Samoans at Sea: Seasonal Work on Ships

Malama Meleisea and Penelope Schoeffel[52]

When one thinks of Samoa — an island nation in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean — one might assume that seafaring would be an occupation pursued by many Samoans, but in fact few Samoans are involved in the industry. This is because local opportunities for such work are limited. Samoa has interisland ferries, but these offer few positions for trained seafarers so most of those wishing to work in the seafaring industry must find work on international fishing boats, cargo ships and cruise ships — work that requires being away from home for considerable periods of time.

In 2021, around 300 Samoans were employed on international cargo and cruise ships (Membrere 2021), and as of 2024 an estimated 500 Samoans are employed on such ships. The salaries they earn are higher than what they can earn in the local labour market, but Samoa's family-oriented culture means that it is rare for Samoan seafarers to choose a lifetime career at sea.

The global shipping industry is experiencing a shortage of trained seafarers at all levels, with a shortfall worldwide of around 34,000, against a requirement of 498,000 (Yuen et al. 2018). This shortage has in recent years prompted the Samoan government and shipping corporations to promote seafaring as an employment option for Samoans looking for temporary work abroad.

This article discusses the types of seafaring work Samoans currently pursue and the training available in Samoa for such employment, and it presents the perspectives of two Samoans engaged in this work and some of the issues associated with work in this sector. Although the two interviewees are only a small sample, the experiences and motivations of these two young Samoans are similar to each other and to other accounts heard by the authors, so can be considered to be broadly representative of other young Samoans in the seafaring industry.

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Qualifications and training for Samoan seafarers

Like those who seek temporary contracts in New Zealand and Australia under the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) and PALM (Pacific Australia Labour Mobility) schemes, Samoans who want to find work in seafaring occupations must speak English, must be good health and must have a clean police record. Employment contracts for seafarers are similar to those of those on labour mobility schemes: most Samoan seafarers work on contracts of nine months per year and may apply to renew their contracts to work the following year if they have performed well.

Unlike workers in the RSE and PALM schemes, however, seafarers must complete a certificate course (in maritime-related training that meets international standards) and must hold a license.[53] In Samoa's context, this extra training means that seafarers are generally more highly trained in their field of work than workers who go abroad on the RSE and PALM schemes.

Training of seafarers began in Samoa in the mid 1970's when the Federal Republic of Germany set up a marine training centre under its bilateral aid programme. The training centre was led by a German superintendent with a nautical background, assisted by a technical officer with a marine engineering background. By 1980 the centre was offering a basic maritime course to qualify seafarers for work on the decks and in the engine rooms and catering departments of container ships.

A German company, Hamburg Süd, began to employ Samoan graduates on its vessels in the 1970s, and at the time it was the only international employment provider. By 1983, however, Hamburg Süd could not guarantee enough employment opportunities for graduates.New sources of employment for graduates were found, and in 1986 the Government of Samoa established the Samoa Maritime Academy (SMA). A total of 298 people were trained in the period between 1986 and 1996 (Lene 1997).

A subsidiary of Hamburg Süd — Columbus Line — provided jobs and shipboard training to Samoans completing courses at the SMA. From 2004, the services of Columbus Line were directly integrated into Hamburg-Süd. The connections between those shipping companies led to the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) recruiting Samoan seafarers for its cargo and cruise ship divisions. As of 2023, the MSC was the sole recruiter of Samoan seafarers.

[53] In Samoa, licences are issued by the Maritime Division of the Ministry of Works, Transport and Infrastructure.

The German government continued its assistance by providing nautical and technical advisors and supplying equipment for the SMA until 1992. The Japanese government also assisted the school by providing two advisors. Other donors likewise provided assistance.

In 2015, the People's Republic of China built a new maritime campus on the Apia Mulinu'u peninsula, providing the means to consolidate marine training programmes and resources by merging the Samoa Shipping Maritime Academy with the School of Maritime Training at the National University of Samoa (NUS).

Today there are three maritime training programmes at the NUS: fisheries deckhand (certificate level I), marine engineering (certificate level II) and nautical (certificate level II). Samoa is fully compliant with the 1978 International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers. The NUS School of Maritime Studies lacks the equipment required for providing advanced marine engineering courses.

As awareness of seafaring employment has grown, more secondary school graduates have enrolled in the NUS courses. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a reduction in enrolments in 2021 and 2022 (see Table 1), however, because practical training could not be carried out due to restrictions on movement. Most students who were enrolled between 2018 and 2024 graduated, including some who repeated the programme, and these graduates were eligible to apply for licenses under the standards set by the International Maritime Organization. The largest number of NUS School of Maritime Training enrolments each year are in the nautical programme, and its graduates are the most likely to work on foreign ships.

