

THE WORLD'S LAST SUNDOWNER COCKTAIL

Just 20 miles east of the International Date Line, Samoa has been the sunset's final outpost for 119 years. Raise a rum-filled coconut there and toast the era's end, as the nation shifts time zones and loses its sundowner status.

Photos and text
by Amanda Castleman

The Polynesian country will leap into the future — skipping December 30, 2011, entirely — so that its time will better align with trade partners in Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

Luckily, Samoa has more to offer than cocktail-hour bragging rights. As the nation approaches its 50th anniversary in 2012, it draws visitors to jump off waterfalls, spy flying foxes in giant banyan trees and salute the mountaintop tomb of *Treasure Island* Author Robert Louis Stevenson. Those who stay through the weekend will probably be invited for a Sunday feast cooked in a Polynesian hot-rock oven (*umu*): dishes likely to include octopus, breadfruit, and taro leaves with coconut cream. Samoa takes its hospitality — and dining — very seriously.

Turquoise water, sugar-white beaches and thatched open-air pavilions add to its allure. Not to mention the pigs, chickens and children ambling across the country's ten roads.

The archipelago has bounced back remarkably from the 2009 tsunami. On Upolu's scenic south flank, Sinalei Reef Resort leapt to four stars, thanks to renovations, while the hard-hit Taufua Beach Fales climbed to No. 7 on *Lonely Planet's Ten Incredible Tropical Paradises for 2010*.

Opposite page: A Manono Island girl displays a plate she wove. This page: Kilisi Solomona — a Samoa Scenic Tours guide — displays his Pe'a Tatau, aka "the full body tattoo," a dense, intricate design from waist to knees, created with soot ink and combs of bone, bamboo and boar tusk.

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Smaller than Rhode Island, the English-speaking country attracts adventurers, eco-tourists, training athletes and body-art aficionados, especially for the annual tattoo festival. A 450-seat convention center just opened and should draw businesspeople eager to shuck their suits after getting their work done in order to dive, navigate sink-hole passages and immerse in *Fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way of life).

Happily, that way of life involves one of the world's warmest welcomes, as Samoans believe "greeting a guest should be like the joy of the birds greeting dawn."

And from 2012 onward, they'll get a head start on that, as their country becomes one of the first to see the sunrise, along with neighboring Tonga and Kiribati.

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The sunset view from the fales — thatched villas — at Samoa's Coconuts Beach Club Resort & Spa (www.coconutsbeachclub.com).