

# History

The idyllic, isolated islands of Polynesia were among the last places on earth to be settled by humans and, a thousand or so years later, were also some of the last places to be colonised by Europeans.

No-one really knows why early peoples migrated here or even where they came from. The modern belief is that Polynesian voyages originated from the Philippines or Indonesia, perhaps spurred by territorial disputes or overpopulation. Whatever the reason, ancient Polynesians packed up their outriggers with coconuts, *uru* (breadfruit), taro, sugarcane, dogs, pigs and chickens and headed out into the blue. These were feats of maritime prowess, not to be matched by Europeans for over a thousand years.

David Howarth's *Tahiti: A Paradise Lost* is a readable but idealistic account of Tahitian history from pre-European times to the French takeover.

## MARAE

Scattered throughout the islands, mostly forgotten and with only a few restored, the most visible remains of ancient Tahitian culture are in its *marae*, open-air places of worship. Today, Polynesians have fully embraced Christianity and many of these temples have been destroyed in the name of agriculture, dismantled to construct churches, used as house foundations or simply left to become engulfed by vines and weeds. Accounts from early European explorers are the only insight we have as to what these once vibrant and sacred sites must have been like.

Rectangular in shape, *marae* are paved platforms built of painstakingly collected blocks of basalt or coral. Every island has its own distinct design, but the common points are that they all have a paved, level space and an open rectangular platform surrounded by a wall. At one end is the *ahu* (altar), which was reserved for priests and kings. Depending on the importance and function of the *marae*, the *ahu* could have one to several tiers.

Births, deaths and family events were celebrated at simple family *marae* while larger *marae* were temples of chiefs where village meetings, sacrifices and wider religious ceremonies were practised. The largest and most important temples were the royal *marae*, such as Ra'iatea's Taputapuatea, that had influence over the whole of Polynesia, attracting chiefs from afar who would pledge allegiance to the kings.

Visitors today will find the most comprehensive and well-restored *marae* in Opunohu Valley (p118) on Mo'orea, where a series of *marae* are well maintained and even have information boards; at Taputapuatea (p144) in Ra'iatea, the most important remaining *marae* in French Polynesia, and the most impressive to visit; and on the principal islands of the Marquesas. Of course the mystery and feeling of discovery you'll experience with finding an old *marae* tangled in the bush can make these lost gems equally interesting.

Check out [www.tahiti1.com](http://www.tahiti1.com), a good, practical site with information about Tahitian ancient history, art and legends as well as maritime history, tattooing and more.

## CONTACT WITH EUROPEANS

Imagine months at sea in cramped, squalid quarters, with many of the crew suffering from scurvy, and happening upon a mountainous isle exploding with fruit, water and women. It was in these circumstances that, around 1500 years after the islands were settled, the first European

## TIMELINE 1500 BC

Polynesia's westernmost islands of Samoa and Tonga populated, probably via Melanesia

## 200 BC–AD 400

Eastern islands including French Polynesia, Hawaii and Easter Island populated

### POLYNESIAN MIGRATION

Exceptionally seaworthy boats and outstanding navigation skills are what made the Polynesian migration possible. Ancient Polynesians had detailed knowledge of the paths of heavenly bodies, wind direction, and sea and current movement that modern science has yet to match.

Nothing remains of the boats used to make these fascinating voyages, so we have to make do with descriptions given by 18th-century Europeans. Cook's voyage yielded the most detailed drawings and description of the large Polynesian *va'a* (canoes) that were used for long voyages. Forerunners of the catamaran, the canoes had two parallel hulls fused together by cross beams or platforms into an integral structure; they could be driven by sail, paddle or both. All materials in the canoes and sails were of plant origin, and construction tools were of stone, shell or bone. They could carry up to 70 people – on the connecting platform the plants, seeds and animals (chickens, pigs and dogs) needed to colonise the new land could be carried.

Nowadays the canoe is still an important symbol even though it is often made of synthetic materials. It naturally appears as the centrepiece of the French Polynesian flag with five figurines on board, each one representing one of the archipelagos. Outrigger canoe racing remains the national sport and is immutably popular.

explorers ventured into the region. Lacking the navigation methods that Polynesians had developed over millennia of Pacific travel, the Europeans searched for islands in the Pacific by means of a rather random needle-in-a-haystack method. The navigational instruments of the day were such that, having chanced upon an island, it was equally problematic to locate it on a return trip.

