Samoa Trip—Return to Lotofaga

On 9 July 2011, 14 intrepid Pembroke students and Mr Bruce embarked on a brightly decorated yellow bus for the Samoan village of Lotofaga. The bus looked full before they boarded for the cultural experience of a life time, so the students had a joyous 2 hour insight into stacking (sitting on laps) while Samoans sat half out the window and swung in the doorway. It was a friendly way to get to know local people and part of the ‘fa’a Samoa’ or Samoan way.

Ms Abbott and Jackie Faasisila, our friend and mentor, were waiting in the village with the Congregational Church Women’s group who were to be our hosts for the 4 days we stayed in the village. The village welcomed us with an ‘ava’ ceremony, which included much passing of long sticks, drinking of kava, speeches by the Matais and ceremonial gifts of money to people of rank. Each student was welcomed to their host family by the mother placing a garland of flowers around their neck. It was here we were also introduced to the Samoan staples of coconut milk, taro and breadfruit, and more food than we could eat.

Alexandra and Ali (both Yr 12) are instructed on Tapa making
The host families were very generous in their hospitality but it was very different from Australia. Some students had homes that were traditional fales, without walls; some slept on floor mats with the whole household; and others were given a bucket for a shower. Trying to communicate when you do not speak the same language, learning to read body language in a foreign culture and attempting to understand how to behave appropriately were all challenges met by the students. Fortunately, laughter and smiling is as large a part of Samoan culture as in Australia, and the students were moved by the generosity of their hosts.

Students were able to help little brothers and sisters with their homework, play guitar and sing with the family, learn how to collect food without any supermarkets, play rugby with the lads and watch hilarious Korean soaps on television when no-one knew the language.

Christianity is very important in Samoa and our village was Congregational. Some families still shared in the ‘sa’, a prayer time before dinner, and our students found that most families said grace before meals. The students attended church on Sunday with their families, some sitting with their little brothers and sisters amid the Sunday school, and others with their mother who was all dressed in white with a white hat. Many of the girls had been dressed in white for the occasion and the boys were all loaned lava lavas (skirts) to wear. We were all impressed by the magnificent singing of the choir and the congregation. The pastor kindly translated the Bible reading into English for us and gave a synopsis of his sermon in English so we could feel included.

Part of the purpose of the trip was assisting the Lotofaga Primary School with lessons and donations of books for their very limited library. Much preparation had gone into the lessons for classes that incorporated activities based around various themes as a way to learn English. Even the teachers, as well as the Samoan children, enjoyed making masks, doing origami and completing join-the-dot pictures of Australian animals. In a school where all the students sit on the floor on woven mats and there is only one ancient computer for teacher use, our coloured handouts and textas and pencils were gratefully received. We all had fun for the morning and the school was appreciative of the books and money we were able to donate.

Living in the village gave the group the opportunity to learn how to cook an ‘umu’ (feast)—pig and vegetables cooked in hot rocks; learn basket making and weaving; understand the importance of coconut and taro crops; and roast and grind cocoa beans. We had time as a group to discuss the complex relationships within the village structure with Jackie Faasisila, our organiser, friend and mentor. We were farewelled with a ‘fia fia’—a village celebration of song and dance accompanied by much laughter.

Past students will be pleased to hear that, for the most part, Lotofaga was unscathed by the tsunami of 2009, but it is still very much in people’s minds, as some families still grieve lost family members and many of the villages to the east along the coast road are no longer there. The money we raised to help in the reconstruction has enabled the relocation of villages away from the coast for protection. We have had five journeys to Samoa and each time have deepened our friendships. While the villagers may not have the financial wealth we enjoy here, they do have a wealth of culture, community and faith that they share generously.

Ms Abbott  
Head of the International Baccalaureate