



Swimming hole on Upolu island, main; the rock pool bar at Return to Paradise resort, above; Roberta Haynes and Gary Cooper in 1953's *Return to Paradise*, and Samoan mat weaving, bottom

# PARADISE REDISCOVERED

It's a quiet Sunday at the gravesite of Hollywood actress Roberta Haynes on the south coast of Samoa's main island, Upolu. I am with Ramona Su'a Pale, general manager of Return to Paradise Resort, and beyond the headstone, reading "Sunrise 19 Aug. 1927, Sunset 4 Apr. 2019", waves lap against black lava outcrops. Palm trees bend towards the Pacific. This is the beach where, 70 years ago, Haynes frolicked with Gary Cooper while filming *Return to Paradise*. After a full life of acting, producing and writing, it was Haynes's final wish to be brought here. "Roberta made it clear when she last visited us that her heart remained here, she will always be Maeva [her character in the film] to the people of Samoa," Ramona says, as she tours me around the property.

Near the grave is a small museum dedicated to the US actress lined with film posters, photos of her real-life love interest Marlon Brando, news clippings, and snaps of her frequent subsequent visits to Samoa, always with welcoming crowds. Every Tuesday night, the 1953 Technicolor film is screened at the resort. It's said the filmmakers chose the location for the graphic way the volcanic rocks contrasted with the aquamarine waters. At low tide, the calm lagoon sparkles. We wander towards the water under palms emblazoned with signs to beware of falling coconuts. "Don't worry, we clear them daily," Ramona assures me. This "mother" of Return to Paradise Resort, as she is known to staff, points out where sea turtles swim. "You know they say sea turtles return to the exact place they were born," she tells me.

Ramona did the same. At the age of 50, she came home to her family village of Lefaga after living in New Zealand and, together with the community, built this beachside resort with bungalows on the shore. The name she chose seemed a given as many of Ramona's wider family, including her father, had worked on the film. The resort, originally opened in 2012, added three-bedroom villas during Covid closures, featuring marble bathrooms, hand-printed Samoan artworks and textiles, giant wooden decks, and direct beach access. Further villas are in the works along the beachside road.

Ramona's family trust owns 51 per cent, with the balance shared between a group of Samoan business families. "They put their money in to ensure we had at least one large four-star resort in Samoa that is 100 per cent Samoan-owned and operated," she tells me as we head toward the beachfront Rock Pool Bar. Her son Raz hands us fresh juice served in coconut shells. After a lazy day lying on sun beds and dipping in and out of the lagoon or a choice of four pools, barefoot guests gather. The collective gaze shifts westward as the sun

sinks in exquisite tints of tangerine and pink below the Roberta Haynes memorial monument on the promontory.

When Samoa recently reopened for international visitors, and bookings at the resort immediately increased, Ramona called for help. Based in Europe, one of the head chefs of Cirque du Soleil, Charles Bergen, was one of the first to arrive. He's been spending time working on menus and training the local kitchen team. Sunday lunch (known as to'ona'i) is a bountiful array featuring fish cooked in coconut shells and umu pork, wrapped in banana leaves and cooked on hot volcanic stones. Staff who tend to the resort's impressive gardens double as musicians and dancers for the fiafia cultural show. "We all come together; we have from the beginning," says Ramona, who explains it's the Samoan way, known as fa'a Samoa, a 3000-year-old way of life centred on family and community. I suspect in Ramona's case her witty personality helps too. She writes the resort's daily newsletter under the pseudonym of "Aunty Pisupo", delivering such wisdom as, "Men, please don't wear budgie smugglers, you will frighten the fish."

In celebration of Samoa's 60th year of independence from New Zealand, the National Beautification Committee recently decided to encourage each village to spruce up, and competition has been fierce. Flags and bunting hoisted on bamboo poles line streets, and bromeliads planted in brightly painted tyres and decorated coconut husks are lined up in an



## The gentle pleasures of Samoa

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alternate pattern to edge garden strips. Open-walled fales, where families and villagers gather, and homes are ablaze in shades of fuchsia, saffron and vivid green. Just driving by feels like a celebration.

Along the north coast, at Piula cave pool, a crystal-clear freshwater swimming hole and cave originating from a lava tube, villagers from Lufilufi look after the grounds, which feature lush plantings. I am alone dipping into the crisp spring pool and have just dried off by the time I drive to Tu Sua Ocean Trench, 30 minutes away. This ancient lava tube features two turquoise swimming holes forming spec-

tacular skylights from continual tidal erosion. It could take ages to get the nerve to descend the steep wooden ladder into water collared by verdant greenery. But as the sign says on approach: "If you never try, you will never know." Then there are splendid stretches of coast to discover that are regularly voted in world's top 10 lists, including Lalomanu and Vavau beaches.

An early-morning ferry ride from Mulifanua wharf to the larger but less populated island of Savai'i provides more opportunities to see unique landscapes. Cars are allowed on the MV Lady Samoa ferry or transport can be arranged on the island. On the northwest coast, a walk through lava ruins reveals a shell of the London Missionary Society church with waves of lava flow set around like licorice soft serve. The slow-moving lava field was formed by the 1905-11 eruption of Mt Matavanu and covers 76 sqkm. Down south, the Alofaaga Blowholes can blast up to 30m and it's worth lingering for a swim at Afu Aau waterfall, set in tropical rainforest. Just a day trip until the 4pm ferry departs might be a stretch to take in all this beauty; beachside Amoa Resort on the road to the lava ruins is the accommodation pick. Or at the very least, book in for lunch to sample tuna oka (ceviche in coconut milk).

Back on Upolu in the capital, Apia, you can set your clock to the weekday flag-raising in front of Government House. At 8.45am, the Royal Samoa Police Band marches from its headquarters, playing Viennese brass band music. Don't miss the Samoa Cultural Village, where daily demonstrations of wood carving and basket weaving are held. Skilled artisans are also at work tattooing unique symbols representing faith and family ties. Nearby at the daily Apia markets, coconuts are piled in neat mounds and towering bunches of bananas and plump papaya are on display, but I save my Samoan tala currency for Janet's, a nearby store featuring local artworks. I buy a tapa (known in Samoa as siapo) cloth, stamped and stencilled with colours evoking lagoons and flowers.

I linger outside a storefront displaying elaborate funeral wreaths crafted from artificial flowers. I've seen these throughout my stay, including laid upon gravesites in the front yards of homes. The shop owner steps outside and touches my shoulder. "Did you lose family?" she asks. Her manner is soft and caring; fa'a Samoa, the Samoan way. Taken aback, I blather about simply admiring her craft, while silently weighing up whether the giant heart-shaped display might just squeeze into the overhead locker on my flight home.

Andrea Black was a guest of Samoa Tourism Authority.

### IN THE KNOW

Qantas flies direct to Apia from Brisbane once a week; from October 31, twice-weekly services will operate with connecting flights from other states. Beachfront rooms at Return to Paradise Resort start from about \$400 a night. Deluxe bungalows at Amoa Resort from about \$180 a night. Entry to swimming holes, waterfalls, lava ruins and some beaches requires a modest fee to help with upkeep. Be sure to carry tala in small denominations.  
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