### Wallis

The *Dolphin* anchored at Matavai Bay in Tahiti's lagoon in late June 1767. A quarter of the crew was down with scurvy and Captain Samuel Wallis himself was incapacitated during most of his visit. Initially, the arrival was greeted with fascination as hundreds of canoes surrounded the ship, including canoes carrying young women 'who played a great many droll wanton tricks'. But the locals' fascination turned to fear and they attacked the *Dolphin*. Wallis retaliated by firing grapeshot at the Tahitians and then sending a party ashore to destroy homes and canoes. Following this a trade relationship developed: the crew was desperate for fresh supplies and the Tahitians, who had not yet discovered metals, were delighted to receive knives, hatchets and nails in exchange.

Wallis only stayed in Matavai Bay for a few weeks, just long enough to name the island King George's Land and claim it for Britain.

### Bougainville

With his ships *La Boudeuse* and *L'Etoile*, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville arrived on Tahiti in April 1768, less than a year after Wallis. At this time Wallis was still homeward bound, so Bougainville was completely unaware that he was not the first European to set eyes on the island. His visit only lasted nine days, but Bougainville was a more cultured, considered man than Wallis and had no unfriendly clashes with the Tahitians.

Bougainville explained that the Tahitians 'pressed us to choose a woman and come on shore with her; and their gestures, which were not

ambiguous, denoted in what manner we should form an acquaintance with her'. Bougainville's reports of Venus-like women with 'the celestial form of that goddess', and of the people's uninhibited attitude towards matters sexual, swept through Paris like wildfire.

Unaware the Union Jack had already flown over the island, Bougainville claimed Tahiti for France but, like Wallis, he was soon overshadowed when the greatest Pacific explorer of them all arrived on the scene.

### Cook

In three great expeditions between 1769 and 1779, James Cook filled out the map of the Pacific so comprehensively that future expeditions were reduced to joining the dots. Cook had been sent to the Pacific with two ambitious tasks. One, which was for the Royal Society, was to observe the transit of Venus as it passed across the face of the sun. By timing the transit from three very distant places it was hoped that the distance from the earth to the sun could be calculated. Tahiti was selected as one of the three measuring points (the other two were in Norway and Canada). Cook's second objective was to hunt for the mythical great continent of the south.

The instruments of the time proved to be insufficiently accurate to achieve Cook's first objective, but Cook's expeditions did yield impressive scientific work. Cook was the perfect man for the task: expert seaman, brilliant navigator, keen observer, inspiring leader and indefatigable explorer. Furthermore, he was ably supported by endlessly enthusiastic and inquisitive associates, most notably the wealthy young Joseph Banks. As a result Cook's voyages communicated the wonders not only of Tahiti but also of New Zealand and Australia to an appreciative European audience.

### Boenechea

The Spanish, who were firmly established in South America, looked upon the Pacific as their backyard and were less than happy to hear of the visits to Tahiti by other European navigators. In 1772 Don Domingo

The first airstrip in French Polynesia was built on Bora Bora by Americans during WWII and is still in use today.

### THE ISLAND OF LUST

When the *Dolphin* returned to Europe, Samuel Wallis, a rather unimaginative man, wrote his official report describing Tahiti. This earnest, dull report, which focused on the geographical beauty of the region, was soon overshadowed by gleeful rumours of uninhibited and beautiful women greeting the sailors with 'lascivious gestures'.

If Wallis was uncommunicative, Bougainville compensated for this with his tales of a new Cythera and his companion Dr Commerçon's gushing avowals that the Tahitians knew 'no other god than love'. Cook in turn was less florid, but his prosaic reports confirmed the view that Tahitian women would 'dance a very indecent dance' while 'singing most indecent songs'.

In reality, Polynesian women were not hanging around waiting to seduce a shipload of uncouth and strange white men. Sex was simply a natural part of everyday life, so it's hardly surprising that Polynesian women wanted to check whether these white men had all the right bits and pieces. This uninhibited approach to sex was soon exploited by sex-starved sailors, whalers and traders, who began buying sex with nails (coveted by the locals for making fish hooks), clothes and alcohol, creating a demand for prostitution, spreading European diseases and palpably contributing to the rapid decline of the Polynesian culture.

