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## **The Growth of Beach Fale Tourism in Samoa:** Doing Tourism the Samoan Way

Regina Scheyvens



## **O le Tupu o Fale Matafaga i Samoa:** Atina'e o Turisi i le Ala Fa'aSamoa.



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The Growth of Beach Fale Accommodation in Samoa: Doing Tourism the Samoan Way

*O le Tupu o Fale Tu Matafaga i Samoa: Atina'e o Turisi i le Ala Fa'aSamoa.*

Regina Scheyvens

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## Executive Summary

Samoa is an independent Pacific Island nation with beautiful beaches, rainforests and volcanic features, and is home to vibrant Polynesian communities living mainly in picturesque villages dotted around two main islands. It is seemingly another perfect island paradise, yet Samoans have a long history of resistance to outside interference thus in the past they have been reluctant to trade on their country's natural beauty and cultural features by encouraging tourism development. Threats to the country's agriculture sector from two cyclones and a taro blight led to a change of heart in the early 1990s, and tourism has since rapidly grown to become Samoa's main industry, contributing four times more to the economy than agriculture (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward, 1998). Arrivals grew from less than 48,000 in 1990 to over 92,000 by 2003.

However, unlike the three most popular Pacific Island destinations, Fiji, French Polynesia and New Caledonia, Samoa is not home to numerous large resorts. Instead the tourism industry here is dominated by small to medium sized enterprises which are mostly under local ownership and control. The largest growth in recent years has been experienced in the budget beach fale accommodation sector. Beach fale, or traditional beach huts, are now a strong feature of the coastal landscape of Samoa. A family or community need relatively little capital to establish a beach fale operation, but the family or community group does need permission from the relevant matai (chiefs). These fale range from basic, open sided huts with thatched roofs and traditional woven blinds in the place of walls, to walled bungalows with small verandas. Bathroom and dining facilities are shared with other guests, and the relations between guests and those catering to their needs are more friendly than servile. Guests are expected to conform with cultural protocol during their stay, which includes dressing appropriately when entering a village and respecting Sa (evening prayer time).

However, staff of the Samoan Tourism Authority generally recognise the value of beach fale as a unique tourism product, and they have been supported by NZAID in providing training and financial support to beach fale owners over the past few years. Training in areas such as financial management, health and safety, and service skills is helping to address areas of weakness which exist in the beach fale sector, where many of the owners have limited business experience.

Beach fale attract a wide range of clientele, with both Samoan and foreign tourists being very important markets. Samoan guests include couples, families, and youth groups who typically take weekend day trips from Apia to nearby beaches where they pay a small fee to cover use of the beach and a beach fale (which provides shade and a comfortable resting place). Longer stay visitors to beach fale include government and non-governmental agency staff who are sent on retreats to work on their mission statement or review goals and objectives, and family or school groups celebrating a reunion. Foreign visitors are also a diverse group which, rather than being limited to international backpackers, includes a lot of young and middle-aged couples from Australia and New Zealand, surfers, adventurers and ecotourists of all ages, and clientele from up-market hotels like Aggie Grey's who desire a unique cultural experience for a day or two.

The majority of tourists interviewed in this research were extremely positive about beach fale tourism. Typical comments from a beach fale visitor's book were as follows: 'Great place'; 'fantastic food'; 'wonderful beach'; 'friendly family'. Many guests commented that they would like to stay longer and/or to return one

day. The location of beach fale on what would be prime coastal property with premium values in most parts of the world certainly adds to the value of the fale. One respondent referred to beach fale as '5 star hotels the Samoan way', and many tourists remarked that staying in an open fale gave them a sense of the affinity between culture and nature in Samoan society.

Both Samoan and foreign tourists agreed that there were several services that were central to an enjoyable beach fale experience:

- clean and well maintained facilities
- good meals incorporating local produce
- a secure environment
- friendly staff.

There were few negative perceptions of beach fale, but they are worth mentioning so those operating beach fale or providing training to operators are aware of tourists' concerns. While they appreciated the relaxed pace of life in Samoa, some tourists felt that the hospitality was 'too casual' at times. For example, tourists expressed annoyance that fale which had been booked in advance were given to other guests, and at the time taken to respond to their requests for service or assistance. Newly arrived tourists were sometimes anxious about security or privacy concerns when staying in open fale, but their fears usually abated after a few days. Some tourists felt there was a lack of clarity or inconsistency with pricing practices, thus every operator in a village might charge ST\$60 for one night even when the quality of their accommodation and service varied enormously. While a few foreign tourists were concerned that beach fale were now crowding the beach in popular locations, Samoan tourists had no concern about this and felt that there was still space for growth in the overall number of fale. Finally a minority of tourists felt resentful that there were cultural restrictions placed on their activities at certain times (e.g. Sundays); the majority were however very positive about the value of Samoan culture and respectful in their attitude to beach fale rules.

Samoa demonstrates that a country with strong indigenous control of the tourism sector can be economically successful. Large-scale development of up-market hotels and resorts based on foreign investment need not be the key objective of Third World governments that wish to maximize their gains from tourism. Indeed, it is probably in Samoa's interests to stay with small-medium scale tourism development and to cater for a diverse range of tourists, including domestic tourists and those travelling on a budget. Many tourists who come to Samoa are attracted at least partly because of what a locally-controlled tourism industry can offer, namely, low to moderate prices, friendly service, basic accommodation in stunning locations, and a cultural experience.

## Aotelega Aloa'ia

O Samoa o le atunu'u tuto'atasi i le Pasefika e iai ona matafaga, laufanua ma atumauga matagofie, ma o le nofoaga o tagata Polenisia e tele ina aumau i nu'u ma alalafaga i motu faapitoa e lua. E foliga mai le atunu'u o se tasi o motu o le parataiso atoatoa, peita'i o tagata Samoa e umi lona tala fa'asolopito i le tete'e atu lea i tu ma aga mai fafo; ma i le taimi ua mavae atu na taumafai ai le atunu'u e tete'e le fefa'ataua'i o le matagofie o lona natura ma ana aganu'u i le una'i lea o le atina'e turisi. O le afaina o le atunu'u i le itu tau fa'ato'aga mai afa e lua atoa ai ma le fa'ama'i lega i le talo na o'o ai se suiga i le amataga o vaitausaga 1990 ma luma mai na fa'apea ai ona tupu vave le itu tau turisi ma avea ai ma atina'e fa'apitoa i Samoa, e fa'afaina lona sea i le tamaoaiga nai lo le itu tau fa'ato'aga (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward, 1998). O tagata faimalaga mai i le atunu'u na tupu mai le numera i lalo ifo o le 48,000 i le 1990 i le sili atu i le 92,000 i le 2003.

Peita'i ane, o Samoa e le tele ni ona nofoaga tetele mo tafaoga e le pei o le tolu o nofoaga i le Pasefika e fiafia tele tagata e tafafao iai, pei o Fiti, Tahiti ma Niu Kaletonia. I lea lava tulaga o le atina'e turisi i le atunu'u e tele lava i atina'e laiti ma feololo e umia ma pulea e le tele o tagata a nu'u lava. O le atina'e olaola lelei tele i nai tausaga e le'i mamao atu o le vaega lea o fale turisi tu matafaga. O fale tu matafaga, po'o fale fa'aleaganu'u, o le atina'e malosia lea ua iai nei i matafaga o Samoa. A iai lava i so'o se aiga po'o se fa'alapotopotoga se fa'atagana mai pulega a matai, e la'itiiti lava se vaega tupe e mana'omia e fa'atu ai se atina'e fale tu matafaga. O nei fale e aofia ai fale atolau ta'alaelae ma tapola e o'o i fale e puipui ma iai fa'apaologa. O nofoaga e ta'e'ele ma 'a'ai ai e fa'aaoga fa'atasi ma isi malo, ma o se tulaga ua maua ai mafutaga vavalata ma malo ma le aufaigaluega nai lo le fa'a'esea. O malo uma e ao lava ona mulimuli i tu ma aga fa'aleaganu'u ua tatau ai a'o nonofo ai i nei fale, e aofia ai la'e'i e ao ona fa'aaogaina pea malaga i so'o se nu'u ma e ao fo'i ona fa'aaloalo i taimi o faigalotu i afiafi.

Ua mautinoa lelei e le aufaigaluega i le Ofisa Pulea le Atina'e Turisi i Samoa le aoga o fale tu matafaga o se atina'e 'ese, ma na fesoasoani mai le malo o Niu Sila i tausaga ua tuana'i i le itu tau a'oa'oga ma le itu tau tupe ia i latou e umia fale tu matafaga. O le itu tau a'oa'oga na aofia ai le va'aia ma le pulea lelei o tupe, le soifua maloloina ma le saogalemu, fa'apea le poto masani i le tau'ave ina o galuega 'ese'ese; ua fesoasoani mai ai lea i le vaivai o le malamalama i vaega ia pei ona maua i le to'atele o e umia ia atina'e.

Ua avea fale tu matafaga ma fa'atosina i le lautele o tagata e aofia ai tagata Samoa ma tagata turisi mai fafo ma avea ai ma maketi taua. O malo Samoa e aofia ai ulugali'i, aiga, ma fa'alapotopotoga autalavou e malaga mai Apia i le fa'ai'uiga o le vaiaso i matafaga tulata ane e itiiti le tupe totogi e fa'aaoga ai le matafaga ma fale (e mapu ma malolo iai). O malo e umi le nonofo ai i nei fale tu matafaga e aofia ai tagata faigaluega i le malo ma isi falefaigaluega e malolo iai mo latou fonotaga tau le galuega ma isi mataupu, ma aiga po'o feiloaiga a sosaiete o tagata tuai a a'oga. E 'ese'ese ituaiga malo mai atunu'u i fafo e le gata na o i latou fa'avaomalo e malaga na o ato fa'afafa, ae aofia ai le tele o ulugali'i talavou ma matutua mai Ausetalia ma Niu Sila, o tagata fa'ase'e i galu, tagata fiafia i le si'osi'omaga, o e malaga ta'amilo aua le fia maua o se malamalama fou, atoa ai ma malo mai faletalimalo pei o Aggie Grey aua le fia maua o se malamalama i le aganu'u mo le tasi i le lua aso.

O le to'atele o tagata turisi sa fa'atalanoa i lenei su'esu'ega na matua lagolago ai lava fale turisi tu matafaga. O fa'amatalaga masani na fa'amaumau mai le api o

malo asiasi i nei fale ua ta'ua i lalo: 'Maoa'e le nofoaga'; 'manaia mea'ai'; 'matagofie le matafaga'; 'laufofoga fiafia le aiga'. E to'atele malo ua manana'o e fia nonofo umi ma/po'o le toe fo'i mai i se aso. O le tulaga o fale tu matafaga e pei o fale taugata tu matafaga i le tele o nofoaga i le lalolagi o se itu lelei tele lea i le fua fa'atatau i le tau o le fale.

Na ta'ua e se tasi na fa'atalanoa o fale tu matafaga 'o fale talimalo 5 fetu i le ala fa'aSamoa', ma e to'atele tagata turisi na ta'ua fa'apea o le nonofo i le fale ta'alaelae ua o'o ai ia i latou le agaga vavalalata i le tu ma le natura i le olaga fa'aSamoa.

