

Samoa



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1970
Population:	179,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	3.1% p.a. 1990–2009
Official language:	Samoaan
Time:	GMT minus 11hr
Currency:	tala or Samoan dollar (T)

Geography

Area:	2,831 sq km
Coastline:	403km
Capital:	Apia

The name Samoa, from *Sa* ('sacred') and *Moa* ('centre'), means 'Sacred Centre of the Universe'. Samoa (formerly Western Samoa) is an archipelago of nine islands at the centre of the south-west Pacific island groups, surrounded by (clockwise from north) Tokelau, American Samoa, Tonga, and Wallis and Futuna. The nine islands of Samoa are Apolima, Manono, Fanuatapu, Namu'a, Nuutele, Nuulua, Nuusafee, Savai'i (the largest, at 1,708 sq km including adjacent small islands) and Upolu (second largest, at 1,118 sq km including adjacent small islands). Five of the islands are uninhabited.

Main towns: Apia (capital, pop. 36,700 in 2009), Vaitele (7,100), Faleasiu (3,800), Vailele (3,200) and Leauvaa (3,100) on Upolu; Safotu (1,500), Sapulu (1,100) and Gataivai (1,100) on Savai'i.

Topography: The islands are formed of volcanic rock, but none of the volcanoes has been active since 1911. The highest point, about 1,858m, is on Savai'i. Coral reefs surround much of the coastline and there is plentiful fresh water in the lakes and rivers. Much of the cultivated land is on Upolu.

In September 2009 a violent earthquake in the South Pacific, some 190km south of Samoa, caused a huge tsunami, which devastated coastal regions of the islands, killing at least 129 people and destroying hundreds of houses.

Climate: Tropical maritime. Hot and rainy from December to April and cooler, with trade winds, from May to November. Samoa is prone to hurricanes and cyclones which sometimes cause devastation. Cyclone Val, in December 1991 – the worst storm to hit the islands in over 100 years – destroyed over half the coconut palms. The country was again devastated in 1998.

Environment: The most significant environmental issue is soil erosion.

Vegetation: Dense tropical forest and woodlands cover some 60% of the land area. Arable land comprises about 20% of the total land area.

did you know?

Samoaans enjoy life expectancy of more than 70 years.

Two Samoaans have been regional winners in the Commonwealth Writers' Prize: Albert Wendt, born in Apia in 1939, won with his novel, *Ola*, in 1992, and again with *The Adventures of Vela* in 2010; and Sia Figiel, born in Matautu Tai in 1967, won with her novel, *Where We Once Belonged*, in 1997.

Wildlife: Animal life is restricted to several species of bats and lizards and 53 species of birds. Birdlife includes the rare tooth-billed pigeon, thought to be a living link with prehistoric tooth-billed birds. Due to over-hunting, all species of native pigeons and doves are approaching extinction.

Transport: There are 2,337km of roads, many being rural-access roads, 14% paved. Apia on Upolu is the international port. There is a ferry service between Upolu and Savai'i, and weekly services to Pago Pago in American Samoa.

The international airport, at Faleolo (34km west of Apia) can take Boeing 747s, but Samoa, like other Pacific island countries, is remote from world centres and too small for commercial airlines to run frequent flights. The national carriers, Polynesian Blue and Polynesian Airlines, fly to several regional and international destinations.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 63
Life expectancy: 72 years
Net primary enrolment: 93%

Population: 179,000 (2009); 20% lives in urban areas; growth 0.2% p.a. 1990–2009, depressed over this period by emigration, mostly to New Zealand; birth rate 23 per 1,000 people (39 in 1970); life expectancy is 72 years (55 in 1970).

Predominantly Polynesian population, with small minorities of Chinese, European, or other Pacific descent. The people live mainly in extended family groups, known as *aiga*. These groups are headed by a leader, known as *matai*, who is elected for life. The population is largely concentrated in villages close to the shore. There are 131,103 Samoans living in New Zealand, more than half of whom were born there (2006 New Zealand census).

Language: Samoan is the official language; English is used in administration and commerce and is widely spoken.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Congregationalists 35%, Roman Catholics 20%, Methodists 15%, Latter-day Saints 13%; 2001 census).

