

## No Ping Pong On Sundays

A church bell at the north end of town tolls the hour. At various intervals, other church bells toll the same number of chimes. They all agree on what hour it is, but cannot quite seem to agree on exactly what point in time that hour should occur. Or perhaps, it was more important to have each of the individual bell songs heard, after all, time is not a strict and adherent function in the South Pacific Islands. It was Sunday morning; we had arrived in Apia, Samoa on a Saturday evening and tied up to a slip in the marina. Customs and immigration officials would not be available on a Sunday, so we put up our yellow 'Q' flag requesting clearance and were stuck on the boat, watching the comings and goings on shore until Monday.

Apia is a sleepy little town on Sundays, church bells tolling and people in their best dress dutifully treading off to their particular denomination of church, most of which stand in very near proximity to each other, almost as if in proud holy competition. Beautiful choral voices raised in song emanate from each, seemingly at specifically measured intervals so as not to compete with each other. Looking at the churches, I have to wonder; which church is the most devout and pious, the one that is the tallest, or the one with the most towers, maybe the one with the most lavish architecture, or perhaps the one with the over abundance of beautiful stain glass windows?

Monday comes and goes. Five different sets of officials have come aboard to clear us; Customs, Immigration, Quarantine, Agriculture, and Port Authority. All at discreetly different intervals so as not to encumber on each other's officialdom. They do this with such well-spaced choreography that I have to wonder if these officials are not also the choir directors or maybe the bell ringers. We fill out multiple forms, most with the same information for each of them. With their ink pads out, they stamp, sign and record, etc. multiple forms, all very friendly but all very official. For these smaller island nations, it seems the more paper work they have, the more 'westernized' they feel. But then they have learned from the experts about bureaucracy. After all is said and done, they do make us feel very welcome.

We have our clearances and are now free to roam about the country. We walk into town to sample the flavor of the place. The city itself is very westernized, five and six story office buildings, modern banks and offices, all with air conditioning and state of the art computer systems, and many, many people, especially younger people, with cell phones. ATM machines abound, and there is espresso coffee available at many shops. What more do you need to prove you have come of age?

The local currency is the Samoan Talla (2.44 Talla = \$1 US). The fish market and the vegetable market each abound with many, many choices. Some of the fish and vegetables are familiar, but there are many more exotic species and varieties unfamiliar to us. To our amazement and delight, a good meal in a restaurant is only about ten to fifteen dollars and a taxi ride anywhere downtown is only about two dollars.

Out in the bay, a 50 man replicated war canoe with 25 men paddling on each side moves smoothly and swiftly through the water practicing for the Polynesian games. A Drummer in the back of the canoe loudly pounds a fast continuous beat, slightly accenting the beat the rowers are required to stroke on. The constantly beating drum gives the whole affair a very ominous feeling. I can imagine the fear this would invoke in the years of past, as hundred of these canoes with drums beating loudly and fiercely painted warriors paddling hard, invaded a bay from some other island.

We decided to rent a car with friends of ours from our Mexico cruising days. They arrived unexpectedly on their boat. It is always exciting to run into old cruising friends in exotic ports. The central part of the island is mountainous with lush green forests and many streams and waterfalls visible. We found a stream with a 40 foot high waterfall that plunged into a pool of cool clear water, surrounded on one three sides by rock cliffs covered with trees, vines, flowers and other vegetation. The scene was something that would give Robinson Crusoe pause, and the swimming was enchanting, delightful and refreshing. Another waterfall we visited a few days later flowed over a rock face that had a 20 foot slope modest enough to allow the brave at heart to slide down into the pool below. We took the plunge many times with howls of pleasure.

People of meager means inhabit most of the villages away from the big city. They live in thatch-roofed huts called fales, raised off the ground, but often with no walls. Children abound and chickens and pigs roam about freely. Conspicuously, at the center of each thatch hut village is a lavishly constructed church with soaring steeples or towers, completely out of scale with the surrounding poverty. Each church's signboard proudly boasts their brand, Methodist, Catholic, Protestant, or some other denomination and the service times. A village's status is based on the size and extravagance of their church, each village continuously trying to outdo the other. This has unfortunately gotten to a point where many of the churches set up a table at the altar, and at a point during the service, each family sends a child forward with their weeks donation. Each donation is read aloud to the congregation and recorded in the ledger – each family competing (and by default for social standing) to give more. It seems that feeding and clothing the children takes second place to building extravagant churches. Man's forced interpretation of spirituality, wrought with human frailty always has been an effective means of oppression and extracting wealth from the poor. The missionaries would be proud of their legacy.

We drove on into the mountains passing through a smattering of small villages of thatch huts with their accompanying pigs, dogs, children and churches. After many miles on a dirt road and taking a right turn to head up to a waterfall. To our astonishment we came across two blocks of paved street with curb, gutter and sidewalk, bordered on each side by nice small rambler style cement block houses occupied by Samoans. It seemed completely out of place. There was a nice school building on the left with well-dressed Samoan children attending school. Half way down the street on the right was a modest building, a small sign out front, the only thing indicating that it was a Mormon congregation house. I have to hand it to the Mormons, at least they see that the peoples money goes into helping the people. Oh, they do push their brand of religion, but it does

not appear that holiness and sanctity are measured by how much they oppress the poor under the pretense of sanctity, into spending limited resources on a lavish church structure while the children go undernourished, undereducated and underclothed.

We drove on further to the coast, and came across some nice resort areas along the shore. These consisted of small restaurants accompanied by thatched huts on white sandy beaches, all with walls and locks on the door, of course, for the modesty of the tourists, and communal bathrooms. Most seemed to be occupied by younger westerners. It all looks very quaint, remote and relaxing with excellent snorkeling inside the reef. It's nice to get away from the lavish churches among the very poor people. Since it was lunch time we decided to stop at one of the small resort restaurants for lunch. The food was good, the restaurant was one of those open-sided thatched-roof affairs with bamboo and palm furniture, overlooking a beach and reef that are so charming. After lunch we wandered into the bar/game room to find the bathroom. There was a lot of open floor, perhaps for dancing and a ping pong table. However, there was a sign on the wall next to the ping pong table that said; "No Ping Pong on Sundays"!

I asked the attendant why ping pong wasn't allowed on Sunday. "Because God said so", was his response. "It is a day of rest"! Oh, I remember how it went now:

His worn and tattered robe hung loosely on his thin frame as the wizened old man trudged up the hot, arid, stony mountain a second time. His long grey hair and beard framed a wrinkled and ageless face, lined and weathered into the texture of leather by too many years in the desert sun. He was thankful for the firm grip of his new sandals on the dangerously loose scree rock of the mountainside. "I wonder what he wants this time", he thought, reflecting on the last time he climbed this mountain and the arduous task of stumbling back down the mountain carrying heavy stone tablets, wearing out his favorite old sandals in the process. Perhaps he had splurged a bit on the new sandals, but he was getting very old and his feet very tired.

Lost in thought, he realized that he had reached the top of the mountain when a bush in front of him broke into flame. The sky turned ominously dark and lightning struck out in all directions throughout the firmament. A supreme and omni-potent voice broke forth from the heavens, full of power and strength, sounding like thunder soothed into a melodious song: "Moses" the thunder commanded. The old man bowed his head, suddenly feeling that perhaps he and his people had not fully comprehended the words written on the stone tablets.

"Moses", the voice commanded again. Was that you I saw playing ping pong last Sunday? "And Moses".

"Yes God"

"Tell me those aren't Birkenstocks!"