TOUR CODE

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ADVENTURESABROAD

SOUTH PACIFIC EXPLORER

Guam, Palau, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga & Vanuatu

24 days

Updated 11/12/2013

Day 1 ***Arrive in Guam***

Each South Pacific island group has its own history, culture, language, geography, and geology. That is the nature of such a far-flung region, where hundreds or thousands of miles separate one island from the next. On the other hand, the islands have many things in common. Their indigenous peoples are descended from ethnic groups who migrated here several millennia ago. Many of their traditions and customs are the same, but with local quirks that have developed over the eons. Nowhere are the local variations as evident as in the Polynesian languages!

Due to colonial neglect and historical isolation, the Pacific Islands, home to the world's most diverse range of indigenous cultures, continue to sustain many ancestral ways of life. Fewer than 6.5 million in all, the peoples of Oceania possess a vast repository of cultural traditions and ecological adaptations.

Oceania is a vast, arbitrarily defined expanse of the world where the Pacific Ocean -- rather than land borders -- connects the nations. Its diverse nations have some of the worlds most remote and culturally isolated villages. One of the most memorable aspects of our travels to the South Pacific will be the fascinating encounters we will have with the cultures and traditions of the people in this beautiful region. In this part of the world, ancient cultures are still very much alive and are accessible for visitors to discover.

** Some itinerary modifications may occur closer to the departure date due to flight routing and schedule changes. Access to most islands is restricted by flight schedules (sometimes just 1-2 flights per week). This may of course impact the itinerary. The order of islands visited may change, and the number of nights on each island may have to be adjusted. We may lose 1 night on one island and gain a night on the other. Also, please pack light as domestic flights only allow for 15kg of checked luggage.

Overnight in Tumon, Guam. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 ***Guam: Island Tour***

Guam is not only the largest island in Micronesia, but it is the largest and southernmost island in the Mariana Islands archipelago. The is a vibrant tropical paradise in the middle of the Pacific, and away from the beaches one finds a melting pot of Asian, European, Pacific Rim and American cultures.

First discovered by people from southeastern Indonesia around 2000 BC, most of what is known about pre-contact settlement comes from legends, archaeological evidence, missionary accounts, and observations from visiting scientists. With its strategic location in the Pacific Ocean, this territory of the United States has been claimed and conquered by many different nations throughout its long history. Ferdinand Magellan passed through here in 1521! Guam was then claimed for Spain in 1565, and then later colonized by the Spanish beginning in 1668 as the island was in perfect position to become a resting place for Spanish traders.

Considered as the gateway to the crossroads of Asia and North America, Guam has emerged as the bustling hub of the western Pacific. The island offers rugged natural beauty, rich and colorful cultural history, and unbelievable vistas.

Scattered around the island are reminders of the ancient Chamorro who flourished in the Mariana archipelago for centuries before the arrival of Europeans.

Our sightseeing today will focus on the central and northern regions of the island. The Tumon Bay area, with its white sandy beach and crystal blue waters, is located on the northwest coast of Guam. Hundreds of years before the tourism industry found its way to Tumon, ancient Chamorros enjoyed the shore and waters of the bay. Historical records show that there were settlements at both ends of the bay. Almost entirely enclosed by a fringing reef, the shallow waters of the bay are home to a large variety of marine life and recognized as a protected marine preserve.

Our sightseeing takes us north to Puntan Dos Amantes (Two Lovers Point). Here towers the sheer 400-foot white limestone cliff named after a local Chamorro legend. The cliff offers a panoramic view of the west coast and the Philippine Sea. An unspoiled jewel of natural beauty, Ritidian Point lies on the northernmost tip of Guam. Once a restricted military area, the 'Point' with its pristine sandy beaches is now accessible to the public and is the site of the Guam National Wildlife Refuge. Established in 1993, this 832-acre refuge includes a native limestone forest that is home to the endangered Marianas fruit bat.

Volcanic activity and uplift raised Guam more than 7 miles from the depths of the Mariana Trench. Millions of years of coral growth and changing sea levels transformed an ancient barrier reef into dramatic 500-foot limestone cliffs fringed by coral forests and beaches. At the northeast corner of the island is Mount Santa Rosa, northern Guam's highest point. This extinct volcano can be identified by the dome-shaped structure that sits atop its peak.

Today we will also visit the South Pacific Memorial Park. This was a main battlefield area during the pacific war, and the Memorial Park commemorates those killed in WWII.

In the afternoon we will continue to Hagatna, Guam's capital. Centrally located, this is a scenic village that offers a variety of cultural, historical, and religious sites. Spain ruled the islands for 333 years and Hagatna has many historic buildings dating from this era. One of the only spots above Hagatna with an unobstructed view of north-central Guam and the surrounding waters is Fort Apugan, known locally as Fort Santa Agueda. The fort is the sole survivor of Spanish era forts in Hagatna. Our sightseeing will include a visit to Latte Stone Park. Latte stone are pillars are believed to have provided the support to ancient Chamorro houses built as early as 500 AD. Unique to the Marianas, they comprise two pieces: a halagi, or supporting column made from coral limestone; and a capstone, known as a tasa, made from coral heads. The bones and important possessions of the ancient Chamorros were buried beneath the stones and remain untouched.