Media: *Samoa Observer* and *Samoa Times* are dailies. *Le Samoa* (weekly), *Savali* (fortnightly), and *Talamua Magazine* (monthly) are in both Samoan and English.

The Samoa Broadcasting Corporation provides public radio and TV services; there are several privately owned radio stations and TV channels.

There are 24 personal computers (2006) and 50 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: Public spending on education was 5.7% of GDP in 2008. There are ten years of compulsory education starting at age five. The government began to introduce free education in 2009. As well as state schools, there are several mission schools. The school year starts in February.

The principal tertiary institution within the country is the National University of Samoa, which was established in 1984. Samoa was one of the founders of the regional University of the South Pacific,

which has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, and the Alafua Campus in Apia, Samoa, where the university's School of Agriculture and Institute for Research, Extension and Training in Agriculture are located. There is virtually no illiteracy among people aged 15–24.

Health: The national hospital in Apia, four district hospitals and health centres. Most medical training is undertaken at the Fiji School of Medicine. Patterns of illness and death are shifting to those of a developed country, with longer life expectancy and a rising incidence of lifestyle diseases. Infant mortality was 21 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (134 in 1960).

Communications: Country code 685; internet domain '.ws'. Samoa has its own analogue mobile phone system. Internet connections are available in Apia and a few other places across the islands.

There are 178 main telephone lines and 844 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

Public holidays: New Year (1–2 January), Mothers' Day (Monday in May), Independence Day (1 June), Fathers' Day (Monday in August), Lotu-a-Tamaiti (Monday after White Sunday, in October), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday and Easter Monday.

Economy

KEY FACTS 2009

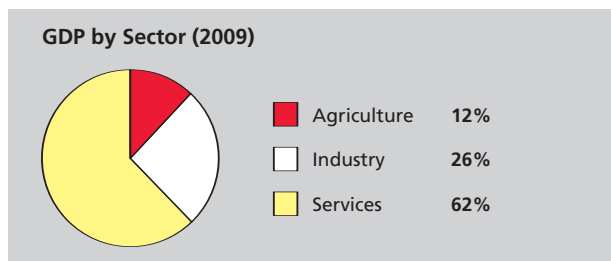
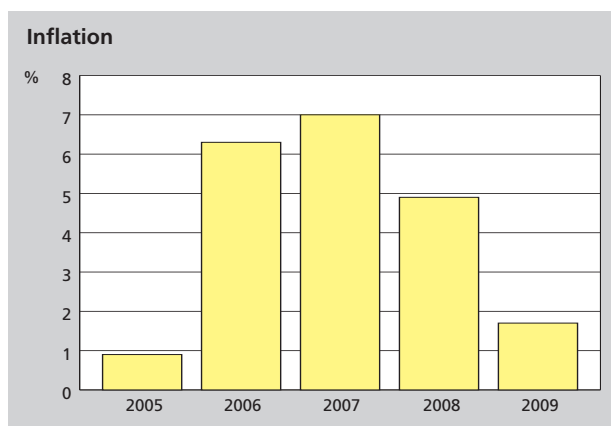
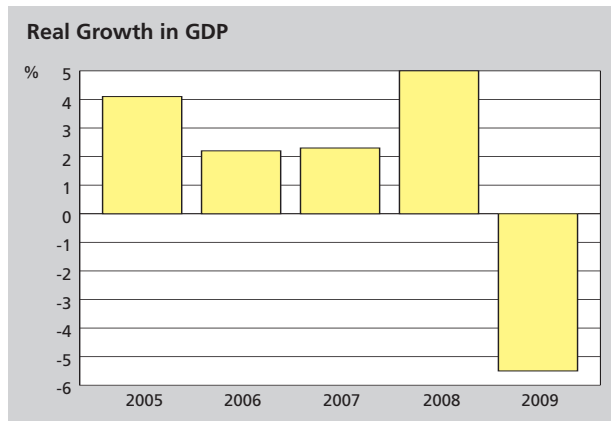
GNI: US\$508m
GNI p.c.: US\$2,840
GDP growth: 1.5% p.a. 2005–09
Inflation: 4.1% p.a. 2005–09

Overview: In addition to remittances from Samoans living overseas, mainly in New Zealand, the economy relies heavily on subsistence agriculture, with cash crops, notably coconut, grown for export. It is therefore vulnerable to natural hazards, such as cyclones and crop diseases, and to fluctuations in world prices for commodities. GDP grew by 0.4% p.a. 1979–89.

