

(American) Samoa: How you can technically timetravel.

New Year's Eve is celebrated all around the world. At the stroke of midnight, we say goodbye to the old year and welcome the new one. But what if you could experience that moment more than once?

It may sound impossible, yet there is a place where it can actually be done. Just 200 kilometers (125 miles) apart lie two islands separated by an astonishing 24-hour time difference. With careful planning, you can celebrate New Year's Eve twice—and even travel back in time, quite literally.

Welcome to Samoa and its neighboring island, American Samoa.



Flag Samoa. Source: wikipedia.org



Flag American Samoa. Source: wikipedia.org

The start

How is it possible that two islands only about 200 kilometers (125 miles) apart are separated by an entire day? Imagine for example that there was a day difference between London and Birmingham. To answer that question, we first need to look at the history of both Samoa and American Samoa.



Samoa, officially known for many years as Western Samoa, has a turbulent past. The islands were first sighted by the Dutch explorer Jacob Roggeveen in 1722. In the decades that followed, European interest in the archipelago grew, and several major powers sought to expand their influence. In particular, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany all competed for control of the islands.

Between 1886 and 1894, Samoa was engulfed in a civil war. The conflict was fought between King Malietoa Laupepa, who was supported by Britain and later by the United States, and his rival, Mata'afa Iosefo, who received backing from Germany.

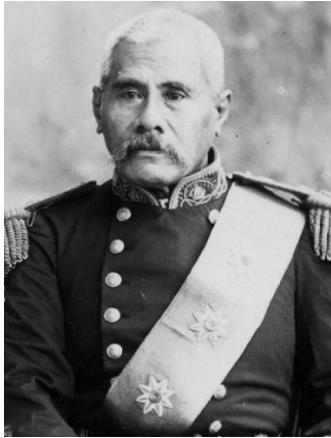
In 1889, a devastating cyclone struck the islands, severely damaging the warships of all three foreign powers. The disaster prompted Britain, Germany, and the United States to temporarily reduce their military presence. Laupepa was allowed to remain king, but despite the withdrawal of many foreign troops, the civil war continued for several more years.

Following Laupepa's death, political tensions flared once again. Instead of his son, Malietoa Tanumafili I—who was supported by the United States and the United Kingdom—Mata'afa was proclaimed leader. The situation escalated dramatically, and on March 15, 1899, the capital city of Apia was bombarded by American and British naval forces.

Later that same year, the Treaty of Berlin was signed, permanently dividing the Samoan Islands. The western islands became German Samoa, while the eastern islands became known as American Samoa. For American Samoa, this marked the end of most of the major political upheavals, and it has remained an unincorporated territory of the United States ever since.

Western Samoa, however, entered a turbulent twentieth century. It is during this period that we find the key to understanding the remarkable 24-hour time difference between two islands that lie so close together.





Malitoe Laupepa. King of Samoa from 1875 until his death 1898. Source: wikipedia.org

Just fifteen years later, in 1914, Germany lost control of the islands to New Zealand. New Zealand forces occupied German Samoa without firing a single shot, largely because there was virtually no German military presence on the islands to resist the invasion.

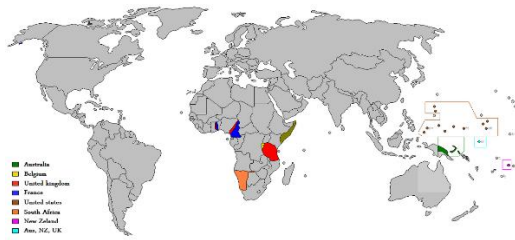
Following the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Germany officially lost all of its overseas colonies. German Samoa formally came under British authority but was almost immediately transferred to New Zealand as a League of Nations mandate. The territory was renamed Western Samoa, while the eastern islands remained under American control as American Samoa.

After the Second World War, Western Samoa became a United Nations Trust Territory administered by New Zealand. These trust territories were former colonies—many of them previously under German rule—that were placed under the administration of other nations after the First World War. Other well-known examples include Namibia, Cameroon, and Papua New Guinea.

Even under New Zealand's administration, the desire for self-determination continued to grow. The Samoan independence movement gained momentum, and after years of political pressure, the islands achieved independence. In 1962, Western Samoa became the world's first independent Polynesian state.

In 1997, the country changed its name for the third time. It officially dropped the colonial designation "Western" and has since been known simply as Samoa.





United Nations trust countries and which countries rule over

them. Source: wikipedia.org

Time difference

Now that we understand how Samoa and American Samoa came to exist as separate territories, another question naturally arises: how is it possible that these two islands, once part of the same island group, are now separated by an astonishing 24-hour time difference?

The answer lies in the International Date Line. This imaginary line marks where one calendar day ends and the next begins. Although the line generally follows the 180th meridian, it bends in several places to accommodate political borders and economic interests, allowing countries to choose—within reason—which side of the line they wish to be on.

Until 2011, Samoa was located on the eastern side of the International Date Line. As a result, it was among the last places on Earth to celebrate the New Year. That changed when the Samoan government made a remarkable decision: it moved the country from the eastern side of the Date Line to the western side.

The consequences were extraordinary. December 30, 2011, simply never existed in Samoa. The country jumped directly from December 29 to December 31, quite literally skipping an entire day.

The reason for this dramatic change was economic. Samoa's largest trading partners are Australia and New Zealand, both of which lie on the western side of the International Date Line. By sharing the same calendar, Samoa increased the number of overlapping business days with these countries from four to five each week, making trade, communication, and business operations significantly more efficient.

Ironically, Samoa had done the exact opposite more than a century earlier. In 1892, when the islands were still united, the territory moved



from the western side of the Date Line to the eastern side in order to strengthen trade with the United States.

American Samoa, which remains an unincorporated territory of the United States, chose to keep its original position on the eastern side of the International Date Line. As a result, American Samoa remains one calendar day behind Samoa, despite the two islands being separated by only about 200 kilometers (125 miles).



International Date Line. Source: Alfredvanceleef.nl

Conclusion

Although it is possible to celebrate New Year's Eve twice in two countries that were once part of the same island group and are separated by only about 200 kilometers (125 miles), the story of Samoa and American Samoa remains truly extraordinary. While genuine time travel is impossible, this phenomenon comes remarkably close. By crossing the International Date Line, you can quite literally move 24 hours forward or backward in time within just a few hours of travel.

Samoa's history—from German colonial rule and New Zealand's administration to independence—combined with its remarkable decision in 2011 to skip an entire day (December 30 simply never existed), makes it one of the most fascinating countries in the world. The fact that American Samoa chose to remain on the opposite side of the International Date Line only makes this contrast even more striking.

This story demonstrates that time is not merely a matter of physics—it can also be shaped by politics and economics. Samoa, and to a lesser



extent American Samoa, prove that you do not need science fiction to experience something that feels remarkably like time travel.

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