At the end of our day we will return to our hotel in Tumon.

Overnight in Tumon, Guam. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 3 *Guam: Island Touring - Fly to Koror, Palau*

Today we will travel from the heart of Guam through the picturesque southern regions of the island. Being mostly rural, this is one of the most untouched and undeveloped areas on the island, and the Chamorro culture is well preserved here.

We will start with a visit to the War in the Pacific National Historical Park, the location of several WWII battle sites and a museum. Overlooking Apra Harbor is Orote Point, the location of one of the first recorded sites of human settlement in the Mariana Islands. Archaeologists calculate that over 3,500 years ago, people used Orote Point for subsistence living. In 1944, Apaca Point was witness to the American liberation of Guam. Fort Soledad (Nuestra Senora de la Soledad), on the southern tip of Umatac, was one of the last forts built by the Spanish in support of the 19th century Galleon trade. The fort protected a trade route between the Philippines and Mexico, and from its cliff-top location there is a commanding view of the Bay.

We will enjoy many panorama views of the grassy hills, deep jungle ravines, and miles of coastline that make up the Territorial Seashore Park. Historical points are numerous and include ancient Chamorro village sites and Spanish ruins. Located at the south of the Pago River, Pago Bay was once home to a Spanish settlement, and is considered to be one of the most picturesque bays on Guam. On the south coast we will stop for lunch at the Inarajan Garden House, a lush garden oasis.

The ‘Underwater Observatory’ at Fish Eye Park is the only underwater observatory in Micronesia. Located in the center of the famous "Piti Bomb Hole", the observatory structure and pier provides a special habitat for fish and other marine life. A boardwalk that leads from the shore crosses a portion of the spectacular bay, and once at the observatory the 360-degree upper deck allows us to enjoy views of the ocean, the coral reefs, and the outer barrier reef. The lower deck takes us beneath the sea where we can view the ocean world and see Piti's amazing marine life and underwater coral gardens.

We later return to Tumon and then this evening we fly to Koror, Palau.

The Palau Islands are an archipelago composed of about 350 islands and atolls having an area of approximately 160 square miles. All of the islands except two small atolls to the north and the islands of Angaur and Peleliu to the southwest are enclosed within the barrier or fringing reef. These islands are located at a crossroads where the Pacific Ocean meets the Philippine Sea, creating one of the worlds' richest zones of tropical marine bio-diversity. Chosen by National Geographic Society as the first ‘Underwater Wonder of the World’ Palau was also featured on Discovery Channels “Living Edens” series as one of the worlds last living “Edens”. This island group is home to one of the highest number of species not found anywhere else in the world. The main island of Babeldaob is the second largest landmass in Micronesia (after Guam) and is recognized as one of the largest undisturbed tropical rainforests in Micronesia.

Palau's early history is still largely veiled in mystery. Why, how or when people first arrived is unknown, but studies indicate that today's Palauans are distant relatives of the Malays of Indonesia, Melanesians of New Guinea and Polynesians. Today Palauans identify strongly with their traditional culture, and the most noticeable aspect of Palauan culture is the people's connection with the sea.

Overnight in Koror, Palau. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 4 *Palau: Island Touring*

Located to the east of the Philippines, the tiny island nation of Palau represents just a speck in the Pacific Ocean. With a population of just over 20,000, this is one of the least populated nations in the world. Having become an independent nation in 1994, Palau’s recent status as a country does little to reflect its rich cultural history. Despite being discovered by the English in the late 18th century, there is evidence to suggest that indigenous inhabitants have been on the island for around 4,500 years.

Today we will spend today exploring the island of Babeldaob, Palau's largest island, and often called the “Big Island”. This is a truly mysterious place that appears physically impenetrable for the most part and shields enigmatic monoliths whose origin and purpose is unknown. The east coast has beautiful stretches of sandy beach, while the west coast has a largely mangrove-studded shoreline. Ancient stone footpaths connect many villages, there are no traffic lights, and resort hotels are a world away. Archaeological highlights include the Stone Faces (Badrulchau) of Ngerchelong, the ancient Stone Monoliths, and the mysterious terraced hillsides found in various locations around Babeldaob. We will also visit a traditional Bai (Men's meeting house).