Ua loto gatasi tagata turisi mai Samoa ma tagata turisi mai fafo fa'atatau i le tele o galuega fai ua fa'aautu i ai le agaga fiafia i le nonofo ai i fale tu matafaga:

- mama ma lelei le va'aiga o nofoaga
- lelei mea'ai ua aofia ai ma fua o fa'ato'aga mai le lotoifale
- saogalemu nofoaga
- laufofoga fiafia tagata faigaluega

E iai nai fa'aletonu ua ta'ua e tagata turisi e fa'asino i fale tu matafaga e ao lava ona ta'ua aua i latou o lo'o faia nei atina'e po'o i latou fo'i e faia a'oa'oga mo i latou o lo'o faia nei atina'e. E ui lava ina fiafia tagata turisi i le olaga fa'aSamoa, ua iai le lagona i nisi tagata turisi i le fa'atamala i le itu tau le faia o galuega tau'ave masani. Mo se fa'ata'ita'iga, ua le fiafia tagata turisi ona o fale ua uma ona taofi muamua mo i latou ae ua tu'u i isi malo ma umi le taimi o fa'atali mo se tali i o latou mana'o ma fesoasoani. Na iai se popolega i tagata turisi fou fa'atoa o'o mai i le itu tau le saogalemu i le nonofo ai i fale ta'alaelae, peita'i ane na fa'aitiitia lea tulaga ina ua te'a ni nai aso. Ua i ai le lagona i ni si tagata turisi i le le manino lelei po'o le le tutusa o totogi o fale, ona o i latou uma ta'ito'atasi i se nu'u e ona fale e fai le tau pe ST\$60 mo le po e tasi e ui ina 'ese'ese tulaga i nofoaga ma galuega tau'ave masani. E ui ina i ai ni manatu fa'asea i ni si o tagata turisi mai fafo e fa'asino i le tele o fale tu matafaga ua fai i matafaga e fiafia le to'atele o tagata e tafafao i ai, e le fa'apea le manatu o tagata turisi Samoa ona o lo'o tele pea avanoa mo le fa'atupula'ia o le numera aoao o fale. I le vaega mulimuli ua i ai se lagona tete'e i se vaega to'aitiiti o tagata turisi e fa'asino i ni si o tu ma aga ua taofia ai mea latou te fia faia i ni si o taimi (fa'ata'ita'iga, Aso Sa); a o le to'atele o i latou ua fa'aali lo latou malamalama ma fa'aaloalo i tu ma aga fa'aSamoa i tulafono i fale tu matafaga.

O le atunu'u e malosi le pulea e ona lava tagata o le vaega turisi e mafai ona manuia le tamaoaiga. O le fa'atupe ina mai fafo o atina'e o fale talimalo ma nofoaga tafafao taugata e le o se fuafuaga autu lena o malo tau atia'e ina ia tele aoga e maua mai i turisi. Manatu o le mana'o o Samoa ia tumau pea i le atina'e o turisi laiti ma feololo ina ia fesoasoani atu ai i ituaiga tagata turisi 'ese'ese, e aofia ai tagata a nu'u, ma i latou e malaga i luga o vaega tupe ua fa'asino tonu mo lea tulaga. E to'atele tagata turisi e fiafia e malaga mai i Samoa ona e taugofie, laufofoga fiafia tagata faigaluega, lelei nofoaga ma le fia malamalama i le aganu'u, atoa ai ma le umia ma pulea e tagata a nu'u lava o ia atina'e.



## Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to all of those who made my fieldwork in Samoa such an informative and enjoyable experience. I am particularly grateful to the beach fale owners and operators, tourists, and community members who provided the bulk of information upon which this paper is based. Officials of the Samoan Tourism Authority also gave generously of their time to help me to understand their work. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the valuable research assistance of Bronwyn Tavita Sesega, the insights provided by Tapulolou Siuli Tuaillemafua, and the friendly help extended by Louise Twining-Ward. Susuga Matai'a Tavale Maiava translated these Acknowledgements and the Executive Summary for me, so I am very grateful to him. To all of you, fa'afetai tele!

In terms of official assistance, thanks to the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for approving my fieldwork in Samoa, to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for providing ethical clearance for this research, and to the Massey University Research Fund for assistance with fieldwork expenses.

## Fa'afetai

E momoli atu le agaga fa'afetai tele ia i latou uma na auai i la'u su'esu'ega i Samoa ua ou maua ai le agaga fiafia i le malamalama ma fa'amatalaga ua maua mai ai. E fa'apitoa la'u fa'afetai ia i latou e umia ma galulue i fale tu matafaga, tagata turisi, ma sui mai fa'alapotopotoga i nu'u na latou tu'u mai le tele o fa'amatalaga o lo'o ta'ua i lenei lipoti. E fa'afetai atu fo'i i ali'i ma tama'ita'i ofisa o le Ofisa Pulea Atina'e Turisi i Samoa mo le fa'aavanoa mai o latou taimi e fesoasoani mai ai ina ia ou malamalama ia latou galuega fai. E fa'aopoopo atu fo'i la'u fa'afetai i le su'esu'ega aoga na fesoasoani mai ai Bronwyn Tavita Sesega, le malamalama na tu'u mai e le Tofa Tapulolou Siuli Tuaillemafua, ma le fesoasoani fa'aleuo mai ia Louise Twining-Ward. O le Susuga Matai'a Tavale Maiava na ia fa'aliliu lenei Fa'afetai ma le Aotelega Aloa'ia mo a'u, ma e fa'afetai tele atu ai ia te ia. Ia outou uma lava, fa'afetai tele!

I tulaga fesoasoani aloa'ia, e momoli atu le fa'afetai tele i le Ofisa o le Palemia mo le fa'atagana e fai ai la'u su'esu'ega i Samoa, le Komiti mo le Soifua Lelei o Tagata i le Univesite o Massey mo le fa'atagana e fai ai lenei su'esu'ega, fa'apea ma le Vaega Tau Tupe mo Su'esu'ega i le Univesite o Massey i le itu tau tupe aua le fa'atinoga o lenei su'esu'ega.

## Biographical Note

Dr. Regina Scheyvens is a Senior Lecturer in the Geography Programme of Massey University, with research interests in sustainable development, tourism, poverty reduction, and gender.

## Glossary of Samoan Words

<i>'Ava</i>	also known as kava – mildly intoxicating drink made from roots of the pepper plant
<i>'Aiga</i>	extended family, descent group
<i>Fa'aSamoa</i>	Samoa customs and way of life
<i>Fale</i>	traditional house with thatched roof and open sides
<i>Fiafia</i>	performance of songs and dancing, used during traditional celebrations and also presented to tourists
<i>Kirikiti</i>	Samoa version of cricket, often played late in the afternoon on the village green (malae)
<i>Lavalava</i>	wrap around skirt, worn by males and females
<i>Matai</i>	chief (each 'aiga is headed by a matai); matai are responsible for making decisions concerning land and the general well-being of the 'aiga or village; they also enforce laws at village level and dole out punishments to those who break these laws
<i>Palagi</i>	white-skinned person
<i>Sa</i>	'sacred'; refers to the nightly devotions which take place for around 15 minutes some time between 6pm and 8pm – a gong sounds to signal that all noise and activity should be stopped, so that everyone can focus on prayers within family homes
<i>Siapa</i>	decorated bark cloth – known elsewhere as tapa

Source: Most entries derived from Bennett et al. (2003: 25,160)

## Abbreviations

BF	Beach Fale
NZAID	New Zealand Agency for International Development
SBEC	Small Business Enterprise Centre
SPTO	South Pacific Tourism Organisation
ST\$	Samoa Tala
STA	Samoa Tourism Authority (name used from 2003 onwards)
TDP	Tourism Development Plan
VFR	Tourism industry term for people who travel mainly to 'Visit Friends and Relations'

## Currency Conversion

At December 2003, ST\$1 = US\$0.35 = NZ\$0.57.

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## 1. Introduction

Samoa is an island nation with exceedingly beautiful beaches, rainforests and volcanic features, and is home to vibrant Polynesian communities living in picturesque villages dotted around two main islands. The tourism industry which has emerged is characterised by small to medium-sized enterprises owned mostly by Samoans. Unlike the three most popular Pacific Island destinations, Fiji, French Polynesia and New Caledonia, Samoa is not home to numerous large resorts catering to medium to high spending tourists. Rather, the largest growth in recent years has been experienced in the budget beach fale accommodation sector. Beach fale dominate the accommodation options in some rural areas (see Figure 1). No other Pacific Island destination has such a well-established network of low cost accommodation for tourists, and the virtues of this are being recognised by some Samoans as well as the overseas tourists with whom beach fale have proven very popular:

To me the beach fale concept is fantastic... I think we're the only Pacific Island country that's using this concept, particularly the only one involving the locals so much. It can really be a nice alternative for overseas travellers. [Beach fale are]...traditional, authentic and nicely presented; they offer good value for the tourist dollar (Fu'a Hazelman, former head of SVB, June 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Beach fale, essentially open-sided huts with thatched roofs held up by poles, located on or by the beach, are an indigenous, home-grown initiative. The first beach fale were built in response to the leisure needs of local people in Samoa, and the concept has since been adapted and expanded to meet the needs of domestic and foreign tourists. Beach fale first became an important feature on the tourism landscape in Samoa in the early to mid-1990s when there was a serious move to diversify livelihood options after the decimation caused by two cyclones and a taro blight which wiped out the entire crop of the country's main food staple.

The beach fale sector appears to hold much promise. Notably: it is based upon local ownership and control; relies on local skills, resources and knowledge; increases the standard of living in rural villages; and provides opportunities for tourists to learn about nature and culture (Scheyvens 2005a). As Park explains

Beach fale are a distinctly Samoan way of accommodating tourists in that they incorporate traditional hospitality, local control and ownership, with tourism... [Thus they] provide an opportunity for a tourist experience that is, to an extent, on the host community's terms' (2003:1).

Despite such advantages, budget tourism associated with beach fale has been largely overlooked in economic reports on Samoa, and the services provided are not deemed worthy of inclusion of statistics on tourist beds available. While this sector of tourism deserves recognition, beach fale development is really still in its infancy (most initiatives studied in this research were no more than ten years old), so there is also the need for caution and to take stock of problems which may be emerging as well as what has been achieved to date.

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<sup>1</sup> Except for government officials and tourism industry representatives who agreed to have their names used in this paper, in most cases the names of research participants have been altered (in the case of beach fale operators) or are simply not used (in the case of clients). Except where it was necessary to use the real name of a beach fale or where operators explicitly agreed to use of the name of their enterprise, I have also changed their names and indicated this with an asterisk e.g. Sunshine Beach Fale\* (this is a made up name).

Figure 1: Beach Fale and Hotel Accommodation in Samoa



Source: Tourism Resource Consultants (2002:60)

## 1.1. Aims and objectives

This working paper explores the budget tourism sector in Samoa as epitomised by beach fale accommodation. It is one part of a broader research project which aims to draw attention to the legitimacy and value of this often-overlooked sector of the tourism market through a study of the economic and socio-cultural impacts of budget tourism, and through exploring the views of Samoan people and foreign tourists about its value. For a fuller understanding of the research findings, readers are referred to Scheyvens (2005b), a second working paper in this series (see <http://cigad.massey.ac.nz>). The current working paper has the following research objectives:

- a) analyse the broader context within which beach fale tourism is situated in Samoa, considering whether support is provided by government, tourism industry players, donors, and others;
- b) consult clients of beach fale about their experiences of beach fale tourism, noting any areas where improvements could be made;

Whereas the second working paper will respond to three further objectives of the broader research project, aiming to:

- c) ascertain to what extent beach fale tourism ventures are valued by local communities and why;
- d) document perceptions of local communities about problems associated with beach fale tourism;
- e) determine ways in which the constraints associated with beach fale tourism can be overcome, and the benefits for communities enhanced.

## 1.2. Methodology

The research on which this paper was based was carried out in my capacity as an independent academic researcher, with financial support from Massey University. Permission for fieldwork in Samoa was granted by the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and ethical approval was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (PN Protocol 02/124).

My methodology was qualitative, with the main technique of data collection being semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders including beach fale owners and operators,<sup>2</sup> clients of beach fale, officials from the Samoan Tourism Authority, and tourism industry representatives. In many cases these were individual interviews, but in some cases family members of owners wished to participate in the interviews at the same time, and often beach fale clients were interviewed in small groups.

