

Treasure Island

A hero's final resting place exerts an awesome pull - more so if it happens to be a South Sea island. Michael de Larrabeiti paid his respects
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I have a friend called Harry who once asked me where and how I wanted to die. "Easy," I said. "I would spend a week wandering around Upolu Island, Samoa: see the house RLS lived in, climb Mount Vaea to his tomb, read the epitaph, enjoy the view for an hour, then lie back and await the painless heart attack." It was mainly as a result of this conversation that I seized the first opportunity to visit Samoa that presented itself; not because I felt close to death, well, no closer than usual, but because, for one thing, the Grim Reaper is notoriously unreliable when it comes to timing. And, perhaps even more importantly, I needed to undertake such an expedition while my knees were still working.

I took a fancy to Apia, the capital, immediately. It wanders carelessly along its bay, with a handful of streets running straight inland towards soft, wooded mountains. The traffic is light and the buildings are low, not many of them over two storeys, with the old ones made of timber, and sporting porches and verandas like battered old godowns. Nearly every passer-by makes eye contact and smiles, pleased to see you, happy to chat. Samoa is the southern hemisphere's best-kept secret. It's the country where you don't have to lock the car, where there are no parking meters, men wear lava-lavas (aka sarongs) and there is nobody on the beaches.

At the top end of town I found the fish market, a huge open-sided shed with concrete slabs to display the merchandise: fish exotic, fish elegant, fish frightening - their scales striped in brilliant hues - turquoise and crimson, yellow and blue; their dead faces mournful with pouting lips and frozen grins; and eels with sharp teeth; and leviathans lurking deep within enormous shells, ready to eat every bit of me, given the chance.

A salt-laden breeze came in off the Pacific; the ambience was lazy, cool in every sense of the word. The fishwives sat behind their wares, waving away squadrons of kamikaze flies with bits of beleaved branches: and in dark corners lay tired fishermen, stranded, marooned high and dry, their night's work over, surveying a half-speed universe out of half an eye.

Beyond the market, in the full blaze of the sun, was the bus station, where travellers waited for transport. Babies slept on generous laps, schoolchildren fluttered and chattered like sparrows and the buses came and went, their bonnets and superstructures painted in

gaudy fairground colours. And their rear axles were a foot or two higher than the front ones, giving them a provocative high-arsed look, as if suffering from steatopygia, as were a good percentage of their passengers. Destinations were written on squares of cardboard and propped in the windscreens; names that brought to mind the titles in Stevenson's collection of island stories: Falelatai, Satapuala, Solosolo, Tafitoal and Vaivase-uta.

I hired a car the next day from two jolly girls in a ramshackle office. "My brother-in-law plays rugby for Bedford," said one of them. At the police station, I gave 10 tala to a sergeant in a blue lava-lava and he signed a paper that validated my licence. He was a five-storied apartment block of a man, and he moved with the certain but gentle grace of a steamroller. "Take care," he said.

I drove past the port of Apia where a couple of coasters lay at anchor, their hulls streaked with rust. Out of town there was an exuberant vegetation on either side of the road, leaves shining under the delicate touch of a sweaty rain. Here and there were square clapboard houses with porches but no windows; who needs windows? And there were traditional dwellings, too - the "fale" - oval constructions on short stilts, their floors some 3ft off the ground, with thatched roofs of palm leaves raised up on posts - no walls. Who needs walls?

I followed the coast eastward, not another vehicle to be seen, the white waves breaking on the reef to my left, the sound floating in through the open window of the car. There were black volcanic rocks along the shore and black pigs rooting in the sand. Chickens strutted archly where they would.

At the village of Solosolo there was a lean-to emporium and post office. The boy in charge had his elbows on the counter and his chin in his hands. His eyes barely flickered as I came into the frame of his vision. I bought a pot of noodles for lunch and the owner of the shop invited me to sit with him in his house, and I did, and he slumped back in his chair and stroked an acre or two of warm stomach with his cold can of beer.

"How far is Saleapaga?" I asked him. Notions of distance are not strong in Samoa. He considered the problem for a short lifetime, then pronounced his

verdict. "It'll take some while," he said. He continued stroking his stomach and I stroked mine.

There was no hurry; Stevenson was my companion on this trip and his words were never far from me: "Extreme business," says the master, "is a symptom of a deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity."