Table 1: Enrolments in the NUS School of Maritime Training, by year and sex (2018-2024)

Year	Male	Female
2018	132	6
2019	81	10
2020	115	12
2021	62	5
2022	76	4
2023	149	22
2024	143	37

Source: NUS School of Maritime Studies personal communication 2024

At present, Samoa only has the resources to provide basic training for seafarers. Those wishing to obtain the training required to become officers must study overseas, for example in Fiji or New Zealand. The main constraint faced by the NUS to providing officer training is recruiting suitably qualified teaching staff. Another issue is that the cost of expansion to provide officer training would be very high relative to the number of likely graduates. A Pacific regional maritime training college, along the lines of the University of the South Pacific, would be advantageous, but a cost benefit analysis suggests that the cost of transportation and housing would be too high given the small number of students.

The NUS offers certificate programmes in tourism and hospitality, but this training is aimed towards employment in local hotels and restaurants and is insufficient to qualify women to work as cleaners, cooks or stewards on ships. According to the Assistant Chief Executive Officer of the Maritime Division of the Ministry of Works, Transport and Infrastructure (personal communication 2023), graduates of the commercial cooking courses offered in Samoa and hospitality services courses offered by the Australia Pacific Training Consortium would qualify for work on cruise ships, but to be licensed they must also take the safety course offered by the School of Maritime Training at NUS.

Recruiting of licensed graduates for the MSC's fleet of cruise ships and container ships is facilitated by Samoa Shipping Services, a division of the Ministry for Public Enterprises. Male graduates mainly start work on international ships as deckhands. There are limited opportunities for Samoan women to work on international ships, and women generally work on ships as cleaners.

Between 2004 and 2012, around 120 i-Kiribati women were employed on international cruise ships under an agreement between the Government of Kiribati and the Norwegian Cruise Liner (NCL) company (Kagan 2016). However recruitment was stopped because of the perception by government officials and private recruiters that too many of these women fell pregnant on the ships. In our observation, many people in Samoa think this risk of pregnancy is a reason why women should not work abroad on labour mobility schemes. Some also think such work should not be permitted for women who have children – because they must leave their children in the care of relatives, which presents a risk that the children will be neglected (see UNICEF et al. 2024).

Types of seafaring work

Criss-crossing internationalised, de-nationalised and national waters during their employment on merchant vessels and living with multi-national crews, seafarers could ... be seen in many ways as pioneers of global citizenship (Borovnik 2009:143).

Work on cruise ships

Cruise ships represent a growing sector of the global tourism industry, with an estimated 36 million people likely to take a cruise in 2024 (Cruise Lines International Association, cited in Ortolan 7 February 2024). Samoan cruise workers are generally employed with MSC Cruises, the third-largest cruise company in the world, which has a staff of over 30,000 in total (MSC Cruises nd).

Work on cargo ships

On cargo ships, everything is mechanised and computerised. This means that the time spent in port can be less than 24 hours and, unlike cruise ships, cargo ships only need small crews. For example, "a ship carrying 9,000 40-foot containers ... may make the three-week transit from Hong Kong through the Suez Canal to Germany with only twenty people on board" (Levinson 2006). Samoans are employed on cargo ships with the MSC, which has around 300 routes to 520 ports in over 155 countries (MSC nd).

Samoan seafarers

Vai's story

Vai, a man aged 25, previously did seasonal work picking fruit in New Zealand and is now employed on nine-month contracts on MSC cruise ships. So far, he has completed three contracts on several cruise ships.

Vai graduated from the NUS Marine School in 2020. He said he was inspired to get trained in this work by his father, who had been an international engineering seafarer in his younger days and who has been a leader in establishing Samoa's seafarer training programmes.

Vai started as an "ordinary seaman", and then became an "able seaman" when he had learned his duties as a deckhand, working mainly as one of a team of safety workers. The work is monotonous, requiring repeated checks

of safety equipment across the ship. This must be learned by heart. In his career so far, Vai recalls only one incident, where a fault (in the ship's engine room) was observed and reported for repair.

According to seafarers we have spoken with, as of 2023 Samoan seafarers earned between WST18,000 and WST24,000 for six months of work (between WST3,000 and WST4,000 per month), depending on their level of experience.In comparison, reports from RSE workers in New Zealand indicate that in 2023 they earned between WST14,600 and WST18,723 for six months of work after deductions (between WST2,433 and WST3,120 per month), and PALM workers on temporary contracts in Australia in 2023 earned between WST13,374 and WST16,897 over six months after deductions (between WST2,229 and WST2,816 per month).