I was also a participant observer of beach fale during my two week stay in Samoa, travelling around both Upolu and Savaii and staying in beach fale with my research assistant, Bronwyn Tavita Sesega. Bronwyn conducted interviews with me, sometimes taking the role of translator, other times taking notes. She also provided valuable insights into Samoan culture. We interviewed beach fale owners both in areas where tourism has become a central economic activity, as

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<sup>2</sup> From this point on I will refer only to beach fale operators – some of those involved were owners, but in other cases those interviewed were family members assisting with operation of the venture.

well as some more remote locations where constraints to business success were more apparent. I received assistance prior to my arrival and for my first two days in Samoa from Tapulolou Siuli Tuaillemafua who had previously been employed by the Samoan Visitors Bureau. He advised me on matters concerning my itinerary, and choice of beach fale and tourism 'experts' to visit.

At the conclusion of the fieldwork, I organised a round table discussion with Siuli, Bronwyn and a specialist on sustainable tourism in Samoa, Louise Twining-Ward, in order to present my initial findings. The feedback received helped to verify my data.

### 1.3. Outline

This paper will provide an in-depth analysis of the value and potential of the beach fale sector in Samoa by discussing the following issues in turn:

- nature of tourism development in Samoa
- growth and popularity of beach fale
- support for beach fale enterprises
- tourists' impressions of Samoa and the beach fale experience

It concludes with a summary of the nature of beach fale development and how well this has been received by a wide range of tourists.

## 2. The Nature of Tourism Development in Samoa

Until relatively recently there has been ambivalence towards tourism development in Samoa which is strongly tied to the people's history of resistance to outside interference in their politics, economy, and culture. Thus before describing and analysing beach fale tourism in detail it is important to provide some contextual information on the way in which the tourism industry has developed in Samoa.

### 2.1. Protecting fa'aSamoa

Samoans never accepted foreign domination. In 1899 an agreement between Germany and the USA saw the Samoan islands split, with Germany taking control of Western Samoa. The colony fell into New Zealand hands at the start of World War I, but this imposed control was not welcome. A non-violent rebellion against New Zealand rule, the Mau movement, became active in the 1920s and 1930s: 'The Mau not only rejected colonial authority but turned away from Western development and culture' (Stanley 2000:460). Western Samoa made history in 1962 by becoming the first Pacific Island territory to gain independence.

While in the interim Samoa had faced 60 years of political rule by outsiders, the colonial period failed to undermine the people's cultural independence or fa'aSamoa (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998). Fa'aSamoa refers to the traditional way of life of the Samoan people, and respect for fa'aSamoa is a key reason why Samoa has taken a cautious attitude towards tourism (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994): there is 'concern that this may have adverse consequences upon the dignity, self-reliance, traditional customs, authority structure and morals of rural people' (Meleisea and Meleisea 1980:42). The guarded approach to tourism is evidenced in various efforts to control tourism, which date back to at least

1919. As noted in the Lonely Planet guidebook when referring to the picturesque volcanic crater of Lake Lanoto'o: 'In 1919 local traders suggested that a road be built to the lake to allow easy access to holiday-makers, but proponents of "controlled tourism" saw to it that the idea remained only a suggestion' (Talbot and Swaney 1998:115).

It is argued that fa'aSamoa attitudes still 'mould the industry', thus for example, in hotel floorshows male dancers are just as prominent as female dancers, 'rather than the South Seas image of sarong-clad dusky maidens wiggling their way through frenzied hulas' (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994:129). And although a lot of modified craft items are offered for sale to tourists, authentic craft items such as traditional tapa cloth have been kept for the Samoan people's own use and ceremonial exchange (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994:138-9; Meleisea and Meleisea 1980). In the interests of fa'aSamoa also, foreigners who are being intrusive or driving too fast through villages may find themselves subject to negative responses from children, including the throwing of stones or baring of bottoms (Stanley 2000:466).

Respect for fa'aSamoa is also evident in the government's promotional activities. Tourism marketing draws particular attention to its cultural and environmental attractions, rather than playing on the typical 'beach paradise' stereotype common for Pacific Island destinations. The national carrier, Polynesian Airlines, was severely berated by members of the public for using a scantily clad woman as part of its promotional efforts and ended up withdrawing this advertisement (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994:129).

## 2.2. Cautious development of tourism

In the 1970s and 1980s the government was reluctant to encourage tourism development, thus, for example, they were at first averse to building a full-scale airport for wide bodied jets (Meleisea and Meleisea 1980). While expansion of Faleolo international airport did begin in 1983, and the Samoa Visitors' Bureau was established in 1984, tourism was low on the official list of priorities (Twining-Ward and Butler 2002).

Active promotion of tourism by the government did not begin until the 1990s when they were spurred on to find development alternatives after the devastation caused by two cyclones (in 1990 and 1991) and taro leaf blight (in 1993) which destroyed almost the entire crop of this staple – and main foreign exchange earner - on both main islands (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:262). Yet even then they did not want to encourage mass tourism or the development of large-scale resorts, rather, they implemented the 1992-2001 Tourism Development Plan (TDP) which stressed that 'tourism in Samoa needs to be developed in an environmentally responsible and culturally sensitive manner, follow a policy of "low volume, high yield", and attract discerning and environmentally aware visitors' (Government of Western Samoa and Tourism Council of the South Pacific 1992, cited in Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:263). It is unlikely that the constant stream of budget tourists who hang out in beach fale today would be seen as either 'high yield' or 'discerning'.

Despite the lack of aggressive marketing of tourism, visitor numbers grew from around 20,000 in 1970, to almost 48,000 visitors in 1990, and over 92,000 visitors in 2003 (Page and Lawton 1996:297; South Pacific Tourism Organisation 2005; see Table 1). The key source markets for Samoa are American Samoa



(35%), New Zealand (30%), Australia (10%), USA (10%), and Europe (10%) (Stanley 2000:462), but an important note is that Samoans who are returning to visit friends and relatives (VFR) slightly outnumber other tourists (ADB 2000:184).

Tourism is now the largest industry in Samoa. By 1998 it contributed more money to the economy than remittances from Samoans overseas, and four times more than agriculture (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:262).

Yet there is still uncertainty about the pros versus the cons of tourism. Villagers often worry about negative outside influences that tourism may bring to their area, notably drugs, HIV/AIDS, and casual sexual encounters. Meanwhile, most tourism industry players want to see growth of the tourism sector, but only as long as tourism is done the Samoan way even when there is involvement from outsiders.

**Table 1: Samoa Visitor Arrivals**

Year	Visitor Arrivals
1990	47,642
1991	36,450
1994	50,220
1995	67,954
1996	73,155
1997	67,960
1998	77,926
1999	85,124
2000	87,688
2001	88,263
2002	88,960
2003	92,313

Source: South Pacific Tourism Organisation (2005)

### 2.3. Land tenure issues

The same reluctance to cede land and resources to outside interests which was apparent at the time of the Mau movement has been applied to the tourism sector today. Around 81 percent of land is held in customary tenure, including most coastal land desired by tourist developers (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:269). There are two options for customary land: while it cannot be sold or transferred, developers can gain access to it through a 30 year lease or joint ventures. In practice, however, 'the communal nature of land holding and consensus decision-making...hinder the smooth development of tourist initiatives' (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994:132). Financial institutions are often reluctant to lend money for tourism investments on customary land, as this is seen as high-risk (ADB 2000:187-8). Customary land tenure has thus provided a considerable constraint to development of large, coastal resorts (Pearce 1999), as Peteru laments:

Attempts to bring in big hotel chains including Marriot and Sheraton flopped after reaching ground breaking stage, several times, when landlords started

haggling for more money. [Samoa has thus gained a reputation] as a difficult place to do that kind of business (Peteru, 1998:36).

Lack of landowner interest in land deals with large outside corporations has created a context in which the tourism industry in Samoa is dominated by small-scale, locally-owned and operated initiatives. Only one of the four hotels with over 50 rooms is foreign owned, and it has been suggested that 'Tourism in Samoa is almost exclusively a family business' (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:266). This situation is starting to change, however, with a number of new proposals for hotel development being submitted since fieldwork was conducted, as supported by the government's efforts to encourage more investment in large scale tourism developments (see Section 8.1).

Furthermore while the communal land tenure system has protected Samoa from foreign ownership, it is important to note that the customary land tenure system is becoming increasingly individualized. Often connection to a matai, for example, is allowing nuclear families to access land on which they can establish a beach fale venture, thus effectively taking that land out of the control of the extended family (Park 2003:63).

## 2.4. Tourism development planning

A cautious but supportive approach to tourism development has characterised Tourism Development Plans (TDPs) released from the 1990s onwards. For example, the TDP 2002-2006 has a specific focus on sustainable tourism:

Sustainable tourism development will be undertaken at a rate, and in ways that will:

- generate continuing economic benefits throughout Samoan society
- contribute to a general improvement in the quality of life in Samoa
- reflect, respect and support fa'aSamoa
- conserve and enhance the country's natural and built environments; and
- enhance tourists' experiences of Samoa' (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002:17).

In this Plan and in earlier plans and policies, the Government has not simply adopted sustainable tourism rhetoric as is evident in the TDPs of numerous countries, rather, it has embraced the concept of sustainable tourism in ways which directly reflect respect for the well-being of Samoan people:

What is distinctive about the Samoan case is the way in which the country's strong social and cultural traditions – the fa'aSamoa – have been incorporated in government tourism policies and the ways in which these policies are being implemented through the NTO [National Tourism Office] in their attempts to foster local participation in the development process (Pearce 1999:154).

In TDPs to date the budget tourism sector has been ignored or under valued, while suggesting that 'higher value' tourists are sought. For example, the TDP for 1992-2001 had a marketing strategy which 'entails seeking out higher spending leisure tourists...in main source markets' (cited in Pearce 2000:196). The TDP for 2002-2006 pays specific attention to beach fale, but it tends to underrate their significance. For example, it suggests that there is already an over supply of beach fale leading to low occupancy rates, and projects that it is at the high-end level of 'quality accommodation' that more investment needs to be made

(Tourism Resource Consultants 2002:73). It predicts that between 260-600 additional staff will be required in hotels by 2006 (compared with 1998), whereas only 5-10 new staff will be required by beach fale (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002:78): '...there are sufficient fale to well and truly cater for current and projected demand, but many of these could be upgraded, managed and marketed better' (2002:61). Thus as Park notes, 'rather than considering the current path of tourism development to be of merit, both plans attempt to send Samoa down a different path' (2003:83). It will be interesting to see whether, as in the past, actual growth differs from these projections.

In summary, the tourism industry has evolved in a unique way in Samoa with respect for fa'aSamoa and the land tenure system effectively limiting foreign involvement and large scale growth of the industry in the past. While the government has supported a strategy of cautious growth and sustainable development of tourism, which provides the context in which a high degree of local ownership and control over the tourism industry has occurred, it has recently established initiatives to increase foreign investment in tourism. This can be seen in the latest TDP which, although acknowledging the existence of the beach fale sector, does not see this sector as being of high value and thus encourages development of more upper-end accommodation options.

### 3. Growth and popularity of beach fale

Despite plans to attract higher spending tourists, as cited above, the most notable tourism growth area over the past decade has been the beach fale sector. This section describes how beach fale are established and how they function, details how they have grown, profiles their clientele, and discusses the evolution of new types of beach fale responding to the different interests of tourists.