1520

Ferdinand Magellan (Spanish) sights Puka Puka in the northeast Tuamotus but manages to miss the rest of French Polynesia

1767

Samuel Wallis arrives in Matavai Bay, Tahiti on his ship *Dolphin*, kills many Tahitians and names the island 'King George's Land'

1768

Louis-Antoine de Bougainville visits Tahiti, ogles the women and begins the myth of 'New Cythera'

1769–79

James Cook makes three voyages to Tahiti and amasses cultural and scientific information that is used as reference even today

de Boenechea sailed the *Aguilla* from Peru and anchored in the lagoon off Tautira on Tahiti Iti. For the third time, the island was claimed by a European nation. Boenechea installed two inept missionaries and established Tautira as the first long-term European settlement on the island.

In 1775 the *Aguilla* again returned from Peru. The two Spanish missionaries, who had been spectacularly unsuccessful at converting ‘the heathen’, and who from all reports were terrified of the islanders, were more than happy to scuttle back to Peru. Boenechea died on Tahiti during this visit, and thus ended the Spanish role on Tahiti. He is buried by the Catholic church that today bears his name in Tautira on Tahiti Iti.

## THE MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY

There had been some colourful chapters in the history of European exploration in the Pacific, but none captured the imagination like the mutiny on the *Bounty*. This most talked-about event made HMS *Bounty* one of the most famous ships in history and William Bligh’s name a byword for bad-tempered cruelty. It also inspired three Hollywood extravaganzas, almost the sum total of cinematic interest in Tahiti (see the boxed text, p41).

Bligh, an expert navigator who had learnt his trade under James Cook and had already visited Tahiti, was sent off to convey breadfruit from Tahiti to the Caribbean after someone had the bright idea that breadfruit would make a fine food source for enslaved Africans in the Caribbean.

Bligh’s expedition started late in 1787. After an arduous 10-month voyage, he arrived at a time when breadfruit-tree saplings could not be transplanted. The crew remained on Tahiti for six long, languorous months. Eventually, with the breadfruit trees loaded on board, the *Bounty* set sail, westbound, for the Caribbean. Three weeks later, on 28 April 1789, when passing by Tonga, the crew, led by first mate Fletcher Christian, mutinied and took over the ship.

Bligh was pushed onto the *Bounty*’s launch with 18 faithful crew members and set adrift. Proving his unmatched skill as a champion navigator, Bligh sailed his overloaded little boat across the Pacific and amazingly made landfall in Timor after a 41-day, 5823km voyage that was promptly written into the record books. By early 1790 Bligh was back in England; an inquiry quickly cleared him of negligence and a ship was dispatched to carry British naval vengeance to Tahiti.

Christian and his mutineers had not meekly waited for justice to catch up. After dispatching Bligh, the *Bounty* returned to Tahiti before sailing off to find a more remote hideaway. Two attempts were made to settle on Tubuai in the Australs. After the second Tubuai interlude had ended without success, Christian returned briefly to Tahiti, where the mutineers split into two groups. A larger group of 16 mutineers remained there while a smaller group left with Christian and the *Bounty* in late September.

Vengeance arrived in 1791 in the shape of Captain Edward Edwards, who made Bligh look like a thoroughly nice guy. He quickly rounded up the 14 surviving mutineers (two had already been killed in disputes) and informed the men’s new Tahitian wives that the men were going back to Britain to get their just desserts.

## AN EARFUL OF COOK

History depicts Captain James Cook as one of the greatest explorers of all time. Indeed, Cook’s navigational and surveying skills, his ability to control unruly crews and keep them healthy and, above all, his cultural understanding, did set him apart. He is described as having been a dispassionate and tolerant man; it’s often claimed he did not want to harm or offend the islanders, and that he made concerted efforts to befriend them. He ordered the humane treatment of the Polynesians and on the whole embraced such an attitude himself. But Cook’s composure was far from impenetrable.

All European explorers observed that the Polynesians were somewhat light-fingered. Having no concept of property or wealth – or the inextricable link European society had constructed between the two – the islanders would help themselves to the white men’s odd and plentiful possessions. In the beginning at least, this was probably more a game than any real coveting of European possessions.

