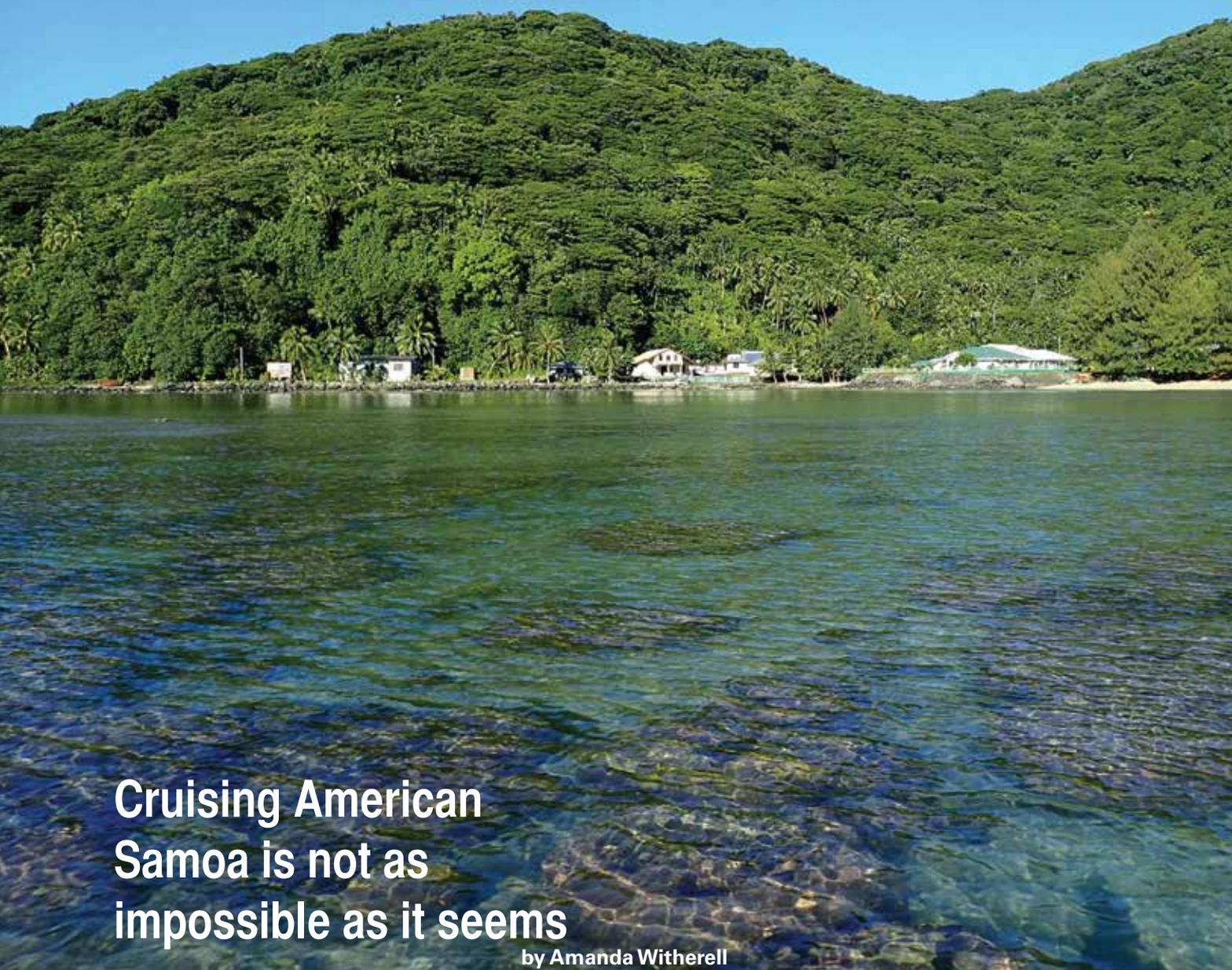


ESCAPE from PAGO PAGO



Cruising American Samoa is not as impossible as it seems

by Amanda Witherell

It appeared that we were victors and victims of that strange luck, circumstance: victors because we had somehow easily, magically procured the rare permission from the harbormaster of Pago Pago to sail our boat to the remote and seldom-cruised bays on the north side of American Samoa; victims because that permission had been granted by someone only posing as the harbor-

master and the real man in charge was back in town. And he wasn't happy.