As a deckhand, Vai works 8-hour shifts and is paid between USD1,100 and USD1,500 (between WST3,000 and WST4,000) per month, with a monthly deduction of USD10 for health insurance. Workers on cruise ships have to pay for half of the cost of their airfare, an amount which is deducted from their first month's pay. Some believe the deduction is made by Samoa Shipping Services, rather than by the MSC.

Vai was told by a ship's captain that "Samoans are good workers but are more expensive than others", and speculated that the reason for this may be the high cost of the airfares of Samoans to join the ships. Recruits must fly from Samoa to the port where the ship is located, such as Singapore, Dubai, Naples or Sao Paulo, and then return home at the completion of their contracts.

No overtime is paid to deckhands if their watches are extended beyond 8 hours, which some workers believe is unfair. The only exception is when deckhands assist passengers to be transferred ashore in small craft for sightseeing; in such cases the deckhands are paid an extra USD10.

Vai said he much prefers working as a seafarer to working as a fruit picker. Although the wages are not significantly higher for seafaring work, it is easier for seafarers to save money because they are provided with food and board on the ships at no extra cost. His only expenses are for drinks, snacks and other personal items while on board. When Vai worked picking apples in New Zealand he had to pay for his board and lodgings, airfares, insurance and taxes.

Vai remits part of his wages to his mother (between WST1000 and WST2000 monthly); she uses some of the money he remits for family needs and puts some aside for him as savings.

There is strict discipline on board. Seafarers are highly motivated to behave well because if they have negative reports on their personnel records they may not be offered another contract. Anyone who gets drunk or gets into a fight is fired and blacklisted. The ships carry "human resources" staff members to whom reports can be made if interpersonal issues arise such as sexual harassment or other offensive behaviour. Vai commented that Samoan seafarers who do not buy alcohol save more money than seafarers who do. Muslim Indonesian crew members,[54] for example, are likely to save more of their pay than crew members who drink alcohol.

Most of the men Vai works with are from Indonesia and the Philippines, but Vai said there have always been other Samoans on the cruise ships he has served on; on his last contract there were 13 Samoans, all NUS Marine School graduates, in the cruise ship crew of about 900 men and women. Although the crews come from all over the world, the low-paid work on ships is mainly done by men and women from low-income countries.

In terms of the social context, Vai said that at first he was a bit shocked by social life of staff on cruise ships. In Samoan culture there is great secrecy about non-marital relations, but on the ships he has worked on crew members have been open about their temporary relationships. Some crew members work as couples, but most work as singles. He said he enjoys meeting and making friends with people from other countries.

The working language on board is English, so communication between workers is easy. When he works his watch doing safety inspections, he is in a team with three other men, and the team members get to know one another well. The work is routine and repetitive, but between leaving school and starting work Vai lived in his village and became accustomed to an uneventful life, so he has no complaints about his work. His only wish would be for overtime payments, which would increase his salary.

He said that Samoan women graduating from the NUS School of Maritime Training can get jobs on cruise ships, but they are more likely to be assigned as cleaners than as deckhands. Working as a cleaner offers the chance of

[54] According to Samoan seafarers, most Muslim crew members they work with do not drink alcohol.

performance-based promotions, unlike deck work. There are no promotion opportunities for cruise deckhands unless they acquire further training, which is not provided by the company.

Vai is interested in building a career on cruise ships. He aims to study towards officer level by obtaining a certificate at the University of the South Pacific. The highest-level of training currently available for seafarers in the Pacific region is Class IV, which is offered at training institutions in New Zealand.

Vala's story

Vala, a man aged 27, is a graduate of the NUS School of Maritime Training and has completed three contracts on MSC container ships (cargo ships). When interviewed in early 2024, he was preparing for his fourth contract. He is unmarried and grew up in a rural village in Samoa.

Like Vai, he worked one season in New Zealand picking fruit. He prefers his present work because he can travel. As he commented, "Since I was a child, I've always dreamed of seeing the world".

His work is in ship maintenance and navigation. He is usually one of a crew of 27 to 30 men, and they take turns to do navigation watches using the computerized navigation system.

He is paid more than those who work on cruise ships. His basic wage is USD1,339 plus a 30-hour overtime allowance, which brings his wage to around USD1,500 (approximately WST4,000) per month, less a ten percent deduction for health insurance. He said the company and the recruiter did not deduct any of his travel costs from his wages. He saves part of his earnings and remits a portion every month to his family. He has bought his family a car and also pays for some of their expenses.