According to diary entries, by Cook’s third and final voyage in the late 1770s some of the crew were feeling uncomfortable with Cook’s treatment of those locals caught stealing. There are stories of an irate Cook wreaking havoc, burning houses and smashing canoes in anger at having had something stolen. David Howarth, a respected historian and author of *Tahiti: A Paradise Lost*, recounts the time when a Polynesian took a sextant. When the culprit confessed and the instrument was returned, Cook had the man’s ears cut off.

As for Christian, he led the remaining eight British seamen, together with a group of Tahitians, to uninhabited Pitcairn Island, where a settlement was successfully established. Many years later, reports trickled back of a strange English-Tahitian colony, where half the residents bore the surname Christian. Today, thanks to Fletcher Christian’s mutiny, Pitcairn Island is one of the last vestiges of the British Empire.

Bligh himself was back on Tahiti in 1792, this time in command of HMS *Providence* and with 19 marines to ensure there was no repeat performance. Bligh duly picked up his breadfruit saplings and transported them in record time to the Caribbean. As it turned out, the slaves never developed a taste for the fruit.

## THE RISE OF THE POMARES

Before the arrival of Europeans, islands did not have kings but chiefdoms that warred with each other over resources. European arms soon changed these traditional power structures.

The Tahitians quickly realised the importance of European weaponry and pressed the early explorers to take sides in local conflicts. Most explorers strenuously resisted this, but the *Bounty* mutineers, along with whalers and traders, were happy to offer themselves as mercenaries to the highest bidder. The highest bidders were the Pomares, one of a number of important families, but by no means the most important at that time.

The mutineers and their weapons helped create the political environment where one group could feasibly control all of Tahiti. The Pomares became the most important rulers of Tahiti. Pomare I, the nephew of Obarea, the ‘fat, bouncing, good looking dame’ who befriended Wallis, already controlled most of Tahiti when he died in 1803. His son, Pomare II, took over.

‘There had been some colourful chapters in the history of European exploration in the Pacific, but none captured the imagination like the mutiny on the *Bounty*’

1772

Don Domingo de Boenechea dispatches missionaries at Tautira – the missionaries, fearing the Tahitians, lock themselves inside

1789

Christian Fletcher sets Captain Bligh adrift in a small boat – Fletcher, aboard the *Bounty*, returns to Tahiti

1797

London Mission Society arrives with 25 missionaries at Point Vénus in Tahiti – the Tahitians are welcoming but hard to convert

1815

King Pomare II, siding with the well-armed missionaries, seizes power and establishes Christianity as the dominant religion

## THE MISSIONARIES

The early explorers were portents of the dangers to come, and the mutineers played a clumsy part in the introduction of European weaponry. But the real disaster arrived in the late 18th century in the form of the missionaries. The arrival of the missionaries saw the censorship of many important cultural and religious practices.

Descriptions of Tahiti and its people had European intellectuals developing theories about the 'noble savage', but before long the devout were planning to do something about the savages, noble or not. Thirty members of the London Missionary Society (LMS) set out on the *Duff* to bring Christianity to the Pacific. In March 1797, 25 of them landed at Point Vénus and set to work.

Success was not immediate, and within a few years most of the original missionaries had drifted off. Pomare II fell from power in 1808 and the remaining Tahitian missionaries, too closely associated with him to be safe, also had to flee the island. Pomare II took refuge on Mo'orea and when he returned to power on Tahiti in 1815, he established Christianity as the dominant religion.

The missionaries were an unyielding bunch, and although they had the best intentions, they made no attempt to combine the best elements of traditional Polynesian beliefs with Christianity, but rather smothered many important, ancient customs with a rigid interpretation of Protestantism. Soon dancing was forbidden, cover-all clothing was decreed, tattoos were banned and silence on Sunday was enforced. More difficult to understand and suppress were the practices of infanticide, human sacrifice, polygamy and indiscriminate sex, but these too were added to the list. A century later, the English writer Robert Keable, who had been a vicar with the Church of England, commented about the pioneering missionary William Ellis that 'it was a thousand pities that the Tahitians did not convert Mr Ellis'.

## WHALERS & TRADERS

Sailing from England, and later from the New England region of the newly independent USA, whalers and traders began frequenting Tahiti in the 1790s, escaping their harsh shipboard life, buying supplies, introducing alcohol and spreading diseases. These men were rough, hard-drinking and looking for sex (see the boxed text, p25). Traders also started to appear from the convict colonies in Australia; they exchanged weapons for food supplies, encouraged prostitution and established stills to produce alcohol.

