Island detour for 319 as smoke fills cockpit

Hundreds of passengers were forced to spend the night on the tiny South Pacific island of Pago Pago after their United Airlines flight from Melbourne had to make a "precautionary" landing on Monday.

But with only a few hotels on the island, airport officials struggled to find accommodation for the 319 passengers.

Flight UA848 to Los Angeles was detoured to the American Samoan territory when smoke filled the cockpit more than halfway through the flight.

A United Airlines spokesman said the pilot, following aviation guidelines, made a precautionary landing at the nearest airport that could take the Boeing 747.

"It was a precise landing. There was no need necessarily for the plane to land at all," he said.

A passenger on the flight said travellers became concerned when it was announced the plane would be detoured, but the crew handled it "pretty well".