#### 3.1. Description of beach fale

A traditional beach fale is a basic oval shaped hut with round wooden posts supporting a thatch roof. The wooden floor is raised off the ground and there are no walls, but woven blinds can be lowered on all sides for privacy or for protection from inclement weather (Figure 2). Beach fale are usually located right on the beach whereas villages are somewhat set back from the beach. Owners of beach fale provide budget accommodation and meals to both international and domestic tourists. For approximately ST\$50-60/night,<sup>3</sup> patrons get their own open beachside fale, bedding, light and mosquito net, access to shared bathroom facilities, and two meals. Palagi (non-Samoan) visitors typically stay at one beach fale establishment for three or 4 nights rather than moving on to a new place every morning. There is also a market for domestic day visitors who like to picnic on beaches near to Apia on weekends, paying ST\$80 per bus load of people, ST\$30 for a van and ST\$15 for a small car. This price covers both the right of access to the beach<sup>4</sup> and use of the facilities (the fale themselves, which provide much-needed shade, and bathrooms).

Most beach fale are run by families, although there are a few cases in which groups (such as the women's committee, or matai) operate the venture.

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<sup>3</sup> At December 2003, Samoan Tala \$1 = US\$0.35 = NZ\$0.57.

<sup>4</sup> Samoans have traditionally compensated others when using resources not owned by their own family.

Enterprises established mainly for day visitors often have fewer than 6 beach fale, and guests may not be provided with any facilities other than the fale and woven mats. Those catering for overnight guests, by contrast, are usually clustered together in groups of 5 to 10 fale, although some are larger with up to 30 fale, and shared bathroom facilities and a communal dining fale/bar area are usually provided.

To many families beach fale offer a useful opportunity to diversify their livelihood options. A beach fale business is rarely, if ever, their only enterprise. Most at least have a family plantation which they maintain as well, and this can be of great help because if there are no tourists, money can still be earned from the plantation. Similarly if there is a crop failure, the tourist venture can supplement family income. Heavenly Beach Fale\* is run by a couple who are a primary school teacher and a mechanic. They saved money from these jobs to start the business. When establishing their beach fale enterprise on Savaii they relied on donations of linen, chairs and a TV from family in Auckland. At Coconut Grove Beach Fale\* it is earnings from the family plantation, along with remittances from family based overseas and a small amount of profit from their current beach fale enterprise, which are the key sources of revenue for planned renovation of their beach fale.

**Figure 2: Traditional Samoan Beach Fale with Blinds Raised**



Source: author

Many constraints to the development of more up-market tourism ventures are either not of concern to the budget sector, or seen as an advantage. Importantly, because beach fale are owned by local families there are no concerns about leasing land or negotiating joint ventures. The fact that beach fale cannot offer every modern convenience is turned into a benefit. Some beach fale, for instance, promote themselves on the internet under titles such as 'Your Own Grass Hut', where they note you will have peace and quiet when you come to stay with them because they are in a remote location with no telecommunications linkages. They trade on *not* being 5 star resorts, yet say they will deliver 5 star service and hospitality.

I call these [beach fale] "luxury 5 star hotels the Samoan way". They suit the needs of visitors...and it's cost effective. It helps tourists learn about the culture – the simplicity of this whole place (Sione, Pastor, June 2003).

### 3.2. Evolution of the beach fale concept

There were 44 registered beach fale operations by December 1999, mostly on the island of Upolu which is home to the country's capital, Apia. The exact number of functioning commercial beach fale enterprises is unclear, however, as only 31 beach fale establishments were promoted in STA's 2003 Visitor Guide, yet as the 2002-2006 TDP points out, there are over 200 actual beach fale in Samoa (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002:58). Individual enterprises comprise between three and thirty fale, with the vast majority having less than 10 fale.

What is clear is that the growth of beach fale as commercial establishments is a recent phenomenon. Meleisea and Meleisea mention only one example of beach fale tourism in their 1980 paper on tourism in Samoa, Piula, where the Methodist church constructed basic facilities and a fale and made these available to visitors for a small fee. However beach fale have existed in a non-commercial sense for a much longer period of time, as they were sometimes constructed by families for their own leisure purposes, for example, as a place to rest in on a Sunday afternoon after a morning in church and the traditional large Sunday lunch. For others, a beach fale provides extra accommodation for visiting family members from Apia or overseas. Beach fale are, thus, an indigenous concept. Some have expanded or been built exclusively for tourists, but others cater just for family. Thus, in the mind of a Peacecorp worker living in Samoa, beach fale are '...places where [Samoan] people hang out...oh, and by the way, you [tourists] can pay to use them too' (Peacecorp worker, July 2003).

A few beach fale ventures were established in the 1980s, some in response to requests from tour operators wanting somewhere for their visitors to rest on tours around the two main islands, especially when poor road quality made travel very slow, or requests from tourists who wanted to stay right on the beach rather than in a village. However most commercial beach fale were developed as an alternative economic development initiative in the 1990s after severe cyclones hit the islands in two consecutive years and taro blight devastated the country's main agricultural crop (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998:267). At this time, a number of families were searching for ways to diversify their livelihood strategies. When explaining her motivation for starting a beach fale enterprise, one woman stated: 'We can pray all the time but God won't give unless we work....I didn't want the family to live on scraps' (Nita, BF operator, June 2003). Those with limited funds often started out small, building one or two beach fale using coconut trunks for the posts and stones for the base. Over time, more fale were built, often using sawn wood. Grants from AusAID's Tourism Development Fund to construct toilet and shower facilities for guests were an added incentive for those establishing beach fale enterprises in the 1990s.

A lot of new beach fale enterprises emerged from the mid-1990s onwards due to the 'copy cat' effect, with families recognising that their neighbours have developed a successful and popular enterprise. In some cases, a family may have one or two beach fale for personal use and after being asked on several occasions to take the overflow from a neighbouring beach fale business, they have decided to upgrade and expand their fale, effectively starting their own business. Beach fale also offer an attractive option for Samoans returning from overseas who want to use their money to establish an economic venture near to their families in the rural areas.

Beach fale have thus become a regular feature of the coastal landscape around both of the main islands (Figure 3), but while there are more beach fale in total in Upolu, it is in Savaii that they offer the main accommodation option for tourists (see Figure 1): 'Beach fale are now the most significant part of the tourism product in Savaii' (Warren Jopling, Safua Tours, June 2003).

**Figure 3: The Coastal Landscape Dotted with Beach Fale**



Source: author

Both Figure 2 and Figure 3 above show traditional beach fale, but in recent years the style of beach fale has evolved to some extent (Park 2003). This has particularly been the case with those fale built to cater for Palagi tourists staying overnight, where changes have been made for the sake of security and comfort. Thus in popular beach fale areas such as Lalomanu, Salepaga and Manase, beach fale operators have sought to differentiate the basic beach fale product in a number of ways:

- building permanent walls around the fale in place of traditional blinds, so they are more private and secure for guests,
- providing lockable doors or a lockable box within each fale,
- adding a balcony and chairs to a beach fale (to provide a place where tourists can sit to read, write and relax),
- building 'honeymoon fale' – that is, larger fale built on stilts out over the water.

Figure 4, for example, shows a 'honeymoon fale' with wooden walls, a lockable door and a veranda.

Most beach fale operators spoken to, however, recognised that the traditional design of the fale was a winning concept with tourists, and they were proud of and wished to retain that style:

...Europeans appreciate the open house style after coming from closed-up houses in Europe (Peter, BF operator, July 2003).

Some people go to hotels because of their [comfortable] conditions, but the fresh air from the sea is better. Fale, that's why overseas people come to Samoa (Luisa, BF operator, June 2003).



**Figure 4: 'Honeymoon fale' in Savaii**



Source: author

It's the open fales versus the closed off living of other societies which gives them [tourists] freedom (Sione, Pastor, June 2003).

*Regina:* Why did you build open fales?  
*Maria, BF operator:* We already have [accommodation] places that are self-contained. Beach fales were easy to build, and a lot of tourists like to experience the life of Samoans by staying in an open fale.

In practice, even very successful beach fale ventures have allowed only limited changes to occur to the original beach fale concept. For example, Tanu's beach fale, the largest and most high-profile beach fale enterprise with overseas travellers, has 32 traditional Samoan-style fale, and the manager claims they have no intention of changing this style (David, Tanu's BF, June 2003). Most beach fale operators wanted to make modest changes to upgrade the standard of their accommodation and facilities offered, but in a way which they still wanted to preserve for tourists the feeling of staying in a traditional beach fale. Some changes are being planned in response to the requests of guests:

'At the moment I'm thinking of building two self-contained fales – for example, for older couples – they like to have their own bathroom' (Maria, July 2003).

Others have chosen to change some of their fale, while keeping the original design in others. Peter had noticed that European tourists preferred closed fale, but that his expatriate guests preferred open fale, so he only built walls and verandas on half of his fale. Commenting on why he appreciated open beach fale, an American man said,

'I like having panoramic views and you get better breeze and more sun' (Peacecorp worker, July 2003).

The owners of Jane's Beach Fale in Manase decided to build fale with walls, lockable doors and verandas because 'it's safe, and more private'. They toured around Upolu and visited many beach fale, from cheap to more expensive ones, before drawing up the final design. They saw guests reading so decided to build verandas and provide tables and chairs outside the fale. Through discussions

with their guests they know that it would be detrimental to build many more fale on the site they have as they don't want to put fale in front of existing ones, however they may build more honeymoon fale, and would like to install air-conditioning in three of them as some guests have requested this. However they will stick with the basic beach fale design 'because that is where the money is' (Penina, BF owner, June 2003).

Meanwhile Vacations beach fale in Manase which has an excellent reputation for providing quality service and food, has retained the more traditional, open beach fale design, even though the operator in this case has other businesses and presumably greater access to capital which would allow her to redesign her beach fale if she wanted to.

Where operators have tried to change the overall design of the beach fale by implementing innovations such as floors of concrete, cement brick walls, and square motel-style rooms, this has not been seen positively by guests. In the case of one beach fale operation on Upolu, the family sourced funding which helped to add a 'Palagi-style' building with three square, walled rooms in addition to the nine fale they had on the beach. Lucy noted that while her family considered the rooms to be more desirable than the open fale and thus rooms cost ST\$30 per night per person compared to ST\$20 per night per person for a fale, in practice their guests preferred staying in the beach fale (Lucy, June 2003). Similarly, at Matareva beach, which is very popular with day visitors from Apia on the weekends, the matais who run the venture chose to build several square, walled, concrete block buildings with aluminium roofs and louvre windows. They said they built these 'Palagi fale' because they were more durable than traditional fale in the face of extreme weather conditions such as cyclones, and because it was now becoming difficult to find some materials needed for traditional fale, such as pandanus. They felt that in the long term, 'Palagi fale' were the cheaper option. They charged ST\$10 for open fale for day visitors and ST\$20 overnight, while the charge was ST\$20 per day or ST\$50 overnight for the 'Palagi fale'. Once again, however, Palagi were not at all interested in staying in the 'Palagi fale', and Samoan day visitors preferred the traditional beach fale as well.

There were also one or two examples of operators who wanted to build more up-market facilities but were constrained by lack of capital. In one case, the operator of a successful beach fale business which had grown from just 4 fale to over 15 fale in a few years, said that even though she knew that overseas tourists are really attracted to beach fale, she would ideally like to own her own Aggie Grey's hotel on the beach. She felt this would enhance her status in society.

There has been considerable interest in the growth of beach fale and evolution of their design, and concern from some quarters about the number, spread and standard of beach fale. Such issues will be considered below under discussions of tourists' impressions of beach fale tourism, and when considering views from people within the tourism industry.

### 3.3. Tourist markets

Now we turn to the people without whom beach fale tourism would not exist: the tourists. One of the most interesting findings of this study was the diversity of people using beach fale. This section profiles the wide range of tourists who stay



in beach fale and suggests why they are drawn to the beach fale experience. Two main groups of tourists are discussed: Palagi (foreign) tourists, including expatriates (who may have been working in Samoa for several months or years); and Samoan tourists,<sup>5</sup> including those living in Samoa and those visiting friends and relatives (VFRs). As mentioned earlier, VFRs make up over half the visitor arrivals to Samoa; they derive mainly from American Samoa, New Zealand, Australia and the USA.