Our goal was humble: to escape the stultifying heat and infamous reek of the tuna canneries in Pago Pago Harbor, to get away from the greasy, e. coli-infested water and the constant clamor of diesel generators. My partner Brian and I wanted to anchor our 41-foot sloop in a clear, clean bay where we could swim, snorkel or

surf. We wanted to meet some locals beyond the anonymous confines of the city. We wanted to regain some semblance of normal cruising life while we waited for mail to arrive from overseas and for the weather to cooperate for our next voyage, a hard sail east against the trade winds to French Polynesia.

The north coast of Tutuila, the main island of American Samoa, is



hoped we might find some shallower pockets to drop the hook in while remaining safely outside the coastal reefs. Our recent experience cruising the north coast of Samoa's Upolu Island gave us confidence that even a modest cut in the cliffs would provide enough protection from the predominantly east winds and swell.

PERMISSION GRANTED, SORT OF

The problem was the scuttlebutt: word on the water was that visiting other anchorages in American Samoa was not allowed. "The harbormaster will tell you that you can't anchor over there," said one of our contacts at the National Park Service, who worked with the marine patrol boats monitoring coral reefs, 2,500 acres of the National Park of American Samoa is underwater. He had psyched us up about visiting the isolated northern side of the island, raving about the beauty we'd experience above and below the sea's surface. During the two years he'd been on the job he'd never seen a single cruising boat over there and suggested we just go without getting permission at all. Tempting, but that seemed like it could open us up to a forced and immediate departure from the country.

Perhaps we could skirt the issue by getting permission from the National Park Service to anchor in their jurisdiction. "Absolutely not," the director said when we called and asked. "We don't even anchor there." He said that they live-boat while diving during the course of their work. Even though we promised to leave no trace and take care to not anchor on live coral, preserving the pristine nature one of the newest and least visited national parks in U.S. territory was his utmost concern and our little escapade wasn't worth the risk.

We approached the task of getting the harbormaster's permission with trepidation. Hardening ourselves for defeat, we climbed the long, rusty

flight of stairs to the harbormaster's roost, a crow's nest of an office atop the Customs Building that offers the kind of vast, commanding view of a harbor befitting a petty tyrant.

Frances, his cheerful assistant, greeted us and tactfully punted our query: we'd have to wait and speak to the harbormaster, who was busy on a boat. We waited, dutifully studying the décor, old Christmas decorations dangled among dusty, tropical flower-printed curtains. A chalkboard scrawled with ship arrivals and departures hung above outdated notices of missing crew and changes to fishing regulations.

Soon, a tall man sporting a long grey ponytail and wearing a lifejacket in such a way that it seemed like a cool part of his outfit, came in carrying a clipboard. He exchanged some words in Samoan with Frances, who then said to us, "This is the man you can ask about anchoring." Brian posed our question while the harbormaster gazed at him with tired, but gentle eyes.

He shrugged. "Sure, it is not a problem with me," he said, and explained, however, that prior to arrival we would need to get permission from the *matai* – the chief – of every bay we visited, as they also control access to the waters off their villages. When we were departing Pago Harbor, we'd also need to hail his office on the radio with our destination.

"That wasn't so bad," I said to Brian after we exited his office. "I don't understand what all the fuss was about."

Western Samoa also requires *matai* approval in order to visit anchorages outside of Apia, however this is easily achieved in one stop to the local government office. In American Samoa it was a full day of effort, accomplished via a series of buses and thumbed rides to the north side and back, interrupted by beach swims and snack stops at roadside convenience stores.

We kept it simple and set our sights on Aoa Bay, where the *matai*'s

everything the capital, Pago Pago, is not: lightly inhabited and lush with paleotropical rainforest clinging to steep volcanic peaks and waterfall-laced ridges, a combination of remote, one-road villages and nearly 10,000 acres of U.S. National Park land.

Our charts showed several bays along the coast, at least half a dozen potential anchorages with suggested depths of 60 to 150 feet, though we



only concern was fishing. We have rules here, he told us when we found him outside his home. Fishing is only for subsistence for villagers, he explained. We promised not to fish and we exchanged phone numbers so that he could contact us if there was a problem.

AOA BAY

We gleefully left the trashy waters of Pago Pago that following Monday afternoon, hailing a farewell to Frances on the radio and motoring around the southeast end of the island in 20-knot headwinds and six-foot swell. We spotted a lone humpback

along the way, waved to passengers on the small ferry between Tutuila and Aunu'u Island, and by cocktail hour had our anchor set in 55 feet. The late light made it difficult to see the bottom – a folly that would later haunt us – though the edge of the coral reef was easily discernible and our anchor seemed to grab and hold against full revs of the engine. Though winds were east, they manifested southerly inside the bay, holding us perfectly offshore.