This is the one of the largest islands in Micronesia. In the past each village had a men's 'meeting house' built on top of a raised stone platform. These houses were constructed from giant timbers reinforced with coconut fiber ropes, and assembled without nails in a timber frame design. The roofs are made by weaving together mangrove palm fronds. Bais were elaborately painted and decorated with carvings of traditional legends. There were two types of bais. The first is

the Bai ra Rubak (or old men's bai) where traditionally no women were allowed. These were used exclusively for the meetings and customs of the older men of the village. The Bai ra Cheldebechel (or clubhouse bai) was used for younger men and was the place where the older men would teach the younger generation the legends of the village and fishing lore. Women were only allowed to visit the Bai ra Cheldebechel. Today we see one of the few remaining bais in Palau, which offers us a unique look at authentic Palau'an culture.

Overnight in Koror, Palau. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 5 *Palau: UNESCO Protected Rock Islands & Peleliu Island Excursion*

Today we will enjoy a scenic boat trip and excursion to the historic island of Peleliu. Our boat journey will take us past the Rock Island Lagoon, recently added to the UNESCO World Heritage list. This is one of the crown jewels of Micronesia, and a true vista of serene and surreal beauty. Here one finds over 400 uninhabited limestone islands of volcanic origin. Many of them display unique ‘mushroom-like’ shapes in turquoise lagoons surrounded by coral reefs. The aesthetic beauty of the site is heightened by a complex reef system featuring over 385 coral species and different types of habitat. The site harbours the highest concentration of marine lakes anywhere, isolated bodies of seawater separated from the ocean by land barriers.

Our destination is Peleliu Island, located where the tide of the Philippine Sea meets the current of the Pacific Ocean, each flowing in the opposite direction. It is a place where the irresistible force of the sea meets the immovable mass of the reef, and the results are spectacular with countless species of fish. With the Japanese controlling Palau by World War II, Peleliu became an important military target for the United States. The Japanese had built a series of underground tunnels and fortifications, and they had tens of thousands of men stationed here. By the time the war was over, nearly 11,000 Japanese and 1,000 American soldiers had lost their lives in this area. Our tour of Peleliu Island will cover many important natural and historic sites, including several WWII remnants and the local War Memorial Museum.

We later return by boat to Koror.

Overnight in Koror. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 6 *Palau: Island Touring / Fly to Manila, Philippines*

Today we will start our sightseeing by taking in the highlights of Koror. Dating from 1955, the Belau National Museum is the oldest museum in Micronesia. The indoor and outdoor exhibits detail Palau’s history, and include information about the past possessors of the territory such as Germany, Japan, Spain and the USA. In the museum we will see exhibits from all eras of Palauan life, including artworks, photography, sculpture, storyboards and more…all tracing the history of the colonial occupation on the island.

The Etpison Museum opened in August 1999, and this private museum collection includes a variety of displays. We will learn about the foreign influence on Palau, and will see displays ranging from local tools and artifacts to archeological sites and traditional canoes. The museum also has a large collection of antique maps and prints of Micronesia.

The Palau International Coral Reef Center hosts it's very own aquarium showcasing the variety of habitats and marine life that can be found in Palau. Here we get a first-hand look into the world of the diverse coral reef ecosystem. Up to date scientific knowledge and conservation efforts are tailored together with traditional Palauan legends to give us a unique overview.

We later return to Koror before our evening flight to Manila.

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Several thousand years ago, the first settlers in the Philippines crossed shallow seas and land bridges from mainland Asia to arrive in this group of islands. These people were related to Melanesians, Australian Aborigines and Papuans. Direct descendants of these people can still be found on the islands today. From its long history of Western influence, 300 years by the Spaniards and 30 years by the Americans, its people have evolved as a unique blend of East and West.

With its tropical climate and location on the Pacific Ring of Fire, the Philippines have one of the richest areas of biodiversity in the world. Here at the eastern edge of Asia more than seven thousand islands are located between the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea. With over one hundred ethnic groups, a mixture of foreign influences and a fusion of culture and arts have enhanced the uniqueness of the Filipino identity. Successive waves of Austronesian peoples brought with them influences from Malay, Hindu, and Islamic societies. Trade and subsequent Chinese settlement eventually introduced Chinese cultural influences; which remain to this day.

Overnight in Manila, Philippines. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 7 *Manila: City Sightseeing*

The Spanish knew the city of Manila as the jewel of their Pacific Empire, and today Manila is a city that has to be experienced to be understood. Located on the eastern shores of Manila Bay, Manila lay at the heart of Spanish activity in the Far East during the 16th century. Once known as the ‘Pearl of the Orient’, the city went on to witness several Chinese insurrections, a British occupation and a Sepoy mutiny, a war against the colonial Spanish and some of the bitterest fighting of World War II.

As we explore the "Charms of Old Manila", we will drive through Roxas Boulevard to Rizal Park, named in honor of the country's national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal. For people-watching there’s no better place than Rizal Park where, every day, locals can be seen jogging, picnicking, or simply hanging out with friends.