There was serious cyclone damage in 1990, 1991 and 1998, when the coconut and banana crops were devastated. Compounding the problem was the taro leaf blight in 1993, which led to a further drop in agricultural output and exports. These setbacks resulted in fluctuating and often negative annual growth.

However, Samoa was early to embark on structural reforms and throughout the 1990s the government was controlling public-sector costs, encouraging diversification to reduce reliance on the agricultural sector and pursuing a programme of privatisation (22 state enterprises were privatised or closed down 1987–99). These policies led to enhanced growth from the latter 1990s. Fisheries were developed, new manufacturing enterprises emerged and an offshore financial sector launched. Tourist numbers increased steadily.

Overall, the economy staged a remarkable recovery, showing generally good growth from 1995. But it remained vulnerable to natural disasters and international downturns, which have caused pauses to growth and rapid rises in inflation. In 2009 this generally



good growth was interrupted both by the global economic downturn and then, in September 2009, by the devastating tsunami, causing the economy to contract by 5.5% in that year and by about 2% in 2010.

Trade: Principal exports are fish, clothing, coconut oil, coconut cream, beer and copra.

Fisheries: Since the mid-1990s there has been substantial growth in offshore fishing, using fish aggregating devices, and in fish farming.

Constitution

Status: Republic
Legislature: Fono
Independence: 1 January 1962

Samoa is a democracy, with a unicameral legislature, the Fono; a prime minister who selects the cabinet; and a head of state, similar to a constitutional monarch. Under the constitution, the head of state is elected by the Fono for five years. However, by a special arrangement decided on in 1962 when the constitution came into

force, Malietoa Tanumafili II (who died in 2007) and one other senior chief (who died in 1963) were to hold the office for life.

The prime minister, who must be a member of the Fono and be supported by a majority of its members, is appointed by the head of state. The prime minister chooses 12 members to form the cabinet, which has charge of executive government. The head of state must give their assent to new legislation before it becomes law.

The Fono has 49 members, 47 elected in 41 constituencies by universal adult suffrage, to be contested only by *matai* title holders (chiefs of *aiga*, or extended families, of whom there are around 25,000), and two elected from separate electoral rolls comprising those of foreign descent. The Fono sits for five-year terms.

Until 1991 only the *matai* were eligible to vote, but following a plebiscite universal adult suffrage was introduced in time for that year's elections. The *matai*, whose office is elective for life, still administer local government in the traditional manner. They are trustees for customary land held on behalf of the people, which makes up about 80% of all the land in the country.

Politics

Last elections: March 2011
Next elections: 2016
Head of state: Tuiaua Tupua Tamasese Efi (2007–)
Head of government: Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi
Ruling party: Human Rights Protection Party

There is a party political system, the main parties being the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) and the Samoa National Development Party (SNDP). In the 1991 elections, the HRPP, led by Tofilau Eti Alesana, won 30 of the 49 seats in the Fono.

At the elections in April 1996, the HRPP was again returned. Tofilau retained his position as prime minister and minister for foreign affairs with the support of 34 votes out of the 49-member legislature.

In July 1997, by act of parliament, the country changed its name from Western Samoa to Samoa. This change had been under discussion for some time, but was delayed by awareness of the sensitivities of American Samoa which, in the end, offered no opposition.

In November 1998 Tofilau resigned as prime minister; he became senior minister without portfolio and his deputy and finance minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, succeeded him. Tofilau had been prime minister from 1982 to 1985 and from 1988 to 1998. He was 74 and had had problems with his health for several years. In March 1999 he died.

In January 2000, a memorandum of understanding was signed with American Samoa for mutual assistance on trade, health, education, agriculture and policing.

In the general election in March 2001, the ruling HRPP – with 24 seats – won more seats than any other party, but was nonetheless challenged by the combined strength of the United Independents (11 seats) and the SNDP (13). On the resumption of parliament, however, Tuilaepa was re-elected as prime minister and enough independents joined the HRPP to give it an absolute majority.