A few miles further on I stopped to give Roki a lift. He was a pastor, spotless in a fawn lava-lava and wearing a shirt as crisp as an arrowroot biscuit, and he had missed the bus to Taelafaga. We turned off the main road and onto a rough track that dropped steeply and suddenly to skirt the rim of a savage precipice. Streaks of water fell from the cliffs, and as we churned down in second gear I could see across the land to where the endless ocean had submerged the rest of the globe. Finally we came into Taelafaga - a poor smattering of shacks and fale on the edge of a rocky coast, dull and dirty with an ashen grit underfoot.

A bunch of ragged children skipped around the car as I drove Roki to the very door of his church. Inside were seats for maybe 60 parishioners, three or four pictures of Jesus and a Cassio keyboard.

"There are 2,000 churches in Samoa," Roki told me. With a population of 160,000 that meant one church for every 80 inhabitants. It was obvious - this was the missionaries' revenge for being brought to the boil in all those cooking pots.

I went on from Taelafaga, up and over the Le Mafa pass, driving towards the eastern end of the island, passing through a string of small settlements, each with no more than half a dozen houses to its name. The hills above me were daubed in greens that were purple and greens that were fluorescent; the high ridges were hard and scalloped into outlandish shapes.

Then I headed south, past Saleaamua, Malaela and Ulutogia. The sky became mottled and lifeless and dusk descended to the very fringes of the road I was travelling, and those fringes were peopled by families enjoying the evening freshness; bands of children, girls carrying babies, parents sitting in groups, hardly bothering to notice me as I went by.

The road turned again at Cape Tapaga, to the west, and I began to search for a fale to sleep in. Stevenson nudged me with his words: "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive...", he said, but for once I disagreed with him - a meal and a night's rest were beginning to look pretty desirable to me. At Faofao I discovered what was needed - a shanty of a shop and, nearby, a large fale the size of four living-rooms, with the mother of all mothers occupying a large broken-down sofa. A young man, the matriarch's son, led me to

the beach where five or six small fale had been built in a line, a few yards from the ocean. One was for me, the others were uninhabited. The young man set about making me comfortable. He switched on a single light bulb and, in its dull yellow gleam, I watched him lay out a mattress and a mosquito net. Then he disappeared, returning after 20 minutes with a chair and a table, beer and food.

I wallowed in the pleasure of it. I had several hundred square miles of the earth's surface to myself. I could see my future stretching before me - a rosy, out-of-focus twilight; and me with a new career as an indolent bum, clad always in a scarlet lava-lava with sand for ever between my toes, a dozen dusky handmaidens eternally within earshot. Now I knew why the crew of the Bounty had mutinied, and why Stevenson had chosen to live here - he had been unable to do otherwise: "Few men who come to the islands leave them; they grow grey where they alighted; the palm shades and the trade wind fans them till they die...No part of the world exerts the same attractive power upon the visitor." The master spoke true.

The air was warm and the sound of the waves beyond the lagoon inspired my dreams. When I came awake eventually, the six o'clock bus to Apia was revving up its engines just behind me on the main road. I rolled over and watched the stars vanish and the clouds unwrap themselves from the islets of Nuutele and Nuulua. The rising sun brushed the sky and picked out the diamonds in the spray that drifted up as mist from the reef. The beach was deserted and not even a canoe crossed the sea.

I swam: the Pacific's only swimmer. The water was limpid and revivifying, serenity itself, velvet untroubled by my presence; an element that yielded to my body without a ripple, and closed behind it without a sign of disturbance. A woman appeared on the shore, an orange lava-lava tied around her, coming through a gaggle of palm trees that leant against the sky like a pen and ink drawing of skinny girls with untidy topknots. The woman placed my breakfast on the table while I towelled myself dry; three fish sandwiches in bread cut solid as doorsteps, and gallons of tea in a chipped enamel pot.

I dawdled shamelessly along the coast that day and the next, gossiping and drinking, and it wasn't until 36 hours later that I drove, in the dark, back into Apia. In the centre of town, on an open space in front of a tall government building, there was a blaze of floodlights illuminating a prayer meeting. There was a choir, an elec-tronic keyboard, electric guitars and a crowd of roughly 2,000 people, swaying and praying.

A preacher stood at a microphone and aimed the

word of the Lord at his audience in a succession of broadsides. His accent was Australian; not tinkling cymbals, either, but rather the sound of empty tin cans rattling down a corrugated-iron roof. His voice was relentless, but in the pauses, when he came up for air, the choir gave him harmony and joy. And the singers linked arms, unified in fervour, eyes shut, smiles seraphic, halfway to paradise.