At the Walled City of Intramuros we visit the remnants of Spain's conquistadors. We will explore this ‘living museum’ - the oldest part of the city known as 'between the walls’ – the Spanish era walled city. It was here that Miguel Lopez de Legazpi built a fort on the site of a ruined Islamic settlement, with walls 13 meters thick and 3km long. Within this protective enclave, the exclusive preserve of the Spanish ruling elite, were 15 churches and 6 monasteries. The imposing Roman Catholic Cathedral is here, and has been rebuilt countless times. A walk through this area gives us a sense of the true history of this area.

We will travel through the cobbled streets to the UNESCO protected San Agustin Church, the country's oldest stone church. Here we will view its wide collection of ecclesiastical icons, vestments and other religious articles. Across from here is Casa Manila, a reproduction of a 19th century house equipped with oriental and European décor, as well as Philippine antique furniture. Built by Imelda Marcos, this is a chance to see some stunning antique furniture and artwork. We continue to Fort Santiago, Manila's main line of defense against invaders from the sea. It is a stone fort guarding the entrance to the city from Manila Bay. It has been the site of many tragic moments in Philippine history. From Fort Santiago, we drive on to Manila's central district, Quiapo, often referred to as the heart of Manila with its market, pilgrimage church of the Black Nazarene, jeepney terminals and bazaars. We will also explore the city's bustling Chinatown, with its network of alleys and side streets. The Chinese cemetery is the only one of its kind in the world, where the mausoleums are as big and as elaborate as houses and where the fusion of eastern and Christian religions are very much in evidence.

Overnight in Manila, Philippines. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 8 *Manila: Tagaytay Lake & Volcano Excursion*

About 90-minutes south of Metro Manila lies the picturesque City of Tagaytay. Located on a ridge 2200 feet above sea level. Tagaytay offers a panoramic view of Taal Lake and Volcano - a lake within a volcano within a lake within a volcano. Taal Volcano, the smallest active volcano in the world. This awe-inspiring vista is best savored atop the Palace in the Sky - the rest house of former President Ferdinand Marcos. On the way to Tagaytay, we will stop by the San Jose Church in Las Pinas to see the world famous Bamboo Organ built by Spanish priest Father Diego Cera in the 19th century. Made from about 800 bamboo pipes, the organ is said to produce a sound unlike any other. We may also have a chance to visit a local jeepney assembly plant for an inside look on how this popular mode of transportation unique to the Philippines is built.

Tagatay is the perfect escape from the chaos of Manila. The city has mountains, fresh air, a cool and breezy climate and plenty of greenery.

Overnight in Manila, Philippines. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 9 *Manila: Makati Museums & Touring / Fly to Honiara, Solomon Islands*

Our touring today will take us through Makati, the financial Center of the Philippines. At the Museo ng Makati we will see the city's glorious past in full display through paintings, murals, and exhibits. The museum itself is housed in an old structure built in 1918 that served as the first town hall of the then municipality of Makati.

We will stop at the Saints Peter and Paul Parish, the first and oldest church in Makati. Built in 1620 its intricate design and Spanish type architecture make it a notable structure. We will then proceed to the American Cemetery and Memorial, the largest and most beautiful of American memorials outside the Continental U.S.

Powerful clans whose histories are inextricable from that of the city own Manila's conglomerates. Two museums, facing off less than a block away from one another, offer insights into how they live and work. The Ayala Museum, established by the Zóbel de Ayala family that owns most of Makati, includes a showcase of works by family member Fernando Zóbel, a prominent artist in his own right. The Yuchengco Museum, established by a former U.N. ambassador, includes a gallery dedicated to family history, as well as a collection of portraits of the sweethearts and mistresses of Philippine national hero José Rizal. You're never far from the Holy Spirit in this predominantly Roman Catholic city, and the spirit is palpable in Greenbelt 3, a shopping complex where the prominent domed church, the Greenbelt Chapel, sits like a jewel in the middle of carefully manicured grounds.

This evening we board our overnight flight to Honiara, Solomon Islands. The flight routing to Honiara will take us via Australia.

Overnight Flight to Honiara, Solomon Islands. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 10 *Honiara, Solomon Islands / Afternoon Touring*

This afternoon we arrive into Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands.

Just 9 degrees south of the equator, the Solomon Islands are comprised of 992 islands, of which 147 are inhabited. These island stretch 900 miles in a southeasterly direction from the Shortland Islands, on the border with Papua New Guinea, to the Santa Cruz Islands, which borders with Vanuatu. The archipelago covers an area of 461,000 sq km -- made up of deeply forested mountainous islands and low-lying coral atolls.

As part of the Melanesian group of islands that also includes Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji, hunters and gatherers from Southeast Asia first settled the Solomon Islands. Seafarers followed later, and it is believed that early Papuan speaking settlers began arriving in the Solomon Islands around 30,000 BC. Austronesian speakers arrived in 4000 BC. Archaeological and linguistic evidence shows that people from Southeast Asia permanently settled the Solomon Islands at this time.