The general election in March 2006 saw a return to power of the HRPP, increasing its number of seats to 33 with gains from both Samoa Democratic United Party (formerly SNDP, with ten seats) and independents (six seats).

Malietao Tanumafili II, head of state since independence in January 1962, died in May 2007 aged 94. According to the constitution, in June 2007 the Fono elected Tuiatua Tupua Tamasese Efi as his successor for a five-year term.

In the March 2011 general election the HRPP and Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi were returned with an increased majority. The HRPP and independents supporting the HRPP together secured 36 seats. The opposition Tautua Samoa Party won 13 seats.

International relations

Samoa is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum and United Nations.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: Samoans adhere to traditional moral and religious codes of behaviour.

Permission should always be sought before taking photographs in villages. Alcohol may not be purchased on a Sunday, except by hotel guests and their visitors. Penalties for the possession and use of illegal drugs, including cannabis, are severe.

Sunday is a day of peace and quiet in Samoa, and visitors should behave quietly and travel slowly through villages, especially during evening prayer (usually between 1800 and 1900). Shoes must be removed when attending church or if entering a *fale* (Samoan house).

In business and commerce, English is the customary language. The best time to visit on business is from May to October. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0800–1200 and 1300–1630.

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for at least six months beyond the intended length of stay, and an onward or return ticket must be held.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required by those arriving from infected countries.

There are strict regulations regarding the import of firearms, fruits, pets and drugs.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left (since September 2009) and car hire is available in most areas with an international driving permit. Speed limits are 40kph within the Apia area and 56kph outside the region.

Polynesian Airlines operates daily flights between the two main islands and there is also a ferry service.

Public buses cover most of the islands, though there are no timetables; travel information can be gained from the bus stand in Apia. Taxis are available, but are not metered, and fares should be agreed in advance of travel.

Travel health: Health care facilities are adequate for routine medical treatment. Travellers are advised to have a comprehensive travel and medical insurance policy.

Vaccinations against tuberculosis and Hepatitis B are sometimes recommended, but all current inoculation requirements should be checked well before travel.

Mains water is chlorinated; bottled water is also available.

Money: The local currency is the tala or Samoan dollar. Credit cards are accepted on a limited basis. Travellers cheques are accepted in major hotels, banks and tourist shops. Travellers cheques should be taken in either pounds sterling or US dollars in order to avoid additional exchange rate charges. The ANZ, National Bank, Samoa Commercial Bank and Westpac have branches at Salelologa on Savai'i. Banking hours are Mon–Fri 0900–1500; some banks open Sat 0900–1200.



History

Samoa seems, on archaeological evidence, to have been inhabited at least as far back as 1000 BC by Austronesian-speaking people. Evidence from legends and from genealogies shows that the country had frequent contact with Fiji and Tonga from the mid-13th century. There was some European contact in the first half of the 18th century, and settlement by refugees and beachcombers until the early 19th century. The Christian missionary John Williams came to Savai'i in 1830.

In 1889, Britain, the USA and Germany, all seeking influence in Samoa, held a conference in Berlin and signed a treaty giving the Samoan islands an independent government, with British, American and German supervision. Later in the same year, Britain relinquished its interest in the country, and the other two agreed that Germany should annex Western Samoa and the US Eastern Samoa. In 1914 the New Zealand army occupied Western Samoa, and in 1919 the League of Nations gave New Zealand a mandate to administer the country. An epidemic of influenza broke out in

1918; the Samoans at the time had no immunity to the disease and 20% of the population died in a few weeks.

Samoans resisted New Zealand's rule, with non-violent action (1926–36), culminating in the Mau uprisings. After the Second World War, the country was made a UN trust territory, with New Zealand's role now being to guide Western Samoa to independence.

A legislative assembly was set up in 1947. A constitution, which aimed at combining the traditional lifestyle with modern-style government, was adopted in August 1960. At a plebiscite organised by the UN and held in 1961, the nation voted for independence. The country achieved independence on 1 January 1962, the first South Pacific island country to do so.

In 1970 Western Samoa joined the Commonwealth as a full member. Since 1962 it has had a Treaty of Friendship with New Zealand.

There were 129,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

Further information

Government of Samoa Official Website: www.govt.ws

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

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