American Samoa is a group of two coral atolls and five volcanic islands in the southern Pacific Ocean that has been a territory of the United States since 1899. American Samoa has a population of approximately 58,000, with nearly 4,000 residing in the capital city, Pago Pago. Approximately 93% of the residents are of Samoan or other Pacific Islands ancestry, with most of the rest of Asian ancestry. Most are Christian, with the largest sects being Christian Congregationalist and Roman Catholic. Nearly 90% of residents are native speakers of Samoan, a Polynesian language closely related to Hawaiian, although most are bilingual and also have proficiency in English. The climate of American Samoa is tropical, with little temperature variation from season to season but a pronounced rainy season from November to April. On September 29, 2009, American Samoa and the nearby islands of Samoa and Tonga were struck by a devastating tsunami that followed a huge 8.3-magnitude Pacific Ocean earthquake. The disaster had an inital death toll of almost 25 people in American Samoa**.**

**Government and Politics**

As a territory of the United States, American Samoa relies on that country for its defense and foreign affairs. However, the territory has considerable autonomy over its internal affairs. American Samoa's internal political system is closely based on that of most U.S. states, with a governor and lieutenant governor elected for a four-year term and a bicameral legislature, consisting of an appointed Senate and a popularly elected House of Representatives. Judicial functions are carried out by a High Court, whose justices are appointed by the U.S. Interior Department. In addition to this system, a parallel traditional system of government exists, with local chiefs heading extended family clans and representing them in territorial councils.

**Economy**

American Samoa's economy is largely dependent on the United States for aid, which totals more than $75 million per year. The local economy is based on fishing, mostly for tuna, and canned tuna is a major export. Attempts to develop the tourism sector, though somewhat successful, have been hindered by the remoteness of the islands and the region's frequent typhoons. American Samoa's per capita gross domestic product in 2005 was $5,800, and unemployment on the islands is high, reaching more than 29% in the same year. American Samoa's major trading partners are its Asian and Pacific neighbors, most notably Australia, Indonesia, and India.

**History**

The first settlers to American Samoa likely came from Asia in approximately 600 BC. These settlers may have passed through other Polynesian island groups, including Fiji and Tonga, although other theories, backed up by linguistic evidence, suggest that the Samoan islands were the center for all future Polynesian migration. The first settlers in Samoa established a system of clan-based governance, known as *faamatai,* in which local chiefs, both male and female, ruled over extended family systems. Although the Samoan islands were remote, Samoans are believed to have maintained trade and cultural contact with Fiji and Tonga beginning in approximately 1000 CE.

Samoans' first contacts with Europeans came in the 18th century. Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen reached the island in 1722. Initial contacts with Europeans were sometimes hostile, and this led to Samoa  being visited only sporadically for nearly a century. In 1830, a group of English missionaries from the London Missionary Society, led by John Williams, traveled to Samoa to spread Christianity. Williams' efforts were extremely successful, and within a few decades all of Samoa's chiefs had adopted the Christian faith.

The United States made its entry into Samoa in 1878, when the Kingdom of Samoa allowed the U.S. government to establish a naval base at Pago Pago Harbor. Germany and the United Kingdom were expanding their overseas possessions at this time as well, and both nations showed an interest in the Samoan islands. However, the United Kingdom ceded its claims to Samoa in 1899, leaving Germany to claim the western Samoan islands and the United States the eastern islands near their naval base. In 1900, the Deed of Cession was signed by eastern Samoan leaders, giving the United States the rights to their land, and the eastern Samoan islands officially became an unincorporated territory of the United States in 1922.

Due to its strategic location, American Samoa was of key importance to the United States in World War II, as was the naval base already established at Pago Pago, which was used by the Marines during the war. After the end of World War II, the Samoan government assumed more aspects of self-rule, including the popular election of the territory's governor—who had previously been appointed, beginning in 1977—and the sending of a nonvoting delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives beginning in 1978. American Samoa's government has steadfastly supported remaining a U.S. territory, petitioning the United Nations Committee on Decolonization to remove it from the list of colonial possessions in 2001 as a step toward showing that its territory status is voluntary.

In 1997, American Samoa was challenged by the decision of the former German Samoan territory, independent since 1962 and known as Western Samoa, to change its name to simply Samoa. American Samoa's government, feeling that this threatened their identity as Samoans, officially refused to recognize the new name and passed a law that no citizens of Samoa could purchase land in American Samoa. Although tensions eased somewhat over the next few years, with plans to improve air service between Samoa and American Samoa and a tentative agreement to open a Samoan consulate in American Samoa, relations took another step back in 2005, when the Samoan government announced that it would require passports and travel permits from all visiting American Samoan residents.

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