### **Samoan tourists: domestic and VFRs**

The beach fale experience is rated highly by the growing urban, middle class population in Samoa who seek leisure activities during weekends and holiday periods. Other domestic tourists only come to beach fale when they have family visiting from abroad or important visitors to their place of work who need to be entertained for the day. These 'day trippers' pay for use of the beach and its facilities but they tend to be self-sufficient otherwise, bringing picnics or barbecuing their own food rather than buying meals locally. While their motivations thus vary, it seems clear that the recreational opportunities afforded by beach fale are gaining widespread appeal among Samoans. As one group of males in their mid-20s explained, 'We come [to the beach] to get out of town, to catch up with friends we haven't seen for a long time, and to look for chicks' (Samoan tourists, June 2003).

While most Samoans are day visitors to beach fale, more of them are now choosing to stay at beach fale overnight like the Palagi tourists. This is particularly the case over school holiday periods, at Christmas time and during the September Teuila festival, when groups of family and friends, and some young couples, descend on the Upolu beach fale in large numbers. At other times of the year well known beach fale businesses can be booked out by corporate and government groups who use their facilities for team building and strategic visioning exercises. Beach fale have also become a popular destination for groups meeting up for school or family reunions, the latter being a popular means of reuniting members of Samoan families spread across several countries. Examples of Samoan groups staying in beach fale in 2003 include polytechnic staff on a day trip, a weekend girl's high school reunion, a Mormon retreat, and workshops for Education Department, UNDP, Peacecorp, Customs and Rothmans staff.

**Figure 5: Samoan Tourists Relaxing in a Beach Fale**



Source: author

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<sup>5</sup> The Samoan tourists I am interested in are those who pay to use beach fale when they visit a beach for a day trip or longer stay – this research did not extend to those using their own family's beach fale for leisure purposes.

## Palagi tourists

Most Palagi tourists came from the region (New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii), but there were a number of Europeans as well. Palagi often stayed several days in one beach fale establishment, relishing the chance to relax and perhaps to get to know other tourists and the family running their beach fale.

The profile of Palagi guests staying in beach fale extends well beyond the stereotypical young backpackers on extended round the world trips. In fact, this profile fitted only a small number of my interviewees, such as a group of British backpackers who had been on a working holiday in Australia and were on their way home via the Pacific and North America. These backpackers had actually planned to travel to Los Angeles via Fiji, but had decided on Samoa when the only available flights to Fiji did not fit in with their schedule. Another British couple wanted to visit lesser known Pacific Islands such as Tonga and Samoa before heading home. Some Palagi guests interviewed stated that they specifically avoided the institutionalised backpacking scene and they associated negative connotations with the term backpackers: 'The backpacker term conjures up images of budget, grungy travel, taking a bus from place to place' (Australian male, 32, June 2003). When I asked the Manager of Training and Cultural Affairs at Samoan Tourism Authority (STA) about whether the government wanted to encourage backpackers to come and stay in the beach fale, his reply confirmed that beach fale were catering for a diverse range of Palagi tourists:

Beach fales...I can't really say if they're for backpackers or people on tight budgets or whatever – I've come across people from flash hotels staying in beach fales (Chin Ete, STA, June 2003).

Similarly, Susan, an instructor in the hospitality industry, argued that:

...beach fales are beautiful even for the wealthy. How often do you have this [a beautiful, pristine beach] on your doorstep? (June 2003).

Nevertheless FITs (free and independent travellers) from overseas did make up a strong proportion of beach fale guests, but this included middle aged professional couples from Australia and New Zealand on a short vacation as well as backpackers from further afield travelling for a longer duration. In addition, beach fale operators often had stories to tell about unusual guests such as an old woman from Sweden who stopped in at a beach fale business while on an Aggie Grey's bus trip and liked it so much that she came back and stayed for 6 months. Another told of a Japanese visitor who stayed for several months and returned to do the same the following year. Thus Palagi tourists staying in beach fale included:

- expatriates/volunteers and their families who were based in Samoa for periods of several months or several years;
- middle aged, professional couples from Australia and New Zealand seeking an adventuresome or 'less touristy' holiday option for 1-two weeks: 'I used to be a travel agent but now these are the only sorts of holidays we go for – we avoid resorts' (NZ woman, 40s, June 2003);
- middle to older aged individuals and couples who made use of beach fale during a day trip from their hotel, or who were travelling with a company such as Ecotour Samoa, which encourages short stays in beach fale;
- surfers;
- 'travellers' – a term preferred by some more adventurous young-middle aged Australian, New Zealand and European visitors on medium length

(two weeks to two months) holidays either just to Samoa, or to Samoa and one or two other neighbouring islands;

- 'backpackers' (though some resist this term) on long term round the world trips, stopping in Samoa for a week or up to a month on their way across the Pacific.

Word of mouth, internet and guidebook searches, and occasionally advice from travel agents, all helped to motivate these visitors to come to Samoa. A Hawaiian tourist said associates he had spoken to at home had 'gushed out' excellent reviews of Samoa and its people (Hawaiian man, 39, June 2003). A guidebook to Samoa accurately captures the motivations of Palagi tourists when it notes that beach fale provide international tourists with

an excellent way to combine hiking, snorkelling, swimming, surfing, and just plain relaxing with a sampling of Samoan life....As well as being great shoestring places to stay, they're a wonderful introduction to Samoan culture (Stanley 2000:470,495).

For many, Samoa's lack of mass tourism, particularly being 'less touristy' than Fiji, is what attracted them to visit:

I think it's the fact that it's not a [well known] tourism destination is what appealed.... There's resorts squirreled away here [in Samoa] but it's not like Fiji where you have the [tourism] industry in your face all the time (NZ man, 43, June 2003).

It's away from high rises on the beach. It's relaxed and easy going (Australian woman, 22, June 2003).

A Swedish tourist who had spent the previous six months travelling in Indo-china, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand explained why Samoa had appealed to her:

On the round the world ticket we could choose Fiji, Samoa or Tahiti. I heard that Samoa was the best – more quiet and unique, not so developed as in Fiji...we really like that, not the touristy places (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

What all of the above groups of Palagi travellers had in common was an interest in *culture*. As one said, '...if we just wanted sun and a beach we would have chosen Fiji'. Samoa is perceived as being more culturally authentic and friendly than other Pacific Island destinations. Some specifically sought 'to be close to the people'. This concurs with the results of a survey of Australian wholesalers who sold travel to the Pacific Islands. They rated Samoa second (after Fiji) as a destination for those seeking 'culture, nature and a break on the beach', or 'a distinctive cultural experience' (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002: 36).

I only met two families staying in beach fale, but this is an area which could grow in the future among more adventuresome Australasian families looking for an alternative Pacific Island holiday. Notably, a nine year old USA boy who had been in Samoa for two weeks and really enjoyed opportunities to play with local boys, said that he preferred this holiday over a trip to Disneyland. Because of Samoa's proximity to American Samoa, there could be further opportunities to attract American tourists.

### Relative importance of the domestic and international markets

While some beach fale operators claimed that they preferred overseas visitors because they stayed longer and used more money to buy things, other ventures – particularly those within two hours drive of Apia – were doing extremely well out of day visitors who usually came on weekends, and during holiday periods some could not keep up with demand. The domestic tourism market is thus very important and should not be seen as any less significant than the international market. Luisa from Masina Beach Fale noted that both Samoan and overseas visitors were extremely important to her business success. Various government departments and an NGO regularly had workshops or retreats at her establishment: for hosting 20 NGO workers for a week, Luisa's business could take in ST\$9000.

Table 2 below shows the origins of visitors to a beach fale establishment that caters only for overnight visitors and makes most of its earnings from Palagi tourists, however with relation to Table 3 it is likely that Samoan visitors boost numbers in the January holidays which occur in the middle of the cyclone season when foreigners are more reluctant to visit.

**Table 2: Origins of Visitors to Heavenly Beach Fale\*, 2002**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Visitors</b>
Australia	171
Samoa	130
New Zealand	111
USA	89
Germany	82
England	53
Others	183
<i>Total</i>	<i>819</i>

**Table 3: Visitor Numbers for Heavenly Beach Fale\*, 2002**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Visitors</b>
January	91
February	54
March	40
April	66
May	9
June	66
July	107
August	110
September	85
October	101
November	51
December	39
<i>Total</i>	<i>819</i>

## 4. Support for Beach Fale Enterprises

Successive governments in Samoa should be commended for supporting sensitive tourism planning that prioritises culture, the environment and controlled development of tourism, rather than focusing exclusively on economic growth. Some of the most important initiatives to support the beach fale sector, typically supported by donor funding but managed by staff of the Samoan Tourism Authority (STA), are discussed below.

### 4.1. Training and education for operators

As mentioned above, most beach fale are owned and operated by families, with larger enterprises employing other villagers as casual labour during peak periods. With the exception of those who were previously employed in small hotels or who had run another type of business (such as a small shop), beach fale operators tend to lack business know-how or service industry experience. Some, however, have brought skills from other professions such as teaching. NZAID provided regular funding for the tourism sector in Samoa through the 1990s and in this context it has recognized the need to support STA in the upskilling of beach fale operators so they can better meet the needs of their clients and run a successful enterprise (Terra Firma Associates 2001:4).<sup>6</sup> Direct support for beach fale has included funding two seminars for beach fale operators (in 1998 and 1999), which involved consultation on the *Samoa Beach Fale Owners' Manual* (Twining-Ward 1999; see Box 1), which has been circulated to all beach fale enterprises. This manual is written in both Samoan and English. The seminars were well attended with 30 operators at the first seminar and 35 at the second, and a higher presence of women than men on both occasions. One of the attendees said the main thing she learned from attending a seminar was that she should inform guests about cultural protocol and how to behave appropriately during their stay. The training has also helped to allay misconceptions held by many new business owners, for example, that their guests would prefer to eat only Palagi food.

#### **Box 1: Contents of the Samoa Beach Fale Owners' Manual**

##### **Part One: Looking after your guests**

- Why do they stay in a beach fale?
- Learn about your guests
- Your guests needs
- Meeting and greeting
- Settling in

##### **Part Two: Managing your beach fale**

- Beach fale
- Toilets and showers
- Dining facilities
- Common facilities
- Booking facilities
- Additional services
- Preparing food
- Attractions and activities
- Looking after your beach
- Site security
- Guest safety

##### **Part Three: Running your business**

- Business planning
- Business finances
- Marketing
- Staff training
- Where to go for further support
- Other useful contacts

Source: Twining-Ward (1999)

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the term NZAID will be used when discussing the agency responsible for bilateral aid from NZ to Samoa. Prior to 2002, bilateral aid was dispersed through NZODA (New Zealand Official Development Assistance) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. NZAID was formed in 2002 as a semi-autonomous unit.

In addition, NZAID has supported specific training sessions coordinated by STA which draw on the skills of people in the tourism industry and education sector. Such training is very important in terms of addressing some constraints to the successful development of beach fale enterprises which are discussed in a later working paper (Scheyvens 2005b). Mary said she had attended helpful training sessions on waste management, hygiene, and meeting and greeting tourists. Other topics that have been covered are food preparation and housekeeping. After attending two training sessions, Lucy was able to make plans for future development of her family's business, for example, building a better kitchen so that meals can be provided to guests.