Each time he has signed on, he joined his ship in Singapore. All the ships he has worked on have called into various ports in China to unload and reload before continuing to ports in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Container ships offer a promotion to "able seaman" without requiring further technical training. A competent deckhand can also be promoted to supervisory level (bosun), which offers a significant jump in wages. Val says there a several Samoan bosuns on MSC cargo ships, but these ships carry very small crews so opportunities to become a bosun are limited.

On several of his contracts, Vala was the only Samoan on board. On his last voyage, the crew were from Eastern Europe, and they were joined by one Samoan after six months aboard. He believes Samoans have a good reputation with the MSC cargo division because they are strong and well mannered.

He said working on ships is a lonely life in some ways, but he meets many people. In his experience, relations between the crew members are friendly and respectful. The crew members have shared access to a television and computers, and many enjoy playing cards together. Good conduct on board is required, so crew members may only buy two alcoholic drinks per day.

In 2021, during the Covid-19 disruptions, Vala spent six months in a Chinese port doing a big refit of a ship. He said that when crew go ashore, they can draw up to 20 percent cash advances on their pay. He joked that when he ate ashore in China he only ate meat that he was sure was chicken, after seeing the range of unfamiliar animals sold as food in the wet markets.

When asked about any concerns he had, he said that (in early 2024) he was concerned about the increased risk of war and piracy for seafarers, including attacks in the Red Sea on ships en route to the Suez Canal.

Vala said that he intends to keep working as a seafarer for the present, but his longer-term ambition is to migrate to New Zealand; he enters the New Zealand visa 'lottery' every year.[55]

The downside of seafaring jobs

According to Yuen et al. (2018:1), retention of seafarers can be difficult because of "boredom at sea, single-task [monotonous] work environment, emotional and work-related stresses" and prolonged time away from family. The time away from family is a particular problem for workers from collectivist cultures,[56] who "prioritise family bonding over individual needs" (Yuen et al. 2018:2, citing Abdullah 2017). Also, the lack of variety on board means that younger workers often decide to leave seafaring for shore-based jobs as these give them greater freedom and comparable salaries (Yuen et al. 2018).

Because of labour shortages in the shipping industry, many seafarers work longer than eight hours daily, and therefore do not get enough rest (Yuen et

[55] Under the New Zealand–Samoa Treaty of Friendship, a set quota of migrant visas are offered (via a 'lottery') each year to Samoans who have found guaranteed employment in New Zealand, and who have clean bills of health and police clearance.

[56] See Brian Alofaituli's article in this volume ("Samoan Tuna Cannery Workers in American Samoa"), which discusses Samoa's collectivist culture.

al. 2018). This lack of rest can be a deterrent for other young people considering seafaring work, so can in turn lead to even greater labour shortages.

Attracting more workers to the shipping industry may require improving working conditions for seafarers, by giving them more rest and more varied tasks, and may also require giving all workers overtime pay.

Motivations and impacts of seafaring work

The accounts by Vai and Vala of their experiences as seafarers show that they have strong family ties, and like the workers participating in labour mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand these men see their jobs as a form of *tautua* (service) to their families and communities.

Vai and Vala both come from a small coastal village on the edge of a lagoon where their ancestors built canoes and fished, and from which, for many generations, their ancestors set sail into the ocean beyond. Their grandfathers lived lives of farming and fishing to support their families, and their grandmothers wove precious 'fine mats', which were the family's wealth, along with the land and sea.

Their village looks like a picture of 'paradise' in a tourist brochure, but it is not seen that way by its young people. Nowadays most young men and, increasingly, young women from their village hope to join labour mobility schemes or migrate so that they can earn sufficient money to meet family obligations and cover church costs, while also getting a glimpse of the world beyond.

The village houses, once made from wood and thatch, are now built with concrete and roofing iron, which are mostly purchased with income earned abroad. The families (in Samoa) of those who migrate or participate in labour mobility schemes today own cars and television sets, smart phones, washing machines and electric fans. They are the consumers of the low-end proceeds of globalised production, shipping and mass tourism systems, which are supported by the cheap labour supplied by their children and others like them from low-income countries across the world. At the same time, their purchases of consumer goods are ensuring ongoing employment opportunities abroad for young people, and these workers bring valuable foreign currency into Samoa.

All of the families in Vai and Vala's village have close relatives in New Zealand, Australia or the United States, and some have family members in two or even all three of these countries. Every family in the village has members who have gone abroad as migrant workers employed in the manufacturing and care industries or via labour mobility schemes (harvesting fruit, doing farm work and processing meat or fish), and now many families have young people who have done well enough in school to train as seafarers and go abroad to work on ships.

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