Listless and plagued by diseases against which it had no natural immunity, the Polynesian population continued to plummet. The population of Tahiti in the late 1760s was estimated around 40,000; in 1800 another estimate put the population at less than 20,000; by the 1820s it was down to around 6000. In the Marquesas the situation was even worse: it has been estimated the population dropped from 80,000 to 2000 in one century.

## CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

After 1815 the Pomares ruled Tahiti, but the English Protestant missionaries were the power behind the throne, advising on government and laws and doing their best to keep unsavoury influences, such as whalers

and traders, at arm's length. Pomare II soon extended his power over the Leeward Islands, when he forced the traditionally hostile chiefs to form a Christian alliance. The Code of Pomare was instituted in 1819, but Pomare II had adopted Christianity more as a convenience than because of any profound faith. He died in 1821, probably after drinking himself to death. In 1827 his successor Pomare III also died and was succeeded by the young Queen Pomare IV.

The new queen's missionary advisers saw her as an interim ruler until the next king and as a result they turned a blind eye to some of the queen's youthful excesses. The queen was not averse to a little traditional 'indecent' singing and dancing, and 'visiting' passing ships was not unknown. But Queen Pomare actually ruled over Tahiti for 50 years. She skilfully extended her control to islands in the Austral group and forged strategic alliances with other islands in the Society group. Unhappily, she also lived to see her islands fall into the hands of the French.

## THE FRENCH TAKEOVER

The missionaries were effectively a colonial power. Although the LMS missions reigned supreme in the Society Islands, the Australs and the Tuamotus, the French Catholic missionaries were in firm control in the Gambier Archipelago from 1834 and the Marquesas from 1838. In 1836 Father Honoré Laval and François Caret, French missionaries from the Gambier Archipelago, were quietly dropped off near Tautira at the eastern extremity of Tahiti Iti. When the Catholics arrived in Pape'ete they were arrested and deported by the British.

France was already effectively in control of the Marquesas, and the deportation of the two French missionaries from Tahiti was considered a national insult. Demands, claims, counterclaims, payments and apologies shuttled back and forth until 1842, when Rear Admiral Dupetit-Thouars arrived in *La Reine Blanche*, pointed his guns at Pape'ete and took power. Queen Pomare was forced to yield to the French, and soldiers and Catholic missionaries were promptly landed.

The French moved quickly and arrested George Pritchard, a British missionary, consul and unofficial chief adviser to Queen Pomare; Pritchard was then forced to leave the islands. The queen, still hoping for British intervention, fled to Ra'iatea in 1844 and a guerrilla rebellion against the French broke out on Tahiti and other islands. The presence of French forts around Tahiti confirms that it was a fierce struggle, but eventually the rebels were subdued, and by 1846 France had control over Tahiti and Mo'orea. In 1847 Queen Pomare IV was persuaded to return to Tahiti, but she was now merely a figurehead.

Queen Pomare died in 1877 and was succeeded by her son, Pomare V. He had little interest in the position and effectively abdicated power in 1881; in true Pomare fashion he drank himself to death in 1891.

## FRENCH POLYNESIA TODAY

Over the last few decades, French Polynesia's control over its own government and resources has been widened. Although independence from France is a possibility in the future, it is unlikely to happen any time soon. Funds sent from France to help French Polynesia develop its own

For well-presented online daily news about French Polynesia in French and English surf to [www.tahitipresse.pf](http://www.tahitipresse.pf).

Television wasn't in French Polynesian homes until the early 1980s, when RFO (Radio France Overseas) began the first local broadcasts.

For a good read, pick up *Piracy in the Pacific* by Henri Jacquier, a riveting, true story about the Rorique brothers, French pirates in Polynesia.

*The Word, the Pen and the Pistol* by Robert Nicole examines mythical values attributed to Polynesians and recent history with the French.

1819

Code of Pomare established, forming a Christian alliance between the Leeward Islands; governing is based entirely on the scriptures

1842

French take power and disperse Catholic missionaries; Queen Pomare pleads for British intervention to no avail

1877

Queen Pomare succeeded by King Pomare V, who abdicates power to French four years later then drinks himself to death

1961

Construction of Faa'a International Airport opens French Polynesia up to the world

## FRENCH NUCLEAR TESTING

French nuclear testing started in the Sahara, but Algerian independence forced France to look for a new testing site. In 1963 Moruroa and Fangataufa, atolls in the Tuamotus, were announced the 'lucky winners', and testing began with atmospheric nuclear explosions in 1966. The Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique (CEP; Pacific Experimentation Centre), the euphemistic name for the nuclear-testing programme, soon became a major component of the French Polynesian economy.

