



My Samoan Souvenir

A cultural experience in the South Pacific that lasts a lifetime
by Neville Hockley

T-shirts, trinkets and carvings from the countries you visit make great souvenirs. But as my wife Catherine and I neared the end of an epic three year, 9,000-mile circuit of the southwest Pacific, I sought a more permanent memento to mark our accomplishment.

For centuries mariners have returned home sporting exotic tattoos

from the South Pacific. And while many Polynesian islands are a-buzz today with the noise of tattoo machines efficiently inking locals and tourists alike, Samoa is one of the few regions that still clings to, or rather taps to, its ancient tattoo customs, which have essentially remained unchanged for thousands of years. So before we set sail on *Dream Time*, our Cabo Rico, for Tonga and then down



Let the tattooing begin; traditional tools of the trade, below; *Dream Time* headed towards Tonga

most sensitive central regions, all the way to the knees. It can take a full week to complete and is a marathon test of endurance for both the recipient and the tattoo artist. And regardless of how unbearable the pain gets, once you begin—from the very first tap—you must endure to the end, as an incomplete *pe'a* would bring humiliation and disgrace to its carrier and those who choose to associate with him.

With this fact very much in the front of mind, I opted to commit only a few inches of skin to my *tatau*—a wristband to signify our Pacific loop, and at most half a day, which I was rather hoping would include lunch.

I met Williesone, my tattoo artist, on the island of Tutuila at the idyllically ramshackle Tisa's Barefoot Bar. Seemingly constructed of wreckage and driftwood, and host to an annual Samoan tattoo festival, its tranquil yet swashbuckler vibe made it the perfect setting for my maritime memento.

Williesone, or simply, Wilson, is known throughout the Samoan islands as one of the best in his trade. He studied as an apprentice for six years learning the origin of each design, how to fashion his own instruments from boar's tusks, stretch skin, and finally, the delicate art of tapping, before he earned his title of *Tufuga ta Tatau*, or Tattoo Master. Accompanied by his apprentice, Leai, who is



still at the skin-stretching stage of his degree (both have full *pe'a* tattoos), they set up on an area of sun-bleached planking under a fluttering canopy of worn, tattered flags from around the world donated by visiting sailors.

Without sketching his design first, Wilson went to work using, thankfully, one of his smaller and more forgiving instruments with a row of spikes just half an inch wide. (His larger instrument boasts a shock-inducing, four-inch row of sharpened boar's tusks.)

He began each new mark by "air tapping" and only when he was satisfied with the alignment and the anticipated result would he slowly lower the tusk,



to New Zealand where we began our southwest Pacific Ocean loop in 2011, I got my souvenir—a traditional tattoo, or *tatau*; traditional not only by its design, but also in its application.

The *pe'a*, the most traditional of all, is a male tattoo proudly worn only by the strongest of Samoan men. It is a painfully complex design that covers a huge swathe of body from the upper waist completely down through the



registered more as a dull pounding than a sharp pain.

Still, just the idea of someone hammering sharpened boar's tusks into my skin deep enough to make a permanent impression was unpleasant enough, so prepared for the worst, I hid under my baseball cap to conceal any signs of betrayal or distress. For 30 minutes Leai stretched my skin as Wilson carefully tapped away into it. I tried to relax, focusing on the soothing sounds of the South Pacific rolling over a reef and washing on the sandy shore. And I thought about how far we'd sailed *Dream Time* since we left New York in 2007; about

how completely different our lives are now. I thought about all the remarkable experiences we have had, and all those yet to come—impressions that, like this tattoo, will last me a lifetime. **BWS**

Read more about the cruising experiences of Neville and Catherine Hockley at their website: www.zeroXTE.com

tapping as he went, until he broke skin, continuing with progressively harder taps and driving the points deeper until satisfied. Compared with the tattoo I had machined into my shoulder in the Marquesas, this traditional method was surprisingly tolerable. The inflicted area became numb, so thankfully by the time Wilson reached the desired depth it



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