Today, between 70 to 80 percent of the population live a subsistence way of life in their small villages, settlements and islands away from the main urban centers. The number of local languages listed for Solomon Islands is greater than 75. Communal, clan and family ties remain strong in these islands with the existence of the Wantok system. A key part of the Melanesian culture, Wantok means people from the same language groups who are blood relatives and part of the extended family support and assist one another. Traditional practices are still being followed, especially by those living in the interior of the country's larger islands. Off the beaten path, village life remains much as it has been for centuries.

This afternoon after our arrival we will commence with an orientation tour of Honiara. This will allow us to discover many points of scenic, cultural and historic interest about Honiara and Solomon Islands. The Honiara Central market is busy, colorful, and presents local produce and crafts. We will have a guided tour of the Parliament House, built for the people of Solomon Islands. With a commanding position, The US Peace War Memorial was constructed in 1992 for the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal. It provides an excellent view of Iron Bottom Sound and the surrounding mountainous regions of Honiara and Guadalcanal. The small National Museum accommodates the diverse cultural artifacts of the Solomon Islands.

Overnight in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 11 *Solomon Islands / Tulagi Island Excursion*

Today we will enjoy a full day excursion to Tulagi Island in the Florida Islands group (also known as the Nggela Islands). This island group of the Solomon's sits immediately north of Honiara across the renowned Iron Bottom Sound. This will be a full day of discovery as we cruise through one of the few truly untouched areas of the South Pacific. Our boat trip takes us to Tulagi Island, the old capital of the Solomons.

The Florida group are made up of four large islands: Big Gela (or Nggela Sule), Small Gela (or Nggela Pile), Buena Vista Island, Sandfly Island as well as approximately 50 other surrounding smaller islands. The Japanese garrisoned Nggela Sule in April of 1942 in connection with their efforts to establish a seaplane base on neighboring Gavutu. Florida Island never became as famous as Guadalcanal, although it did serve as a small, very secondary base of operations for the US and Australian and New Zealand war effort in the Pacific. Following the Allied liberation of the island from the Japanese, it became the site of a US seaplane base. Tulagi (also known as Tulaghi), was the capital of the Solomon Islands Protectorate from 1896 to 1942, and is today the capital of the Central Province.

A visit here is a must visit for the true intrepid traveler, and all of our sightseeing is done on foot. This original capital of the Solomon Islands was severely ravaged during the Second World War, and Honiara became the new capital after the war. Tulagi is in the center and entrance to the Florida Islands. Here one finds small provincial government offices, the police station, post office, main port, market and a few restaurants. Our stop at this colonial capital will include a walking tour, where we experience the true pace of life on an undeveloped island.

In travel terms, these islands are still very much virgin territory, and our adventure today is an experience not to be missed.

Overnight in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 12 *Solomon Islands: Full Day of Touring*

We will spend the day touring the island of Guadalcanal and seeing it's many highlights and attractions. Stepping out from the usual path into the islands of the Solomons is a totally unique and richly rewarding experience. Without doubt, this is one of the few remaining, truly un-spoilt tourist destinations of the world.

This is an island group of rainforests and volcanoes. There are over 900 volcanic islands in the Solomon Islands, and here we will discover the palms, ferns and truly exotic orchids spread across the islands. Certain regions in the Solomon Islands served as battlegrounds during the Second World War. Guadalcanal is known for its many WWII sites, and we will visit several during our day.

The islands are also home to many botanical gardens displaying a wide variety of plants, and we will be sure to visit one of these. A village tour will give us firsthand experience of an ideal Solomon Islands village setting as well as a look into the traditional daily living of Solomon Islanders. Here we will gain an appreciation of the unique cultures of the islands as we learn about traditional customs and practices.

Overnight in Honiara, Solomon Islands. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 13 *Solomon Islands - Port Vila, Vanuatu / Port Vila Touring*

This morning we fly from the Solomons to Vanuatu. With a population of approximately 221,000, Vanuatu boasts 113 distinct languages and innumerable dialects. This makes Vanuatu one of the most culturally diverse countries on earth. This amazing diversity is a result of thousands of years of sporadic immigration from many Pacific countries. Over the millennia, natural boundaries; large open stretches of water, dense jungle and mountainous terrain, isolated many groups, even from the same ethnic origins, from each other. And isolation bred not just warfare, but quite different, sophisticated societies and political systems.

This afternoon after our arrival we will tour the town of Port Vila, the capital and largest town of Vanuatu. We will see the Parliament House, the Cultural Centre (Museum), Hospital, Schools, French and British jailhouses etc. We will explore some of the most picturesque spots in town. Learn about the colonial years of French and British rule, and visit local handicraft and vegetable markets.

Overnight in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 14 *Vanuatu: Efate Island Touring*

Today we will tour the island and discover the many hidden treasures of Efate island. Our travels today take us past the pandanus-fringed coastline, where we see true Melanesian villages of the South Pacific. Beautiful white sand beaches and crystal-clear turquoise waters surround us. Each village we pass provides a glimpse of local life. This is an opportunity learn about the historical and local life of the island people along with their way of daily living.

