



Meet the Specialist

Cass Talbot

## Pacific Wanderings

*Cass Talbot discusses her love of the South Sea Islands.*

For many years I had a strong desire to visit New Zealand, thinking it would be the perfect place for me. I'm a real outdoors person and love hiking, biking, rock climbing and getting away from it all. Growing up I spent many holidays in the Alps hiking with my parents, and then later spent two years working in Austria as a ski, walking and mountain biking guide. When I finally got to New Zealand five years ago it did not disappoint, and joining Audley was a great opportunity for me to indulge in my passion for the country. It has also given me the chance to broaden my knowledge of the region, branching out into the South Pacific.

Up until a few years ago my only real experience of the South Pacific was through 'reality' television programmes and glossy holiday adverts in the back of magazines, but recently I have got beyond the lagoons and the honeymooners! With trips to Fiji, The Cook Islands and Samoa I have had a real insight into the many faces of travel in the South Pacific, fulfilling my craving for active, off-the-beaten-track adventure. Of these the place that epitomised all that was wonderful about South Pacific destinations was Samoa.

I visited Samoa last October and fell in love with it. The people are immediately welcoming and the drive from the airport to the main town on Upolu, Apia, is both exciting and intriguing. The villages along the

road-side are all focused around one communal meeting *fale* (open-sided hut) where much of everyday life takes place. With the system of chiefs still very much in place, this central *fale* is the epicentre of everyone's lives. Just driving from the airport I could see how community life was buzzing in the little villages.

In addition to the strong feeling of community and the people's pride in their culture, one of the aspects that made Samoa so appealing is how many diverse things there are to do. I spent time wandering through the vibrant markets in the main town of Apia, swimming beneath plunging waterfalls in the highlands and relaxing on the beach with a cocktail! One of my real highlights was hiking through the forest on Savai'i to the edge of the Tafua Savai'i crater. Although I did not see the resident Samoan flying fox the walk itself was a challenge, and the view across the forest-choked crater at the end was well worth it. What I love most about Samoa is that everything can be explored at your own pace, taking to the road by hire car, and travelling by ferry between the two main islands of Upolu and Savai'i.

The beauty of the South Pacific is that it offers different things to different people. If you want a luxurious stay in an overwater bungalow, a fantastic diving holiday, the chance to swim with whales, an activity trip or a stay with an historic and cultural twist then it is all possible somewhere in this scattering of beautiful islands.