

# The Gambier Archipelago



Yep, this is about as close as you can get to the ends of the earth. The most remote of the French Polynesian island groups, the Gambier Archipelago lies at the extreme south-eastern end of the long arc of the Tuamotus. On a map the islands appear to be a part of the Tuamotu atolls, but in fact these are high islands that are entirely different from their neighbours. Well to the south, the islands' climate is relatively mild and in winter it can actually get cool.

The few tourists who make it out this way rarely leave disappointed. The surprising landscapes of the archipelago offer a condensed version of the entire country: rocky peaks, a lagoon as clear as glass, white-sand beaches and thriving coral, not to mention a fascinating history and plenty of interesting monuments. If only it wasn't so darned expensive to get here...

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Marvelling at the folly of Father Honoré Laval's astounding **Cathédrale Saint-Michel** (p243) in Rikitea
- Shuddering at the ominous **maison nucléaire** (p243) fallout shelter on Mangareva
- Touring the lagoon and the islands of **Taravai** and **Aukena** (p243) in an outrigger canoe
- Relaxing on some of the most magnificent **beaches** in French Polynesia
- Appreciating the **tropical beauty** of the island while enjoying the not-so tropical temperatures



■ POPULATION: 1085

■ AREA: 27 SQ KM

## History

The Gambiers were populated in three waves from the 10th to the 13th centuries, and there is much speculation that they may have been an important stopping point on the Polynesian migration routes to New Zealand or Easter Island.

The Sacred Heart Congregation, the first Catholic mission in French Polynesia, was established here in 1834 and quickly converted the entire population. Father Honoré Laval, leader of the mission, and his assistant François Caret became virtual rulers of the archipelago. Until persistent complaints about his behaviour led to his exile on Tahiti in 1871, Laval ran the islands like his own personal fiefdom (see p29).

Laval transformed the islands, building wide roads, a huge cathedral, nine churches and chapels, monuments, lookout towers, quays and numerous buildings, including a prison. Unfortunately, at the same time, the people of the Gambier Archipelago simply died out. When Laval arrived the population may have been 5000 to 6000, spread across the four main islands, but by 1887 the population had dropped to 463 and only recently has it once again passed 1000.

What role Laval played in this disaster is an open question. One view is that European diseases, which were imported by whalers and trading ships, caused the annihilation of the population, and that Laval was merely an observer. The opposite view is that Laval was a single-minded bigot who wiped out native culture and then worked the islanders to death constructing a collection of absurdly overambitious monuments to his beliefs. Laval's own memoirs actually recount with delight the destruction of the idols and symbols belonging to the old religion.

Today Mangareva is known for producing some of the finest and most colourful pearls in Polynesia.

## Culture

Early European explorers noted the absence of outrigger canoes when they passed Mangareva. Peter H Buck, an ethnologist from New Zealand who studied the Gambiers in 1930, formulated the interesting hypothesis that, due to the unusual geography of the islands, people no longer needed to



build complicated outriggers and did all their day-to-day activities using rafts. The only time outriggers were used was in warfare. When Te Ma-teoa, the grandfather of the last king of Mangareva, won supreme leadership in a historic battle he forbade the construction of outriggers, since any attempt to build them would be in anticipation of war. Visitors from Tahiti and the Tuamotus later reintroduced the outrigger canoe to the Gambiers.

The ancient Gambier culture was wiped out more thoroughly than any other in French Polynesia. Laval's extremist tactics destroyed almost every vestige of ancient beliefs and the people's adherence to them, within about two years.

## Geography

The wide polygon-shaped lagoon is protected by a 90km coral reef. Along the northern half there are 25 *motu* but the southern half of the reef is partly submerged.

Within this massive lagoon are 10 volcanic islands. Apart from a handful of people who are on other islands, only Mangareva, the largest of them, is populated. Mangareva is 8km long but measures only 1.5km across at its narrowest point. The highest elevations are Mt Duff (441m) and Mt Mokoto (423m). The three other larger islands are Taravai, Aukena and Akamaru. About 50km southeast is the small island of Temoe.

## Getting There & Around

The Gambier Archipelago is around 1700km southeast of Tahiti.

**Air Tahiti** (☎ 97 82 65; Rikitea; ⏰ 8am-2pm Mon & Fri, 8-10am Wed) flies to the Gambier Archipelago once a week. A return flight costs 56,000 CFP and takes about 3½ hours. During the school holidays a second weekly flight is added, usually via Hao.