First order of business was a dive off the boat to finally swim in clear, clean water. An hour later, the last of the day's light disappearing behind the high green peaks, we were below

preparing dinner when we heard a knock and a call from outside. Here was Pisoni, a young village policeman who'd been elected by his brethren to paddle out to us by virtue of the fact that he was the one with a "boat", a beat-up windsurfing board that he'd found washed up after the 2009 tsunami.

"We just wanted to make sure that you're okay," he said, explaining that they thought something was wrong and that's why we'd put into their little bay. "No, boats don't do this," he said when we asked if anyone ever came and anchored here. "They just..." and he gestured with a slow-moving finger along the horizon, like tracking a distant satellite's arc across the sky.

We told him we'd already received permission to be there from the *matai* and assured him that we had everything that we needed, which he didn't believe because the next day he returned with drinking coconuts and fresh fruit, which he generously replenished during the entire week we stayed.

Life for the 200 people living in Aoa is pretty quiet. A single road runs over the ridge from the south coast and fades into a dirt lane along the sandy beach that can be followed for a scramble around the cliffs to visit the village next door. A bus departs early every morning for the long ride to the city, delivering teenagers to the high schools and people to work, and returns just before the first curfew at 6 pm.

At this time every evening, a church bell rings and everyone hustles home for 15 minutes of prayer; if home can't be reached in time, they sit quietly in the shade of the nearest tree while village police, strolling in white shirts and knee-length lava lavas in their church colors, monitor compliance, stopping cars in the road and corralling rowdy kids.

There are two small stores and an elementary school, just off the beach where kids watched us out the windows, surfing the little wave breaking over coral in their cove. "I couldn't

get them to pay attention today!” One teacher scolded us. “It’s very exciting for them to see a boat here.”

It’s not uncommon to arrive at a remote village and immediately be bombarded by children the moment our feet hit the beach. What was exotic this time was that the kids spoke excellent English and they had questions. Lots of questions: Where are you from? Where are you going? What’s your favorite football team? What church do you go to? What’s your father’s name? Do you speak Samoan? Do you want to learn? The last was from 10-year-old M.J., a rugby enthusiast with a sweet, round face and a facility with languages: “This tree, *ulu*,” he said tapping its trunk. “Change to English, breadfruit. And this is coconut. Change to Samoan, *popo!*”

While we’ve often encountered Eng-

lish speakers in villages while cruising throughout Central America, Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, just as often we don’t. The few we do meet often result in one-on-one exchanges that create singular relationships.

Aoa Bay is the first we’ve visited in nearly 10 years of cruising where we all shared competency in the same language and this resulted in one of the richest experiences we’ve ever had visiting a remote, rural village. People asked nuanced questions about our travels and we were able to give the detailed answers they deserved. The myriad things that piqued their curiosities reminded us how all villagers must perceive cruisers, as distant, impenetrable mysteries on their horizons.

When word leaked out that we wanted to continue west along the north coast to Fagasa Bay, somebody

knew somebody’s cousin who knew the *matai* who we could simply call for permission. Phone calls went unanswered, however, but everyone we spoke to in Aoa seemed to agree that if we simply showed up and went immediately to shore to find the *matai*, permission would be granted. The swell had deepened and was wrapping uncomfortably into Aoa Bay, so we decided to up anchor for more protected waters.

The problem was the anchor refused to come up. A deep dive with a mask revealed the shank of our 60-lb CQR trapped in a thin crack between two old, dead pieces of coral. Using the engine, we managed to wrench it free, however it came aboard with a nearly 45-degree bend in the shaft. Though we carry a spare bow anchor, we decided to be prudent and return to Pago Pago to see if we could get the shank





Fagasa bus to meet the *matai*, who turned out to be one of the island's senators. Permission was duly granted to visit and we gave him our phone number just in case. That morning he called and spoke with Brian, who confirmed we'd be arriving later that day. Then the Senator called the port captain, who apparently told him that we were not allowed to leave the harbor. The port captain called us and rescinded any rights to cruise his waters that we thought we had.

straightened, and then set out afresh for another north coast exploration.

That's when we ran into trouble.