The Small Business Enterprise Centre (SBEC) in Apia also offers free one-on-one business advice to people setting up any kind of small business. Taking part in this training is a pre-requisite to being considered for the Small Loans Guarantee Scheme, described in the next section. SBEC's service is worthwhile, but only the well-established, more popular beach fale ventures seem to be aware of this. Maria Melei of the SBEC acknowledged that it was very difficult for beach fale operators to follow the business convention of separating family and business finances completely (interview, June 2003). She favoured an accounting system which allowed social and family obligations to be worked into people's business calculations.

#### 4.2. Grants and loans

NZAID also established a Tourism Support Fund (TSF) in 1999 to provide advice and financial grants for capital development to tourism operators. Under the TSF advisory services, businesses can apply for up to two days free advice on planning, management and marketing their enterprise. Meanwhile the TSF financial service has been very popular with beach fale operators. This fund has a pool of NZ\$100,000 available annually. It is administered by STA and operates under a system of reimbursing up to 50% of the costs of capital works, up to a maximum of ST\$10,000. This has enabled some operators to fund new signage, communal bathrooms or a dining fale, for example.

While a very good scheme in principle, there have been some major misunderstandings among beach fale operators about how the TSF works, and what it can offer them. Some beach fale operators think that the ST\$10,000 is available as a grant, rather than a half reimbursement based on actual expenditure. I was at the Samoan Tourism Authority in Apia when a man from a beach fale enterprise in Savaii presented himself at the counter and said his matai had told him to go there to collect the money he could claim for building work which they had completed. The correct procedure would have been for him to submit receipts and for an inspection of the building work to be carried out before any reimbursement was considered. In another case, a beach fale operator claimed that her family had spent ST\$17,000 on a dining fale and had submitted all receipts to STA, but only ST\$1900 was refunded.

It is unclear whether such misconceptions abound because of an enthusiasm to 'sell' tourism to these communities, meaning that the potential incentives and rewards are overstated. Some commentators have warned that outsiders must avoid inciting 'cargo mentality' among local communities in the Pacific when developing tourism initiatives. This sentiment of caution in promoting tourism as an economic development strategy is echoed by Maria Melei, who noted that:

Beach fale and other small tourism projects are very sensitive – we [business advisors] have to handle them with kid gloves. If they don't work it really discourages people and crushes their morale (Maria Melei, SBEC, June 2003).

SBEC also has a Small Loans Guarantee Scheme (SLGS) through which they help clients to develop funding proposals to take to commercial banks. Monitoring and follow-up is provided once loans are approved. An estimated 4 beach fale businesses in the Lalomanu/Salepaga area and two in the Manase area had been successful in getting loans this way (Maria Melei, SBEC, June 2003).

Both the *Beach Fale Owner's Manual* and the *Attractions Manual* list other sources of funding sometimes available to beach fale enterprises, for example, small grant schemes from the European Union, AusAID, the Canada Fund and the United Nations Development Program (Twining-Ward 1999; Twining-Ward 2000).

#### 4.3. Publicity for beach fale

World wide studies of tourism in Third World communities have found that in addition to the lack of business and skills training mentioned above, a key factor constraining the success of community-based tourism initiatives is a lack of publicity (Moscardo and Pearce 2003). Thus it is important to consider how well beach fale as a particular tourism product are marketed at present.

In practice, most beach fale enterprises catering for day visitors do no marketing of their own apart from a hand-painted billboard along the road. Those hosting overnight visitors are more likely to print brochures or posters, sometimes available in the Information Fale in Apia, to have an email address or, for a few, their own website. As noted by Steve Brown who runs Ecotour Samoa,<sup>7</sup> many guests seeking 'alternative' travel experiences do all their bookings on the web, so the importance of advertising beach fale well using this medium is obvious. For many enterprises, however, their custom comes either from word-of-mouth or guide books, specifically Lonely Planet's *Samoa Islands* (Bennett et al. 2003) and *South Pacific Handbook* published by Moon Travel (Stanley, 2000).

STA has made an effort to actively market beach fale, listing links to some beach fale on their website and stocking brochures for beach fale in their Information Fale in Apia. As staff at the Information Fale noted, however, these brochures often ran out and were only available for a few establishments. They said that rather than promoting any individual tourism business they encouraged visitors to travel around Upolu and Savaii and see for themselves where they would like to stay. For example, while based in Apia visitors could easily do a circuit of Upolu (by tour bus or hired car) in a day. STA does not have funding to set up websites for beach fale enterprises, but when consulted they do advise on ways in which beach fale operators planning a brochure or website can best market their products.

Overall, therefore, it is the more successful, established beach fale enterprises that are both marketing themselves effectively and being marketed by others.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ecotour Samoa is a company which promotes sustainable, equitable tourism development. Overnight stays in beach fale are included in a number of Ecotour Samoa tours.

<sup>8</sup> In the future this trend may be enforced because of plans to promote only those establishments that meet the planned 'minimum standards', as discussed later in a later working paper (see Scheyvens 2005b).

#### 4.4. Awareness raising for communities

As noted earlier many Samoans are ambivalent about tourism development because of potential cultural impacts. The government is keen to overcome such concerns and show how tourism, appropriately controlled, can bring a number of benefits to rural people. Simultaneously some Samoans with high expectations of tourism have embraced the industry, but often with limited understanding of what visitors want. In order to overcome this gap in understanding, STA have used NZAID funds to run tourism awareness programmes whereby “villagers’ awareness of the nature and potential of tourism has been heightened...and advisory services are offered” (Pearce 1999:150-1). In addition, they are informed about tourist behaviour and expectations. For example, in 2002, awareness raising was carried out in every primary and secondary school in Samoa, while in 2003, STA staff spent two weeks touring Upolu and two weeks in Savaii to conduct this awareness raising.

These sessions have purportedly helped to change opinions in villages where the majority of residents used to be anti-tourism:

We tell them to appreciate tourism and what it can bring them, while being proud of their culture and respecting the tourists.... Before many villagers had the notion that ‘tourism is bad, it’s going to spoil the culture’, but we focus on the positive side of things and they really appreciate it – it’s kind of an eye opener for them  
(Chin Ete, Manager of Training and Cultural Affairs, STA, June 2003).

What is clear is that the STA actively encourages villagers to support fa’aSamoa, to see it as something of value to both the people of Samoa and something which attracts visitors:

We use our culture as one of our marketing strategies.... We encourage the villagers to have the fa’aSamoa, and to make it stronger and stronger. Visitors feel very safe when they come here because of our culture. You know some of the cultural factors have been revived because we *pushed* the villagers to revive them – for instance, making traditional foods. Some villages will neglect meetings – we ask them to have at least monthly meetings of matai where they start with an ‘ava ceremony which they can encourage visitors to come and watch. It’s not a put up thing – they then go on to discuss normal village matters after the tourists leave (Chin Ete, Manager of Training and Cultural Affairs, STA, June 2003).

#### 5. Tourists’ impressions of Samoa and the beach fale experience

The sections above have provided contextual information on the nature of tourism development in Samoa, the emergence and increasing popularity of the beach fale sector, and support services available to beach fale operators. The following section examines in detail tourists’ impressions of the beach fale experience, noting why so many of them thoroughly enjoyed their stay in a beach fale but also highlighting areas where some tourists feel improvements could be made.



### 5.1. Positive perceptions of beach fale tourism

The majority of tourists interviewed in this research were extremely positive about beach fale tourism

I can't imagine a nicer place to sleep [than a beach fale]. An all natural little hut right on the beach where you can feel the wind. What more would you want?.... I've had 16 years of travel experience and nowhere else in the world is there something like this. It's just an amazing form of accommodation...there's a real sense of belonging and partnership [with the Samoan culture] that you don't get from other forms of accommodation' (New Zealand man, 43, June 2003).

Beach fale are very good – enjoyable accommodation and low costs. The food, people – both staff and other travellers – makes for a good experience (Italian man, 37, June 2003).

Typical comments from a beach fale visitor's book were as follows: 'Great place'; 'fantastic food'; 'wonderful beach'; 'friendly family'. Many guests commented that they would like to stay longer and/or to return one day.

Some long term travellers compared beach fale to their experiences in staying in other budget accommodation around the world:

...beach fale offer the best views, every morning and every evening. You certainly sleep really well in the fresh open air and wake up early ready to hop in the water [for a surf] (British man, 22, July 2003).

Thailand, Laos and Cambodia had huts made of similar materials [to beach fale] – but these are right on the beach. I love this – you can fold up the walls and get a lot of sunshine. This is more unique (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

The location of beach fale on what would be prime coastal property with premium values in most parts of the world certainly adds to the value of the fale. As discussed earlier, many investors have attempted to gain access to beach front land in Samoa but their attempts have generally been thwarted due to the customary land rights system which means all operators would have to agree to any such transaction.

The interest of Palagi travellers in Samoan culture was reflected in their comments on beach fale accommodation. A number of those interviewed felt that beach fale were a great place to stay because they 'blend with the culture', there is 'a certain alignment with culture', or are 'culturally harmonious'. The interest of Palagi tourists in the Samoan way of life was understood by Samoan tourists too: 'If they [Palagi] want to escape from their lifestyle, why not give them ours?' (Samoan man, 21, June 2003).

'You get a sense of belonging, of fitting in with the culture, when staying in a beach fale' (NZ man, 44, June 2003).

Sinalei [an exclusive resort] is luxurious and it's great for people who just want to party and get laid, but it's so separate from the culture. Staying in beach fale you are *in* the culture; you can't help but be a part of it (Netherlands man, 27, June 2003).

It's the way the Samoans live – you'd feel out of it if you didn't stay in a fale I think (NZ woman, 22, June 2003).

And even the cocks crowing ... I know they're a pain ... but they *add* to the experience (British woman, 23, June 2003).

It was particularly the open sided nature of traditional beach fale that appealed to some tourists, making them feel open fale were 'more in tune with nature and culture'. VFR tourists and other Samoans agreed: 'The set up is open plan: it promotes mixing and sharing - that's the Samoan way – not like when I was in Australia' (Samoan man, 22, June 2003).

When asked, 'has staying in a beach fale enhanced your experience of Samoa?', one man replied thus:

Absolutely. Especially when we went to Namua [Island], because it's run by a Samoan family, you eat their food and learn about their culture. If we'd stayed somewhere else I'd have bought the laptop, checked my cell phone etc! (NZ male, 44, June 2003).

One couple stressed that for them, beach fale evoked feelings of harmony, belonging and partnership – expressions one would be unlikely to hear when referring to a hotel (NZ man, 43, and Swedish woman, 26, June 2003). Similarly, a young Australian man noted that 'Top end accommodation – the Hilton etcetera is the same in Sydney as in Fiji; the same goes for backpacker accommodation – a standardised product leads to a standardised experience' (June 2003). A middle-aged New Zealand businessman said he was essentially tired of staying in hotels which offered little more than 'an air conditioned concrete box':

You stay in a fancy hotel, you get an air-conditioned concrete box. You don't really talk to people (NZ man, 44, June 2003).

Most tourists felt beach fale offered good value for money by providing nice food and accommodation and reasonable service. Two doctors from Australia, in Samoa for a two week holiday, commented that they had chosen a beach fale because, 'For us it's an in-between, between the backpacker scum and hotels. It can still be just the two of us – you don't have this backpacker scene. Also the [low] cost' (Australian man, 32, and woman, 28, June 2003).

Most Palagi tourists liked the new styles of beach fale which have developed, for example, those with walls, verandas, lockable doors or security boxes, although some alternative views are given under Section 5.3 'Negative experiences and concerns'.

## 5.2. Palagi tourists' feelings about Samoan people and culture

Most Palagi tourists stressed that their experience of staying in Samoa was better than they had anticipated, as noted in the following responses to the question 'Has Samoa lived up to your expectations?':

Oh, far more. My expectations weren't this high! I had heard it was a beautiful place, with beaches and everything, [but] in one place you have volcanoes next to beaches and blowholes, and great people.... This is my definition of paradise: I couldn't wish for anything better (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

Samoa has far exceeded anything that I could have imagined. The hospitality of each place is different, but there's the same warmth (Clint, Hawaiian tourist, June 2003).