In 1963 the USA, the USSR and Britain agreed to stop patently unsafe atmospheric testing (although they continued testing underground), but in 1973 France refused an International Court of Justice request to halt above-ground testing. In that eventful year, the New Zealand government sent a naval ship to Moruroa in protest, the first Greenpeace protest vessels were boarded by French forces, and Peru broke off diplomatic relations with France.

In 1981, in the face of continuing international opposition to all forms of nuclear testing, the French drilled bomb shafts under the central lagoon and moved the tests underground.

International and local opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific grew stronger and stronger over the years. In 1985 French secret-service agents bombed and sank the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour, New Zealand, killing a crew member, Fernando Pereira. Captain Dominique Prieur and Major Alain Mafart, the only two of the French team that the New Zealand police were able to capture, were tried, found guilty (on reduced charges of manslaughter) and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. The French government then pressured New Zealand to allow Prieur and Mafart to be transferred to serve reduced sentences on Hao in the Tuamotus. France soon reneged on the agreement, the Club Med-style prison sentence was ended, and the two agents were returned to France to be rewarded for their parts in the fiasco.

In 1995 French president Jacques Chirac announced a new series of underground tests, and a storm of protest broke out worldwide. Pacific and Pacific Rim nations uniformly condemned the announcement and Greenpeace vessels were once again sent into the fray. The first test was conducted in September, and in another round of international protests, Chile and New Zealand recalled their ambassadors from Paris. Rioting broke out in Pape'ete but fell on deaf ears in France, far from the strong antinuclear sentiment in the Pacific and around the Pacific Rim. The tests were finally concluded in early 1996, and it was announced there would be no further testing in the Pacific.

For many years the French government denied that the tests posed any ecological threat to the region. Finally, in 1999 a French study reported that there had been radioactive leakage into underground water, and later that same year the existence of cracks in the coral cones of Moruroa and Fangataufa were also acknowledged. These cracks could cause leakage into the ocean, so, while the issue may be off the international stage, it is an ongoing debacle for those living in the region.

industries to work towards economic independence have mostly been squandered by the self-serving Flosse regime. Oscar Temaru's new policy to actually help his country's independent economy, receives little support from France and Flosse's cronies are constantly setting roadblocks to make the new regime look incompetent. At the time of writing, Temaru's chance of remaining in office was shaky.

The standard of living in the region is relatively high, and access to adequate health care and fresh water is improving, but French Polynesia is in a vulnerable economic situation, with very few natural resources to draw upon and a system based on imports. The impact of El Niño, felt strongly in French Polynesia as in other parts of the Pacific in recent years, serves as a reminder of how small Pacific nations are at the mercy of the large industrialised and polluting nations.

1963

French Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique for nuclear testing opened on Moruroa and Fangataufa

2004

Oscar Temaru's pro-independence party elected to power

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

If French Polynesia had a national slogan it might be *haere maru* (take it slow), words that often fall from the lips of Tahitians to their busy French and Chinese cohabitants. It's hard not to take it slow in the islands. With one road encircling the main island of Tahiti, it's easy to get caught driving behind an old pickup truck at 40km/h with no chance of passing; national holidays seem to close up the shops and banks once every week or so; and getting served in a restaurant can take an eternity. This can be frustrating to anyone in a hurry, but somehow it all works out: you make it to wherever you were going even if it does take twice as long, the bank can wait till tomorrow and your food arrives once you are really, really hungry. The Tahitian people know this and always seem slightly amused by anyone who tries to break the rhythm of calm.