THE REAL PORT CAPTAIN

"I'm not sure how, but somehow we've screwed up," Brian said after he hung up the phone. It was early morning, the boat was restocked for another north coast adventure, and we were ready to escape Pago Pago once more. For \$50 and an hour's wait, the anchor had been straightened with dispatch in the workshop at the Ronald Reagan Slipway, with the shank showing no sign of trauma except some scraping away of its patina of rust.

The previous day, we'd taken the

"I think there's been some kind of confusion," Brian said when we arrived in the harbormaster's office an hour later. The man who greeted us was a clean-cut, elderly gentleman in a suit, neither ponytail nor lifejacket in sight.

"Yes," he said, introducing himself as Captain Silila Patane and explaining that he'd been away for several weeks, visiting his second home in Utah, and that someone else had been acting as port captain, someone who did not have the authority to grant us permission to anchor in other parts of the island. A troubled wrinkle rippled like a rogue wave across his brow and I sensed an imminent demotion for Mr. Ponytail Lifejacket.

We apologized for the misunder-

standing and said that we'd just spent a week visiting Aoa Bay and had a wonderful time getting to know people there. We explained that one of the reasons we traveled by boat was to see and experience life in different places and to share our experiences with locals.

Captain Patane absorbed these details and gave us a brief history of the problems he's encountered from cruising boats during more than 30 years he's been on the job. Trash and gas tossed overboard, drug running, blatant nudity, general lechery, it was a short-list of the worst behavior our kind has to offer the world.

Back in the '80s, he decided to simply stop permitting cruisers to leave Pago Pago and little has since prompted him to change his policy. Just a couple of weeks earlier an American accused of murdering his wife had escaped from a Tongan prison and sailed into Pago Harbor, where he'd been captured by the cops. Now he was in jail and his boat was rafted up indefinitely with the numerous other abandoned and broken cruising dreams that clog the inner harbor and harass the Port Captain by snapping docklines, sinking on their moorings, and getting in the way of port operations. Could we see why he didn't want us wandering out of his sight?

We could. We nodded politely and told him we understood. We sat on his worn, tan leather couch and pondered our next move. He filled the silence by asking questions about our travels. Soon he was sharing yarns from his own past as a sailor and harbor pilot. We yarned along with him and at some point I felt that he was warming to us. It occurred to me that if we simply waited long enough, the crack in his tough façade might widen and we'd be able to sail through to some new place where he could see us as not just another couple of troublesome American cruisers, but as two unique people worthy of his special consideration.

We nodded, we smiled, we were as polite and modest as church mice



and after an hour of conversation, he squinted and said, “I can see that you are good people, so if you would like to visit Fagasa I will call the Senator and tell him you have my permission.”

DOLPHIN BAY

“That was tougher than any job interview I’ve ever been to,” Brian said when we finally exited his office. We decided to take off before he could change his mind and soon we were anchored in a perfect pocket cove that the locals call Dolphin Bay, with excellent holding and ample protection from the swell and wind. Directly opposite Pago Pago, but separated by the steep ridgeline of Mt. Alava, Fagasa was once in the running for coronation as the main harbor, but has become instead a peaceful village peppered with homes, many conspicuously larger and nicer than the average

traditional *fale*, and set high on the hill with beautiful bay views.

Situated on the western boundary of the national park, the scenery is a gorgeous variety of waterfalls coursing down basalt cliffs, sea caves, and secret beaches. From Vaiava Strait National Natural Landmark, a sharp, steep ridge colloquially known as the Cock’s Comb, to the tranquil coral depths of Tafeu Cove, the park coastline here is stunning and only possible to see by boat.

Since there is very little tourism in American Samoa and no boats offering coastal cruises, as we explored the many rocky nooks, beaches, and caves by dinghy and paddleboard, our only company was the wildlife, nesting noddies, frigates, flying foxes, and tropic birds, the resident dolphin pod that gives Dolphin Bay its nickname, and the myriad green turtles, black

tip reef sharks, and spotted rays that surrounded us while we snorkeled.

Ashore we got to know more locals and had daily chats with the Park Service staff, who use Fagasa’s well-maintained concrete ramp to launch their patrol boat. It was also possible to access some of the park hiking trails from here by simply setting off down the road, the first car that passed insisted we get in and spared us the steep climb up to the Mt. Alava trailhead. A short \$1 bus ride also put us back in Pago Pago when we needed to shop for groceries and check the mail, thereby allowing us to get the most of our permit and extend our special time exploring a part of the world rarely visited by people like us. Hopefully our permission will not be the last granted by the Harbormaster, but the first in a new era of cruising for American Samoa. **BWS**