The preacher went full tilt with his message and, in his breast, holy embers smouldered and burst into flame. The music wound emotions to breaking point; there were chants and hymns and songs. "Hallelujah, Jesus loves you, hallelujah!" Hands surged heavenwards to grab the sky and caress the feet of the angels. Everyone in the congregation was throbbing to the pulse of the beat, and the gospel flooded into every heart. "Oh how Jesus loves you...Come forward and bear witness...Jesus loves you...he's calling to you...come forward, come forward."

And they did, several hundred of them, singing and clapping, many of them swooning to sprawl senseless across bodies that had already swooned and were already senseless; bodies that would have been in danger of injury but for the stewards who, strangely unaffected by the magic of the preacher that night, bore them off to safety. But the remainder lay in the dust, twitching and writhing. A woman leapt and screamed, cackling with an insane laughter. A man kicked out and shook his limbs, drumming on the Tarmac with his heels. Lava-lavas began to unfasten, clothes became grimy and, from the shadows, the children watched open-eyed, bemused but calm - "They're used to it," a woman said, "it happens every Friday."

I was as bright as a button the following morning. I knew it was time to embrace my destiny and struggle up Mount Vaea, time to pay my dues at the master's tomb - and never mind the danger of death. After an early breakfast I rode a gorgeously painted bus to the gates of Stevenson's house, the Villa Vailima, and walked, with a respectful tread, up the Road of Loving Hearts until I reached my destination.

The Villa Vailima itself was virtually destroyed by a cyclone in 1990, but was later repaired and restored and opened as a museum in 1994, exactly 100 years after Stevenson's death. None of the original furniture remains but, by using old photographs and sketches, the restorers have managed to endow the house with an approximation of the old ambience. Stevenson's library; the double bedroom in Californian redwood; his mother's quarters; the great hall and the sweeping staircase are all spacious and full of light and even have a suggestion of grandeur about them. Pictures show the Stevenson tribe assembled on the front porch, and

there is the man himself, rigged out as a hidalgo in a wide-brimmed hat, white trousers tucked into boots and, in true artistic fashion, a floppy cravat. I glowed with contentment. Ever since I first read *Treasure Island* I have dreamt of being here - but that was the easy part, now the fatal moment could be postponed no longer - Mount Vaea or bust.

The mountain - a big hill covered in thick forest - looms right over the house. The air was muggy, made visible by clammy shreds of cloud. The path to the top was not difficult to find, though after crossing a gully it rose steeply. The trees bent over me, glistening with moisture. Geckos, as big as dogs it seemed from the noise they made, rustled in last year's leaves. Sad-sounding doves were cooing as if in madness, on and on, monotonous and sickly-sweet - honey dripping from a spoon.

The path divided after a while and a notice said "Long route, 45 minutes; short route, 30 minutes". I chose the short one, a foolhardy decision, really, given the nature of my death wish. No matter, before long I was climbing hard, my heart banging against my rib cage, my clothes steaming.

When the path arrived at the summit it arrived abruptly, and there was the top of the tomb rising above a grassy knoll. It was a simple monument: a coffin-sized oblong of mortar resting on a flat podium, similar to most of the tombs that can be seen all over Samoa.

From one side of the knoll there was a tree-framed view down to the bay of Apia; from the other, a glimpse of the red roof of the Villa Vailima.

I had always thought to enjoy this special place on my own; in the event, I was desperately disappointed to see a young man sitting cross-legged on the ground, studying a book that he held balanced on his knee. He was young, very handsome with a bronze skin and black curly hair. He was dressed in simple shorts and a singlet. There were sandals on his feet. I ignored him and he ignored me. I stared at the horizon and attempted to imagine Stevenson doing the same; then I read the bronze plaque that carried the epitaph: "This be the verse you grave for me:/Here he lies where he longed to be;/Home is the sailor, home from (the) sea,/And the hunter home from the hill".

At long last, when the young man closed his book and got up to leave, I did break the silence.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"Poetry."

"Whose?"

"My own," he answered and went down the hill.

Well that was as it should be, I thought; the master would have approved. I stretched out on the tomb,

finally alone, and gazed at the sky through a lattice work of branches. My heartbeat was good and slow, and I felt as right as a trivet. I had every reason to believe that I would not be joining the immortals that day, and friend Harry would have to put up with my existence a little longer. There was nothing for it - I'd just have to send him a postcard and tell him I'd failed in my endeavour, even though I'd done my best. After all, it wasn't my fault I'd survived.