Regardless of 'Tahiti time', Pape'ete manages to move at a pace fitting for a capital: there are traffic jams, everyone is on a mobile (cell) phone and the nightlife shakes on till 5am. The modern world is quickly infiltrating the slow pace of life and this is most evident in the younger generations.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The traditional Tahitian family is an open-armed force that is the country's backbone. Although modern girls are increasingly less likely to stay home and have baby after baby, an accidental pregnancy is considered more of a blessing than a hindrance, and babies are passed along to another eager, infant-loving family member. This attitude of allowing a child to be raised by whoever will provide the most love has brought many hopeful adoptive parents to Tahiti from France, and few leave empty handed. *Faamu*, or adopted children, are not thought of as different from blood brothers and sisters to either the parents or siblings, although the real mother, and occasionally the father, sometimes remain a peripheral part of the child's life. Once a child is in a family they are in no way obligated to stay; children move about to aunts, uncles and grandparents as they wish.

This family web is vitally important to an individual. When people first meet, the conversation usually starts with questions about family and most people are able to find a common relative between themselves within minutes. This accomplished, they are 'cousins' and fast friends. The flip side is that many new couples find out too late that they are *tapu*, too closely related for the relationship to be accepted by the family (see p36).

It's not all roses in what appears to be such a warm, fuzzy family framework. Domestic violence and incest are prevalent. This is closely connected with high rates of alcoholism. The government has launched numerous programmes addressing these issues but little progress has been made.

Despite these domestic problems, women do hold a strong position in French Polynesian society. It was a woman whom Samuel Wallis (see p24) met in his first encounter with what he believed to be a Tahitian chief. Today Nicole Bouteau, one of Tahiti's newest political stars, has started her own centrist political party that is rapidly gaining popularity. Many village

**'The traditional Tahitian family is an open-armed force that is the country's backbone'**

## GENDER BENDER

You'll find that some women serving food in restaurants, or working at hotels or in boutiques, aren't actually women at all. *Mahu*, males who are raised as girls and continue to live their lives as women, were present when the first Europeans arrived in the islands. Although the missionaries did their darndest to halt this 'unnatural crime', *mahu* are still an accepted part of the community today.

According to François Bauer, author of *Raerae de Tahiti*, popular belief has it that among a family with eight children, one will inevitably be a *mahu*. It remains unclear, however, whether this practice has a sexual or a social origin, but it is generally assumed to be the latter as *mahu* don't necessarily have sex with men. Even so, anyone seeking the mythical notion of a sexually free Tahiti should note that most of French Polynesia's modern-day prostitutes are (very convincing) transvestites.

mayors and high-powered politicians and business people in Tahiti are women. In the household, women are most often the homemaker but they don't wear this role lightly. They permeate a strength and dignity that set them in charge of everything domestic and sometimes more. Men (particularly those who don't drink) often share in the chores of cooking, cleaning and baby rearing; it's not uncommon to see massive, muscular, tattooed men nuzzling with an infant or holding hands with a toddler to cross the road.

Although religion has been teaching people to think otherwise, homosexuality is generally viewed as a natural part of human existence. This tolerance is displayed most strongly by the presence of *mahu* (sometimes called *raerae*), men who dress and live their lives as women (see the boxed text, above). Lesbians are more rare and generally live in or around Pape'ete. The discotheques of Pape'ete, particularly the Piano Bar (p99), are real hotspots for the gay community.

*Pakalolo* (marijuana), and the associated music-and-smoking lifestyle, have been thoroughly embraced in French Polynesia but harder drugs are rare. The exception is 'Ice', a highly addictive meta-amphetamine that has rapidly gained popularity in the upper classes of Pape'ete. The government has responded with an impressive effort that will hopefully curb the problem before it becomes too serious. In the meantime violent crime, almost entirely drug related, has been on the rise in Pape'ete. This shouldn't be much of an issue for travellers but it's a good idea to take care when walking in Pape'ete late at night, especially on Friday and Saturday.

## Education

The education system in French Polynesia is identical to that of France. School is compulsory between the ages of five and 16. Teaching is in French; only a few hours of Tahitian a week are offered in primary and secondary schools. This tends to disadvantage Polynesian children, who have greater difficulty working in French and following the French education system than *demi*, *popaa* and Chinese children. The new regime of Oscar Temaru is focusing on increasing both Tahitian- and English-language learning, particularly at the primary-school level.

Most small islands do not have schools offering education beyond primary school (fifth grade) and the only high schools are in Tahiti and Ra'iatea. Education is mandatory so most children living outside the main islands have to board in Tahiti to complete their studies. This is hard on both the parents and the children, especially those from far-away

archipelagos like the Australs, the Tuamotus or the Marquesas where the culture and language are very different from Tahiti. Some of these students get hooked on the buzz of Pape'ete city life and never want to return to their sleepy islands while others can't wait to fail so they can go home.