Samoa has been a mythical place (Italian man, 36, June 2003).

These comments reflected those in the visitors book at the Information Fale in Apia, where 95% were very positive about their experiences in Samoa. A common theme was the sense of surprise at how nice Samoa was: 'Samoa is much more wonderful than I'd expected'. The simple but commonplace gesture of children waving to passing tourists impressed many.

Almost all of the Palagi tourists I interviewed made specific points about Samoan people and/or culture when emphasising what they were enjoying about their time in Samoa:

I expected it to be like Fiji with a real dilution of their culture – [but] it's not (Australian man, 24, June 2003).

There's very very friendly people. It's a beautiful place, inland and the beaches. People are very accommodating – they're reserved, but if you make the first move, they're very friendly (Australian woman, 21, June 2003).

The people are very chilled, and very warm (Australian woman, 28, June 2003).

A big chunk of this is the cultural experience (NZ male, 44, June 2003).

A traveller who had spent the previous six months in Indochina, Southeast Asia, Australia and NZ stated:

I'm not a tourist – that's why I'm on this trip.... My goal is to live as close to real people as I can – that's a challenge (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

A young surfer backpacking his way around the world, noted:

I just sort of – read about all these countries, and [chose Samoa because it] balanced the culture and the surf. Like in Tahiti there's better waves there but it's just really popular – I wanted somewhere a bit less popular. And you always read about the friendly [Samoan] people' (British man, 22, July 2003).

This young surfer did get to experience Samoan culture first hand when he was invited to stay in a village (Box 2). A New Zealand medical student said that she had chosen Samoa out of other Pacific Island options for her practical placement because she wanted somewhere affordable, but also because she had worked at Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland with large numbers of Polynesian patients: 'I only got a taste of Samoan culture at Middlemore – I wanted to understand more' (NZ woman, 22, June 2003).

Others had arrived in the country and found they needed to slow down to appreciate what Samoa had to offer: 'It's good to get here and take your time so you can take in a lot of the culture.... It's not a place where you can just flit in and out. You need time' (British man, 22, July 2003).

**Box 2: Staying in a village**

Soon after he arrived in Samoa, a British surfer was invited by a family he had met at the wharf to celebrate a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party in a nearby village. The party lasted three days and he said it was 'fantastic', but that this was long enough to spend there because it was quite tiring ensuring you were being culturally sensitive and abiding by village rules at all times. He gave the family a small amount of money and some rice when he left.

Many Palagi tourists had made the effort to learn a few greetings in Samoan, and enjoyed travelling on local buses and talking with families running their beach fale in order to gain insights into their way of life. They put a high value on opportunities for personal interaction with local people. It is not surprising then that many of the best memories overseas tourists had of their time in Samoa derived from the interactions they had with Samoan people, often while staying in beach fale accommodation. For one it was 'going fishing with the boys', and for another, 'tasting coconut fresh from the

shell'. One tourist recounted that the highlight of his trip was not the long hours he spent lazing in the sun on pristine beaches, but as the day in which his rental car got a flat tyre. The tourist and his son had driven from Manase to the port town of Salelologa on Savaii to do some errands, and on the way out of town they offered a ride to an old man. Just as they neared the old man's village, the tyre on the car went flat. The three of them thus set off to find some tools or some help, but when they returned to the car they found a small crowd had gathered and the job was already half done. Those who spontaneously fixed the tyre refused all offers of payment and sent the tourists on their way.

A strong interest in the host culture was reflected also in relationships between Palagi tourists and beach fale staff. Rather than speaking of their hosts as 'cordial' or 'efficient', Palagi guests would enthuse that the staff were 'lovely' or 'like family'.

Because we were at [named beach fale] a bit longer, that was really great. We were playing volleyball with the boys. One of them took us into the village and into the shop to buy beer – all his mates gave us a hard time [in a joking sense]. Everybody waved – 'hello Palagi' (NZ male, 44, June 2003).

Such friendly relations between beach fale operators and tourists led some guests to assist their hosts (for example, one tourist had helped to fix the plumbing), or to spend time engaging in leisure activities with them. One European tourist relayed how at the end of a fiafia night, during which she had been encouraged to try Samoan-style dancing, she had stayed up late with some of the young female performers who asked her to teach them how to do some Western-style dancing. She was happy to oblige and they all had a lot of fun comparing moves. Meanwhile a group of three Australians explained that they always introduce themselves by name when they meet locals, who in turn do the same. They felt this gesture led to mutual respect and friendliness which may have explained why the operator of their beach fale freely offered to give them a ride into town earlier in the week, when they had planned on taking a taxi. Overall there was thus a genuine sharing of stories, skills and fun between some hosts and guests: this was not simply a one-dimensional, commercial relationship, rather, there were opportunities for two way learning and interaction.

Many tourists expressed that they had experienced 'genuine Samoan hospitality' and some even suggested that because beach fale were generally run by an extended family, after a few days in one place they felt like 'part of the family'.

Thus when asked to describe her relationship with the people running the beach fale she had been staying in for seven days, one visitor effused:

Oh , it's beautiful. I am an open person and curious. I like to talk and I'm friendly and this helps people to be friendly back. But Samoans are friendly anyway. We've had so much fun – dancing all night. And long discussions. It's just pure love and happiness between us – because I love being here and they enjoy my company (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

One young Australian man felt there was a direct benefit for the tourists' home countries if through their travels they learned to understand and value another culture: 'It can help to break down racism in our own countries, and show that Pacific Islanders are not all the same' (June 2003). Similarly, another Australian stated that such travels would help to break down negative stereotypes about Pacific Islanders which exist in countries like New Zealand and Australia.

Most Palagi tourists were accepting of basic restrictions on their behaviour associated with culture, for example, dressing decently when entering a village or a church, and not walking through villages during evening prayers (which was signalled by a bell). In a beach fale establishment on Upolu, there was a bar area with pool tables and a sign clearly stated that there should be no pool played on Sundays. Return to Paradise beach is closed on Sundays, and while beach fale operations still run in Manolo Island on Sundays, no swimming, kayaking or other such activities are allowed. Most tourists seemed to tolerate these restrictions. As one said, 'Each village makes its own rules – for example, you can't play pool on Sundays, so you've got to relax the whole day'; his friend continued: 'With the religious thing here...if you can't respect it you shouldn't come here, y'know?' (Australian man, 22, June 2003). These views were reflected by a surfer who felt Samoans had held on to values that used to make Sundays special in his home country:

Back home, Sunday is never Sunday any more – you know, in the days when no one was working, and no one phoned.... It used to be a lazy day. You had a nice meal and spent Sunday with your family. And it's still like that here (British man, 22, July 2003).

### 5.3. Negative experiences and concerns

There were few complaints about beach fale from either Samoan or Palagi tourists, and although I have documented a number of points below, these were concerns raised in most cases by just one or two individuals. These comments thus need to be considered in light of the overwhelming positive impression of most tourists of their beach fale experience. Some of these comments reflect individual tastes (that is, preferred style of beach fale), others relate to service, and at the end some concerns about the increased competitiveness between beach fale are raised.

#### **Style and number of beach fale**

Some Samoan tourists and a minority of Palagi tourists interviewed felt that the new wave of beach fale with walls, doors, and locks were not in fitting with Samoan culture:

Many [beach fale] have lost their Samoan identity as they've been changed to suit the Palagi visitors (Samoan tourist, June 2003).

Similarly, some tourists did not like new initiatives for slightly more up-market beach fale such as that at Virgin Cove, which was initiated by an expatriate on land well away from villages:

Virgin Cove is isolated, remote from Samoa in a way. A Palagi enclave (NZ man, 43, June 2003).

At Lalomanu, the line up of fale along the beach was perceived by some as very unattractive, that is, 'mass produced; not very traditional' (NZ man, 43, June 2003). Another Palagi tourist commented that at Lalomanu, 'There's too many beach fale – it's sterile [and] ... you have no interaction with the people [villagers] themselves' (Belgian man, 42, June 2003). The general feeling was that it would be a shame if in the future there were a lot of large beach fale ventures established in isolation from villages, because it was the smaller, family-run ventures that really appealed to Palagi guests. While Samoan tourists also preferred the traditional style of beach fale, they were not so concerned with numbers. In fact, some Samoan tourists commented that there may be too few beach fale to meet the needs of tourists during popular times of the year.

In a very small number of places, Palagi-style buildings (that is, square buildings with walls and windows) were built by beach fale operators as an intended improvement to the facilities on offer, and higher prices were charged for them. As seen in Section 3.2, however, such attempts at modernising the facilities on offer were not received well by either Palagi or Samoan tourists.

Tourists also commented on the style in which meals were provided at different beach fale establishments. Most beach fale enterprises offer a communal, buffet-style dining experience which is in tune with Samoan custom and encourages socialising among guests. Guests seem to appreciate this, and some of them were not impressed when they stayed at a more upmarket beach fale enterprise which offered a café instead of a communal dining area – they felt this detracted from their holiday as it was much harder to meet others.

### **Authenticity**

There were one or two 'hard core travellers' who were not satisfied with the authenticity of the beach fale experience. To them, it was necessary to live in a village to find out about 'the real Samoa'. For example, a European tourist criticised the fact that beach fale establishments were often separate from the village (that is, across the road), not realising that this may be a definite strategy to minimise cultural disruption. Some Palagi were engrossed in the search for a static, somewhat romantic notion of authenticity, as reflected in the following statement: 'This beach is nice but it's away from the village...this is not Samoa' (Belgian man, 42, June 2003).

### **Service**

While they appreciated the relaxed pace of life in Samoa, some tourists felt that hospitality was 'too casual' at times; several others noted problems with bookings whereby, for example, a beachfront fale would be booked but the client would arrive to find that either their fale had been given to someone else because they had arrived 'too late' (although no arrival time was specified when they booked), or that a garden fale had been reserved for them instead. In most cases however tourists do not book in advance and beach fale operators seem to prioritise the needs of those with whom they have face to face contact.

### **Security, comfort and privacy**

Some tourists had an initial feeling of apprehension about security of their possessions in the open beach fale. However, most visitors said their concerns were allayed after a few days in the country.

Many beach fale enterprises have been well planned with fale tastefully laid out with shrubs and trees in between to beautify the surroundings and offer privacy. However some tourists wanted more privacy when staying in open fale, especially when staying in fale built immediately adjacent to the road where anybody driving past could glance over and see what they were doing.

Most tourists found that mattresses provided were comfortable, however there were concerns about noise from dogs running around under the fale in one village, and about the standard of maintenance of some beach fale (for example, exposed nails and rickety steps).

### **Clarity over pricing**

Most tourists were satisfied with the cost of their accommodation and meals in relation to the service received and the comfort of staying in a beach fale. A few on tight budgets, however, avoided what they saw as 'institutionalised beach fale', that is, those where all tourists paid a set fee for accommodation and two meals per day.

Tourists who stay in beach fale are very accepting of basic facilities when they are paying modest prices, however they do like value for money. There were concerns then about inconsistent pricing. One man said that operators often asked him what he had been charged to stay in other beach fale, then copied these prices regardless of whether or not they offered equal facilities and services. In one case, for example, he was charged the standard ST\$50 for a basic beach fale with a 'decrepit' long drop toilet, and a meal that consisted of heating up a tin of fish and another of spaghetti (NZ man, 43, June 2003). This same man, who had worked on conservation projects in New Zealand, was perturbed when he found the price for a guided canoe tour of a wetland area was ST\$20, mainly because he had taken a similar tour in another place in Samoa for only ST\$3. The price was not advertised on the information board. After talking to the Manager, he thought the money paid was negotiable and that it went to the individual taking the tour.<sup>9</sup> He certainly supported conservation of the wetlands in principle but uncertainty over the pricing and where the money would go led him not to take a tour in this case (NZ man, 43, June 2003):

If you whack out ST\$20 to a 17 year old girl to paddle you around the mangroves for half an hour and not talk to you...what message does that send to them about Palagi (NZ man, 43, June 2003)?

