

Time Travel

In Tahiti with James Samuela

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“When you are kids in Tahiti, you are always around tattoos,” says James Samuela, a big, brown bear of a man, who speaks earnestly with a thick French accent. “I did my first tattoo when I was 8 years old. I used a piece of bamboo with a shark tooth attached. I didn’t realize I was taking part in an ancient tradition. And I didn’t realize this would become my life.”

Samuela is one of Tahiti’s most celebrated tattoo artists. He lives on Moorea with his wife, two kids and three horses. As a child he liked to draw. He eventually moved to Paris, where he studied at the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts*. He graduated, moved back to Tahiti and set up a tattoo shop. Customers would come in asking for traditional tattoos. Samuela called around and discovered that it was a dying art form.

It’s easy to associate tattoos with strip bars and Harley Davidsons, but in fact they go back as far as 1500 B.C. The word “tattoo” derives from the Tahitian word *tatau*. In ancient Polynesian society, nearly everyone was tattooed — it was as much a part of the culture as it was a body ornament. Tattooing indicated one’s genealogy and/or rank in society. It was a sign of wealth, of strength and of the ability to endure pain. As such, chiefs and warriors generally had the most elaborate tattoos. Tattooing was typically begun at adolescence and would often not be completed for several years. Tattooing was not limited to men. Tahitian women were also tattooed — it was an indication of a girl’s sexual maturity.

With the arrival of Europeans in the 18th century came a dramatic change to both tattooing and the culture in general. Captain Cook and others returned from the Pacific with tales of exotic islands, of “savage” cultures indulging in erotic dance and bizarre rituals. One of these rituals was tattooing. When the missionaries arrived in the early 1800s, this art form was nearly killed. Considered to be a sinful glorification of the skin, they strictly forbid tattoo. Fortunately, the art of tattooing was well documented, and it is only in recent years (since 1981) that tattooing has enjoyed a renaissance. Today, Tahitian tattoo has again gained recognition as a highly respected art form and is sought by travelers the world over.

But Samuela was surprised that there weren’t more tattoo artists working in the traditional mold. He decided to take matters into his own hands. He apprenticed with one of Tahiti’s only traditional tattoo artists. It was a *Karate Kid* story — first Samuela raked leaves and did house work, then he was taught this ancient technique.

“I used bones from wild boar and sea birds,” remembers Samuela. “I had to watch closely ‘cause he

was only going to show me once.”

Samuela explains that it’s all about the tools. “Back in the early days, the one who was using the best tool was making the best tattoos.”

Getting a traditional Tahitian tattoo is not like getting a normal tattoo. You don’t walk into the studio and pick a motif or design off the wall. Samuela talks to his customers at length about their idea. Then he sets about carving the tool. “It’s time travel,” he says. “I don’t use machines to carve my tools. Everything is made by hand. You put energy and soul into making the tool. It takes a whole week to make one.” The actual tattooing usually takes several hours. When he’s finished, the customer gets to keep the hand-carved tool.

Not long ago Samuela had a wonderful epiphany. He was studying an ancient book of Polynesian tattoos that doubles as a kind of registry. In it he found his family name. It turns out his ancestors, 300 years back, did tattoos.

“When I discovered this, it all made sense. I understand now that this is my calling.” x



James Samuela, shot on location at Sofitel Resort, Moorea.