From Tahiti the cargo ships *Nuku Hau* and *Taporo V* sail via the eastern Tuamotus to the Gambier Archipelago every three weeks or so; see p265 for details.

The airport is on Motu Totegegie, on the northeastern side of the lagoon. A communal ferry from Mangareva meets every flight; the journey takes 45 minutes and costs 500 CFP.

*Pension* owners can organise island tours by boat and visits to the major sites. On Mangareva there is a small network of walking tracks. It's possible to bike around the island but parts are very steep.

## MANGAREVA

In the dry season the grass-covered hills of Mangareva have a sombre brown appearance, but **Rikitea**, the island's sole village, is a green, pleasant and quiet little place. In the upper part of the town stands the **Cathédrale Saint-Michel** (Cathedral of St Michael), built between 1839 and 1848, the ultimate symbol of Laval's single-minded obsession. Featuring twin blue-trimmed towers, the building can accommodate 1200 people – more than the population of the island today!

Various other Laval constructions can be found in the village, including the coastal watchtowers and the turret, which are all that remain of the 'palace' Laval built for the island's last king, Maputeao. At the instigation of Laval, Maputeao changed his name to Gregoria Stanislas, and there is a memorial to him in **Cimetière Saint-Pierre**. The **Couvent Rouru** (Rouru Convent) once housed 60 nuns, and it's said that Laval hid the entire female population of the island in the convent whenever whaling ships paid a visit.

A much more recent construction stands beside the coast road on the northern side of the island – the **maison nucléaire** (nuclear fallout shelter). Moruroa (see p30) lies just 400km northwest of Mangareva and during the period from 1966 to 1974, when above-ground nuclear tests were conducted, the

entire population of the island was herded into this ugly metal-walled fallout shelter if winds threatened to blow fallout towards the Gambier. Older island residents remember being squeezed into this windowless tomb for up to three days at a time.

## Sleeping & Eating

Credit cards are not generally accepted on Mangareva so you'll need to bring plenty of cash.

**Chez Bianca & Benoît** (☎ /fax 97 83 76; Rikitea; s/d with half board 9500/15,000 CFP, bungalow s/d with half board 15,000/20,000 CFP; ⏰ closed Jun) This place is located 1km from the quay and offers fine views across the bay to Aukena. There are three rooms with shared bathroom (with hot water) and four comfortable bungalows with attached bathroom. The owners are dynamic and helpful, and the food has a good reputation.

**Chez Jojo** (☎ /fax 97 82 61; r with half board per person 7000 CFP, bungalow s/d with half board 11,000/18,000 CFP) In an enchanting, lagoon setting 5km from the quay, Chez Jojo has two spacious bungalows and one clean but economical room with shared bathroom in the owner's house. The local-style food is excellent and there are bikes and kayaks available for hire.

**Tara Etu Kura** (☎ 97 83 25; Rikitea; bungalows 6000 CFP; breakfast 1000 CFP, lunch or dinner 2000 CFP) With one bungalow for one or two people, this option has a family atmosphere and is near the football field.

There are some modest food shops in the village and some will accept credit cards. **Snack Jojo** (☎ 97 82 61; Rikitea; mains 900-1500 CFP; ⏰ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) is in the east of the village and serves reasonably priced fare.

## TARAVAI & AUKENA

Taravai had a population of 2000 when the missionaries arrived, but today only a handful of people live on the island. The 1868 **Église Saint-Gabriel** (Church of St Gabriel), with its conch-shell decoration, is abandoned, as are the other buildings in **Agokono**, the island's all-but-empty village.

Aukena also has reminders of the missionary period, including the 1839 **Église Saint-Raphaël** (Church of St Raphael) and the hexagonal **lookout tower**, still used as a landmark, on the southwestern tip of the island.

## AKAMARU & TEMOE

Akamaru was the first island to be visited by Laval and his 1841 **Église Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix** (Our Lady of Peace Church) still stands on the utterly deserted island. Occasional groups come over from Mangareva to maintain the church or to pick oranges in season.

The remote island of Temoe, 50km south-east of Akamaru, has a **marae** with some

Marquesan features, leading to theories that Marquesans may have paused here en route to Easter Island. Temoe was populated until 1838, when the missionaries shifted the inhabitants to Mangareva. Archaeologist Kenneth Emory from Hawaii's Bishop Museum carried out investigations here and on Mangareva in 1934, and in that same year James Norman Hall, co-author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, was shipwrecked on the island.

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