'Custom fees' for visiting beaches, caves, waterfalls and other natural attractions have also been a source of confusion. Some tourists see these fees as a form of extortion, rather than appreciating that this practice is the continuation of a long-standing custom in Samoa whereby people from any other area of Samoa or overseas would bring some sort of gift or donation when visiting someone else's

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<sup>9</sup> In fact the set fee was ST\$20 and it went into a fund used for conservation and community activities, so the problem in this case centred on inadequate communication about the conservation project.

land. However children have exploited this situation in some circumstances and thus tourists complain of finding children 'begging' at important tourist sites. Guide books suggest paying the custom fee only to adults.

### Information on beach fale

Beach fale are well described on some web sites and in the two main guide books used in Samoa (Stanley 2000; Bennett et al. 2003). The STA website ([www.visitsamoa.ws](http://www.visitsamoa.ws)) describes the beach fale as an attractive accommodation option in Samoa and lists the names and phone numbers of those beach fale enterprises most popular with overseas tourists. Meanwhile the privately run Pacific Travel Guides website (which purports to offer 'free and unbiased travel information on the South Pacific') also provides a strong endorsement for beach fale accommodation ([www.pacific-resorts.com/samoa](http://www.pacific-resorts.com/samoa)). There is also a free Jason's map of Samoa available at the airport which lists beach fale establishments, but it does not indicate their locations. Thus those tourists travelling without a guidebook may not be able to find the information they need to make them comfortable about staying in a beach fale. As mentioned earlier, the STA Information Fale in Apia can provide some guidance to tourists, but few brochures are available for distribution to potential beach fale clientele.

#### Beach Fale Profile: Sunshine Beach Fales

*Sunshine Beach Fale is a family-run enterprise located on the Southern coast of Upolu. It provides basic fale mainly for Samoan day visitors but also offers some 'palagi-style' accommodation.*

Sunshine beach fale was established in 1995. It is a family business involving three brothers and three sisters (two of whom are overseas). One brother looks after the finances and makes most decisions. Another brother is a carpenter in Apia, so he constructed the fale along with other family members using mainly wood and plant material from their family plantation. They have a family account in Apia where revenue from the business is deposited.

Sunshine beach fale are popular at holiday times and sometimes on weekends, accommodating up to 60 guests in a good week. At other times the family would like more guests: nevertheless they earn enough to make a small profit. They cater mainly for Samoan guests from Apia, although they have also been booked for family reunions where there are a number of VFRs from overseas. Palagi guests rarely stay there, except when nearby beach fale ventures are full.

The family have tried to develop their business in a number of ways. Firstly, they sourced money from NZAID's Tourism Support Fund (ST\$5,250) which helped to fund a 'palagi-style' building with three square, walled rooms in addition to the nine fale they had on the beach. While the family had anticipated that the rooms would be more desirable than the open fale and thus rooms cost 30 tala per person per night compared to 20 tala per person per night for a fale, in practice their guests preferred staying in the beach fale. They have also removed three of the fale to make way for a communal eating house which was partially completed at the time of fieldwork. Meals will be offered in the future. When funds allow, their plan is to renovate the remaining beach fale by building walls around them, 'just like Litia's' (popular beach fale enterprise in a nearby village) (Lucy, June 2003).

The beach fale enterprise complements the family's other main source of revenue in the village: their plantation. In fact earnings from the plantation, along with remittances from family based overseas and a small amount of profit from their current beach fale enterprise, are the key sources of revenue for the planned renovation of the beach fale.



### **Rude gestures**

Most visitors were delighted that children, in particular, waved to them spontaneously as they travelled around the country, however one person said that when he waved at a child, the boy made a rude gesture in response, while another said a woman threw some kind of liquid at her, through her car window, as she passed. Two 'minor' stone throwing incidents on Upolu were also reported. In some cases, these incidents are an indication of villages where the people are very reluctant to welcome tourists or where they are offended by tourists' behaviour (such as driving too fast) while in other cases they can be attributed to cultural misunderstanding. For example, two medical students on placement in Samoa for a few months had been driving around Savaii when they decided to stop along the road and watch a kirikiti match in progress in a village. They were quite upset when an elderly man gave them an unpleasant stare and then waved aggressively at them urging them to move on. In this case, the tourists had not realised that the kirikiti pitch often includes the road: they had inadvertently parked their car in the middle of the pitch.

### **Samoaan way of life**

While most tourists were impressed with the strength of indigenous culture, as discussed above, others were concerned that the Samoaan way of life was not as romantic as the predominant cultural image. Thus an Australian woman who had been working in Samoa for several months noted that beyond the romantic stereotypes of Samoaan culture which are perpetuated by tourism promoters, visitors who stay in or near villages may be struck by some harsher realities:

Through living with a Samoaan family I've seen the reality. For example, women treated badly, children being strapped, and puppies left to starve (Australian woman, 19, July 2003).

Another felt that littering and a poor diet were real problems in the villages (British man, 22, July 2003).

### **Restrictions on tourist activity**

As stated above, most tourists were interested in and respectful of Samoaan culture. Not all, however, were happy with restrictions placed on leisure activities in some villages on Sundays. In particular, the owner of an alternative tourism company (mainly providing tours for small groups of middle aged and older people) who was scouting out a possible new tour to Samoa, was not at all impressed at Manono Island's restricted leisure activities on Sundays. Manono consists of three square kilometres of land and is home to less than 2,500 people living a semi-subsistence lifestyle. She felt the Sunday restrictions were too harsh as guests could only leave the area of their beach fale to walk to church, and they were not allowed to go swimming or canoeing (NZ tour company owner, July 2003). In fact there are further restrictions on visitors here. They are expected to wear clothes or a lavalava while swimming, and due to the community's strong commitment to preserving the environment, visitors are expected to take their rubbish back to Apia (Bennett et al. 2003:101-103).

### **Concerns about increased competitiveness between beach fale**

Some tourists expressed concern that tourism in Samoa might become too commercial in the future, and that the genuine friendliness they experienced now would be replaced by locals aggressively touting for custom, and by staged hospitality, focused only on maximising revenue from guests. Currently though,

most tourists felt Samoa was a very relaxed place where tourism had not got to the stage where local people were aggressively competing with each other, however, one person reported that at a popular beach fale venue, the operators were 'pushy' in trying to get him to stay. Due to this he moved on to a smaller, quieter establishment down the road (Belgian man, 42, June 2003).

In another case, a beach fale operator was incensed when she heard what one of her guests had been charged for buying *siapa* (decorated bark cloth) in a nearby village. Her concern was that local people were starting to see foreigners as 'walking wads of cash' (Marilyn, BF operator, July 2003). Similarly, one tourist felt that he was perceived by Samoans as a 'walking ATM' (Belgian man, 42, June 2003).

#### 5.4. Most important services beach fale can provide

Apart from location and marketing, most factors determining the success of beach fale enterprises are associated with service. This section comments on what, for tourists, are the most important services that beach fale can provide. It thus builds upon points raised above concerning what many have identified are the best features of their stay, as well as taking into consideration concerns some tourists have had. At the same time it is important to be mindful of the low to moderate cost of staying in a beach fale, and the fact that most guests appreciate that they receive good service in relation to what they pay:

The service has been for me like a top class hotel. Whatever you ask they try to sort out for you. And they clean up all the time. They try to satisfy the guests (Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

All tourists agreed that at a minimum, beach fale operators needed to provide the following:

- Clean and well maintained facilities (such as clean sheets and comfortable mattresses. Tourists do not mind shared bathrooms and cold water showers, as long as the facilities are hygienic; if the sheets smell of mothballs, if there are holes in the mosquito net and nails protruding from floorboards, this does not leave a very good impression)

At [named place] the wife was sick in hospital – when we arrived the man went into the toilet and started scrubbing madly. Then he changed the soap – the old soap was hardly used. We thought 'wow, it's so nice and clean'. He also raked and picked up rubbish on the beach every morning – the sand was immaculate (NZ man, 43, June 2003).

- Good food (preferably incorporating local food, but in a way which appeals to European tastes).
- A secure environment (the more popular beach fale employ people to guard their grounds after dark; one had lockable security boxes inside the fale, and these were popular with guests).
- Friendly staff.

While many Samoan tourists are only day visitors to beach fale and thus do not require a broad range of services, like Palagi tourists they felt that clean facilities

were essential. One noted that the main difference between the beach fale at Lalomanu beach was the facilities and service they provided, which is why some were always full and others did not get many visitors (Samoan tourist, June 2003).

In addition, the following factors were seen as making the difference between an adequate and a really good beach fale operation:

- good service such as meals ready in good time, tables cleared promptly, a booking system which allows clients to secure a beach-front fale;
- excellent meals and remembering details, such as the fact that someone is a vegetarian;
- a 'family feel' whereby the family running the venture remember names of guests and there are ample opportunities for guests to sit down and talk with the owners and/or employees;
- attractive beach and garden setting:

I stayed at a place where the owner cleaned the beach every day, and they'd planted nicely around it. Other places they just have beach fale, nothing else (Belgian man, 42, June 2003);

- small touches (such as hand towels and flowers in the bathrooms; tablecloths in the dining area; 'carpet grass' outside fale so guests can wipe the sand from their feet before entering).

These are areas in which ventures like Vacations excel.

A high standard of service can certainly distinguish a beach fale enterprise and help it to attract larger numbers of visitors. In this case the owner had prior business experience, and she set high standards for things like food quality, presentation of the fale, and cleanliness, while maintaining the classic beach fale concept.

A few tourists mentioned that they would like a higher standard of facilities (such as hot showers, ensuites, lockable safes within the fale) and that they would be willing to pay extra for these services.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has provided background material on the evolution of tourism development in Samoa, focusing particularly on the growth of beach fale accommodation. While tourism development plans for Samoa have consistently advocated a focus on attracting 'high value' tourists and providing services to match, growth in both the number and popularity of beach fale has continued unabated. Drawing on interviews with both Samoan and foreign tourists, it was clear that beach fale operators are providing a much desired product and associated services at a price which is very affordable. Perhaps more importantly, staying in a beach fale is perceived as an important part of the cultural experience of visiting Samoa, and this is a key draw card for foreign tourists particularly.

There are areas in which the service and facilities provided by beach fale operators could improve, but it was clear that a number of enterprises have already responded to the challenge of providing a quality yet value-for-money experience. Certainly it is important that donors, local organizations and the Samoan Tourism Authority continue to provide training, finance and other forms of support which are critical if beach fale are to be economically successful.

Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward (1998:270) argue that commonly perceived constraints to the growth of tourism in Samoa (including land tenure arrangements, aspects of fa'aSamoa, air access, and weak institutions), may have been to the overall benefit of the country and its people:

these constraints...have also resulted in a more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable tourism industry than is found in other Pacific island countries. Local participation in the tourism industry is high, and the kind of dependency on foreign investors and expatriate staff that has befallen larger destinations such as Fiji does not exist in Samoa. The critical indicator, visitor satisfaction, also shows that the country is on the right track.

Thus rather than assuming that growth of the industry and attracting higher spending tourists should be key goals, the material herein suggests that it could be in Samoa's interests to promote small to medium scale tourism development and to cater for a diverse range of tourists, including domestic tourists and those travelling on a budget. Many international tourists who come to Samoa are attracted at least partly because of what a locally-controlled tourism industry can offer, namely, low or moderate prices, friendly service, basic accommodation in stunning locations, and a cultural experience.

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