During our touring we will visit a local village where we are met by chanting warriors and learn about the ancient traditions of the islanders and their way of life. Our journey around the island will take us past rows and rows of coconut palm trees, plantations established by the colonial powers during their time here. We will make a stop at the scenic Blue Lagoon, a magical deep blue hole with a mix of fresh and seawater. We will be greeted by local villagers and enjoy lunch at a quiet local restaurant before we continue along the coastline. At Saama Top Rock there will be a local guide waiting to take us on a short walk to a deck built on a hillside where we will have a great view of the islets off the coast of North Efate.

Overnight in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 15 *Vanuatu: Tanna Island / Yassur Volcano Excursion*

Today we will enjoy a scenic adventure to one of the world's most accessible active volcanoes! Our Yasur Volcano exploration starts with a scenic one-hour flight to Tanna Island. This journey takes in the spectacular views of Port Vila Harbour, South Efate and Erromango with its beautiful coastline (weather permitting). On the approach to White Grass Airport in Tanna you will have a great view of the magnificent landscape of Tanna Island.

Here we will be met by our friendly 4WD Safari staff and taken to a local resort for some refreshments. Our Volcano Tour begins with a 4WD journey across the island, passing local villages, dense native bush, stunning views and passing over volcanic ash plains as we approach Yasur Volcano.

Once we reach the summit it is a short 10-minute uphill walk to the rim of the crater, where we will experience the awesome power of the world's most accessible active volcano! This ancient volcano is conspicuously located in one of the most pristine, unspoiled corners of the globe.

The Island of Tanna is a natural paradise and a favorite destination for volcanologists and adventure travelers. In the local native dialect, Yasur means 'Old Man'. This volcano is 361 meters above sea level, and the crater itself is 300 meters wide and 100 meters deep. Visiting Mount Yasur is a 'once in a lifetime' experience, and your opportunity to watch nature at work.

Overnight in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 16 *Vanuatu: Island Touring*

Most species of plants and animals native to the South Pacific originated in Southeast Asia and worked their way eastward across the Pacific, by natural distribution or in the company of humans. The number of native species diminishes the farther east one goes. Very few local plants or animals came from the Americas, the one notable exception being the sweet potato, which may have been brought back from South America by voyaging Polynesians.

This morning we will visit the stunning Summit Gardens, the largest tropical garden in the South Pacific. Here we find 10 hectares of gardens that showcase thousands of different botanic species from all over the world. These species include water plants, succulents, orchids, bromeliads, heliconias, palms, cycads and fruit trees. As well, we will enjoy the sights, scents and sounds of the sandalwood industry that has provided a livelihood for over 200 years in Vanuatu. Nearby is a large sandalwood plantation with over 120,000 trees! At the end of our guided tour of the gardens we may take a break here to enjoy tea or a snack in the garden.

Today we will also visit the small Tanna Coffee factory. The Tanna Coffee Development Company was first established in 1982 in order to assist in the development of the newly independent South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. Though the coffee is grown on nearby Tanna Island, it is transported here for roasting and packaging.

We then will enjoy a pleasant walk through lush tropical rainforest to see the Cascade waterfalls. Here you may want to step under the falls or take a dip in the clear rock pools for a refreshing swim. Or, maybe just sit under the cool shade and enjoy the lush green setting. You will be able to enjoy the scenery from our lookout view on the way back from the waterfalls.

We later return to Port Vila where you will have some free time in the afternoon.

Overnight in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 17 *Port Vila, Vanuatu - Nuku'alofa, Tonga (via Fiji)*

This morning we depart for our flight to Tonga (via Fiji).

The Kingdom of Tonga is a sovereign state and archipelago comprising 176 islands scattered in the southern Pacific Ocean. Of these islands only 52 of are inhabited. Tonga became known as the ‘Friendly Islands’ due to the friendly reception accorded to Captain James Cook on his first visit here in 1773. This is one of the last absolute monarchies in the world where social rule is based upon a feudal system where the king disburses land and positions without recourse to any elected body. Tongatapu, a coral island surrounded by coral reefs, is Tonga's largest island with over two-thirds of the country's small population.

Overnight in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 18 *Tonga: Touring & Local Island Excursion*

Today is Sunday in Tonga! A clause in Tonga's constitution establishes a Sabbath day on Sunday. During this time no trade or professional or commercial undertakings are to be pursued. Although hotels can cater to their guests on the Sabbath, almost everything else comes to a screeching halt. Most stores are closed, airplanes don't fly, most taxis don't operate, and most restaurants other than those in the hotels don't open. Today Tongans by the thousands will go to church and then enjoy family feasts and a day of relaxation in true Polynesian style.

