash. Explaining the need for hundreds of dollars in travel cash to NPS bureaucrats is often comical: "No, the vendor cannot register their business in the system... They have no bank account, no computer, no power and often do not speak English." There are just no alternatives.

Travel to and from the mainland U.S. can be a challenge. There are only two flights a week to Honolulu. Even if there is an urgent reason for traveling, you still have to wait until the next flight. It takes about 2½ days and two redeye flights to reach the East Coast. You travel across seven time zones.

Even when not traveling, those time zones can be a challenge. The staff is never completely sure they did the math correctly when dialing into conference calls. Sometimes you can be off by 14 hours. It's a blessing to have the time zone excuse some days, but when WASO has a close-of-business deadline, it hits American Samoa at 10 a.m. In fact, the international date line lies just past the territorial boundary, making it possible to look at tomorrow from the park.

Little molehills, like buying supplies, are mountains in American Samoa. Supplies bought over the Internet can be thwarted by one of two things. First, American Samoa (AS) isn't always on the drop-down list for shipping, and customer service agents can't fix the drop-down list. As a U.S. territory, it doesn't cost extra to send packages through the U.S. Postal Service, but other shipping companies classified "AS" as international. Shipping rates are sometimes exorbitant. We did our best to stop those purchases, but if they went through, the package would be sent from the U.S. mainland to New Zealand, then to Independent Samoa and then, on a small prop plane, to American Samoa. This adds to the severely extended time it takes to receive even regular mail.

By far the most unique aspect of the National Park of American Samoa is the culture in which we do business. The Samoan culture is so vibrant and vital that it is a part of every aspect of life. Employees live and work within the curiosities of language and social practices. Traditional Samoan *lavalavas* (rectangular cloth worn as a skirt) and *puletasis* (two-piece dresses) are incorporated into the official national park uniform. Texts and programs are translated into Samoan. Since the park leases the land and water from the villages, any time the park wants to do something, such as put up a sign or build a trail, we need to discuss the project with and get approval from the chiefs of the village. This, of course, is a good thing to do regardless of the culture. Parks should be open with their neighbors about what is happening on their lands, but it becomes a complex situation when the culture is so different from the normal NPS mode of operation. At any time, a chief or village member can walk into the office and question actions taken in the park or demand money.

The relationships between the villages and the park are simple enough on the surface but become complicated. They are barely explainable to people within the NPS, let alone a villager with a language barrier. These are often interesting conversations, but ones that are cherished by park employees. Most other parks wish they had such an intimate relationship with their constituents, and so



**Samoan flying fox, Ofu Island, National Park of American Samoa, © Amy Gulick, amygulick.com**

much is learned from our neighbors despite the initial frustrations.

These formal meetings with partner villages are long ceremonial events. The Samoan culture is an oratory one. Employees come dressed in traditional attire and sit with the village council in traditional *fales* (open-walled structures). There are flowery introductions, singing, gift exchanges, ceremonial 'ava and food. All proceedings are in Samoan. It is never appropriate to get right to it. Everyone who participates is expected to give speeches that convey the point and display oratory skills. There is a lot of use of complex imagery, metaphor and emotion in every speech.

Living and working in American Samoa is an experience to be cherished. The challenges encountered and overcome teach life lessons that can be used in continued service as a park ranger and in daily life. Though "island time" may not fit well with the day-to-day operations of a bureaucratic agency, it does provide a good outlook on life.

Things happen to us and because of us every day. We spend a lot of energy stressing over every detail. Life in American Samoa teaches us that it is good sometimes to take a step back and realize that everything will work out fine — if given enough "island time." 🏠

*Sarah Bone served with the National Park Service in American Samoa in diverse capacities from 2009-12. Mike Reynolds was superintendent of National Park of American Samoa for 3½ years, learning that eating nearly raw pig with a dose of dirty dishwater-flavored 'ava really isn't as bad as it sounds. Now he is superintendent of Tule Lake Unit WWII Valor in the Pacific NM and Lava Beds NM.*



◀ **Rangers Sam Meleisea and Elaine Lio dance at an all-employee party.**