On this day those who wish will have the chance to attend church this morning at the Centenary Church. Here we may be lucky to see members of the royal family, including Tupou VI, the King of Tonga. Tupou VI is the younger brother and successor of the late King George Tupou V. Tongan men may wear neckties to church, but tourists get by without as long as they are neatly dressed. Women should wear dresses that cover the shoulders and knees. It's not every day that you get to see a real-life king, but sometimes you can in Tonga. For maximum respect, keep your knees covered (both men and women). This is a very conservative Christian country.

Given that it is a Sunday, our schedule for today will remain flexible. A typical Sunday event for the many locals is to take the ferry over to one of the outer islands, so today we will enjoy an excursion to one of the offshore islands for lunch and some exploring on foot. Atata Island is one of the best local ‘small island destinations’. Set around white coral sands, this island is less than an hour away. One can walk almost all of the way around the island, with its palm-covered picture postcard beaches. This island is truly ‘untouched’, with just one resort / restaurant, one local village, one school and two churches!

Overnight in Nuku'alofa. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 19 *Tonga: Tongatapu Island Touring*

This is truly an eclectic country where ancient traditions sit alongside the latest offerings of modern life. Society in the Pacific’s only remaining kingdom has remained more impervious to outside influences than other islands. Today will be spent touring the island of Tongatapu, and we will start by touring Nuku'alofa. Nuku'alofa is situated on the north coast of Tongatapu, and our time here provides us with a great opportunity to experience this unique culture.

The Tongan National Cultural Centre provides one of the South Pacific's best cultural expositions, with displays about

the kingdom's history, geology, and handicrafts. Occasionally artisans can often be found at work producing local crafts. Nearby are the colonial-era Court House and Parliament.

A field to the west of the main wharf is the Pangai, where royal feasts, kava ceremonies, and parades are held. The Royal Palace overlooks the Pangai and is surrounded by towering Norfolk pines. During our touring we will be sure to see the Royal Tombs. King George I, King George II, Queen Salote, King Taufa'hau Tupou IV are buried at the center of the field.

Outside of the capital, at the village of Mu'a, we will stop at the monument marking Captain Cook's Landing Place. The great British explorer landed and rested under a large banyan tree here when he came ashore in 1777 to meet with reigning Tui Tonga.

One the most prominent sites on Tongatapu is the Ha'amonga Trilithon, located on the eastern tip of Tongatapu Island. This is the area where the eleventh Tongan King had his seat of power, and it is believed that Tu'i Tu’itatui built the structure in 1200 A.D. The Ha'amonga 'a Maui has been scientifically interpreted as an early style sundial clock that recorded different seasonal changes. Nearby is Maka Fa'akinanga ('Leaning against the rock'). Made from the same stone as the Ha'amonga, the Maka Fa'akinanga is a large stone slab standing upright with markings on the front resembling an indentation of a large head, shoulders and back. Oral stories recount the belief that Tu'i Tu'itatui (eleventh Tu'i Tonga) often sat against the Maka Fa'akinanga and struck out with a staff at people so that they were kept at a safe distance for fear that they may make an assassination attempt.

The small fishing village of Nukuleka on the northeast coast is possibly the site of first human settlement in Tonga. In 2008, Canadian archaeologist Professor David V. Burley claimed that it was the "cradle of Polynesia". In 2007, Burley led an archeological team, and uncovered pieces of Lapita pottery; which are estimated to be about 2,900 years old. Burley then stated: "Tonga was the first group of islands in Polynesia to be settled by the Lapita People about 3,000 years ago, and Nukuleka was their first settlement in Tonga." This finding challenged claims made by Samoa which, in the words of a New Zealand journalist, "has advertised itself for decades as the 'cradle of Polynesia'".

The majestic blowholes of Pupu'a Puhi, located along the rugged coast near the village of Houma, provide a never ceasing display of the power of the sea. Here the power of the Pacific Ocean is forced through natural rock fissures to create instant skyscrapers of water up to 30-meters high. As the southerly winds blow into Tongatapu the sea is driven into the southern coastline and sea spray erupts into the air. As we proceed towards the village of Kolovai on the western tip of the island we will keep an eye out for the flying foxes in the treetops. Our last stop of the day will be at the Abel Tasman landing site.

Overnight in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 20 *Nuku'alofa, Tonga - Apia, Samoa (via Fiji)*

The morning is free for you to enjoy before our afternoon flight to Samoa via Fiji.

The independent island nation of Samoa is located about midway between Hawaii and New Zealand. The Samoan islands have narrow coastal plains with volcanic, rocky, rugged mountains in the interior. The two main islands are Upolu and Savaii, and we will tour both during our time here. The old ways have been lovingly preserved on Samoa, the South Seas islands steeped in a relaxed and communal Polynesian lifestyle. Samoa was previously located east of the international date line but in 2011, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele announced his country would move the International Date Line to the east of the country, so that Samoa would lie to the west of the date line. This change took effect on the night of 29 December, so that the Friday was skipped altogether and the following day was Saturday 31 December.

Samoans originally arrived from Southeast Asia around 1500-1000 BC. The oldest known site of human occupation

dates back to that time and is at Mulifanua on Upolu Island.

Overnight in Apia, Samoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 21 *Samoa: Upolu Island Touring*

Today will be spent touring the island of Upolu. The entire country of Samoa serves as a cultural storehouse of fa'a Samoa, the traditional Samoan way of life. Most Samoans still live in villages featuring fales (oval houses), some of which have stood for centuries (though tin roofs have replaced thatch). The island of Savai'i is especially well preserved, and today much of Apia on the island of Upolu looks like it did when Robert Louis Stevenson settled here in 1889. Our sightseeing today will include a visit to the Robert Louis Stevenson Museum, situated in the hills to the south of Apia. This museum, with its spectacular setting, showcases and preserves the memories and lifestyle that drew him and his family to Valima, Samoa.

After some morning exploration in the capital of Apia we will travel east along the north coast, passing picturesque villages and landscape. Our route then takes us south over Le Mafa Pass and down towards the south side of the island. At the southeastern corner of Upolu is a cliff like mountain; which forms a dramatic backdrop to the deep sands of Lolomanu Beach. The setting faces a group of small islets offshore. Along the south coast one can find many idyllic stretches of white sand and black rocks overhung by coconut palms!

The combination of tropical climate and fertile soil make Samoa the perfect breeding ground for rainforests and other lush landscapes such as mangrove swamps and marshes. These ecosystems are all alive with native wildlife, such as seabirds, skinks, flying foxes, geckos, as well as a plethora of unique flora. One of the best remaining rainforests is O Le Pupu-Pue National Park on Upolu. This park runs from the southern coast up into the mountainous interior of the island. Bird lovers, and those who love exploring nature on foot, will love this place. Another place of paradise is the Tafua Peninsula Rainforest Preserve in the southeast.

Overnight in Apia, Samoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 22 *Samoa: Savai'i Island Touring*

Today will be spent exploring Savai’i, the largest island of Samoa. Savai'i is one of the largest of all Polynesian islands, and this great volcanic shield is also one of the least populated. Here we will find traditional villages with oval-shaped houses sitting alongside freshwater bathing pools fed by underground springs. Savaii is relatively undeveloped and regarded by many as the "real" Samoa.

For our sightseeing we will depart from our hotel early in the morning and head for Mulifanua wharf in order to connect with the morning ferry to Savai’i. The crossing takes about 90-minutes, and will provide us with some great views of the Samoan islands. Upon arrival we will be met at the wharf and proceed with our island touring. At Savaii’s fresh produce market we can view the locally grown produce and handicrafts. We will stop at the Mu Pagoa Falls that drops into the ocean. Our drive to the Taga Blow holes is through lush vegetation, plantations and traditional villages. These blowholes are a natural spectacle not to be missed. Following the blowholes we will witness a tapa making demonstration, an art form that is rarely practiced these days. The tapa is made from the bark of the paper mulberry tree, and it is amazing to watch a thin bark stretched to form a fabric type material. We may break for lunch at the Aganoa Beach where you will have the opportunity to relax under the shade of a tree. We later head back to the wharf for our return journey.

Overnight in Apia, Samoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and lunch.

Day 23 *Samoa: Manono Island Touring*

Our tour today will visit Manono Island, which offers an insight into Samoan culture and life. An hour's drive to the west and then a further 20-minutes by boat brings us to Manono Island. The boat leaves from Cape Lefatu, with views of the crater island of Apolima along the way. Once reaching Manono we will be greeted by our Samoan hosts for a brief lecture on Samoan customs and etiquette. We will have the chance to learn about locally grown products, as well as the various local uses of the coconut.

This island is completely enclosed by a reef, and the colours of the crystal clear water are simply stunning. Today there are only four villages on the island with a total population of 889. Electricity was only introduced here in 1995. This is the third larges island of Samoa, but has an area of only three-square kilometres and was in years gone by, the most important of the group of islands in a political sense, for it was here that the highest chiefs lived. In Manono there is a very Samoan atmosphere, no noise, no dogs, no vehicles, and the main thoroughfare is a footpath that follows the coast. We will enjoy a magnificent stroll viewing the lush beautiful gardens with cooling trade winds.

This is a real paradise for anyone looking for adventure, friendly people and an island that has hardly changed in the last 100 years. Life is very different than elsewhere. The men go to the coral reef spear-fishing every morning on their traditional canoes and come back only once they catch enough fish to feed the family.

Overnight in Apia, Samoa. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

Day 24 *Apia, Samoa - Fiji and connect with flight home!*

Today we fly as a group from Samoa to Fiji, and you then connect with your International flight home. You may wish to extend your stay in the South Pacific with a few nights on Fiji.

THOSE travellers booking their own flights must consult with us re the timing of the group flight from Samoa before booking onward flights from Fiji.

BON VOYAGE! Meal plan: Breakfast.