School holidays are excessive: one month from mid-December to mid-January, six weeks in July and August, two weeks in October, three weeks in March and ten days in May. Other three- and four-day weekends are scattered throughout the year. Children boarding in Pape'ete often cannot afford to return home for all of these holidays.

The Université de Polynésie Française (UPF; University of French Polynesia) is steadily growing but, because it does not offer a wide range of disciplines, many students go to university in France.

## Economy

With a per-capita GNP comparable to that of Australia, French Polynesia is one of the richest countries in the South Pacific. This elevated standard of living is, of course, somewhat artificial since it depends on lots of input from France. Unemployment is officially 11.7% of the active population, but this figure is virtually meaningless in the local context. On some atolls there is really no job market at all and the population is primarily self-sufficient. Combine that with the *fetii* (extended family) concept, and employment levels don't have the same impact as they do in the industrialised nations of the West. Pape'ete is the one exception, where unemployment has brought the same social problems experienced in other urban centres worldwide.

The primary industry of tourism has been seeing hard times over the last few years. While countries like Fiji are seeing more visitors every year, tourist numbers to French Polynesia aren't reaching hoped-for levels. Perhaps this is because of France's initial refusal to accept the new government of Oscar Temaru and fears of resulting social unrest, or maybe it is just a result of bad marketing (focusing only on high-end package tourists) on the part of French Polynesia itself.

Black pearl production, which takes second rank to tourism, is looking even bleaker. A combination of little professional organisation among farmers, naive marketing, overproduction and the worldwide economic lapse of 2002 has made the industry lucrative only to large, factory-style farmers (particularly those who received unofficial 'aid' from the Flosse regime). Small farms have been forced to close throughout the Tuamotus and many islanders have had to go back to fishing and copra or have moved to Pape'ete in search of other opportunities.

Agriculture moves with fads; vanilla was sure to be the next 'black pearl', and the government offered great start-up packages for anyone with some land and a strong back. The price dropped radically before many began seriously harvesting, and now everyone is turning to *noni* (see the boxed text, p52). This crop seems to have an insatiable demand although prices will surely drop with the increase in production. All islands produce some crops for local consumption but the Australs have become the primary producer of local produce for the country. Copra production involves intensive labour for little pay but still manages to support islanders, particularly in the Tuamotus and the Marquesas.

People are seeing some hope with the new president Oscar Temaru, who is slowly trying to clean up the systems of favouritism left by his predecessor. In hopes of bringing economic independence to his county, President Temaru is researching new avenues for fishing and agriculture

'On some atolls there is really no job market at all and the population is primarily self-sufficient'

### SOCIAL GRACES

French Polynesians are generally very easygoing, and there are few social pitfalls for the unwary visitor. Nonetheless, it's worth remembering that religion permeates everyday life. Grace often precedes a meal and the churches are jammed on Sunday mornings. Given how religious the Polynesians are, it's wise to avoid criticism of the missionaries. Attending church on Sunday is interesting, but dress and behave politely.

The most important thing to remember is to smile and say *bonjour* or *ia orana* to everyone you come in contact with. City-like habits of not acknowledging people can be interpreted as outright unfriendliness. When you are introduced to people, women are greeted with a kiss on each cheek and men with a handshake. Occasionally men greet women with a handshake instead of kisses and men who are good friends, family or want to show deep respect for each other will kiss each other on the cheeks. Women nearly always greet women with kisses (*bisoux*).

If visiting a Polynesian home, take your shoes off at the front door. Your hosts may claim that it's unnecessary, but you'll win friends if you refuse their entreaties and insist that you would be more comfortable shoeless.

Although all beaches are public property, most waterfront land is privately owned, so before trying to make your way down to the water, ask permission. Fruit trees are almost always private property, so never pick fruit without asking first.

while also trying to better promote tourism. France shows little support for his regime and ex-President Gaston Flosse is still searching for measures to regain his power. Oscar's position has become shaky at best.

### POPULATION

Paralleling worldwide patterns of urbanisation, French Polynesia's people have migrated towards the city and main island: 69% of the population currently make their home on Tahiti and 75% of those on Tahiti live in Pape'ete or its suburbs. While a few atolls in the Tuamotus continue to pull in new residents for work in the Tahitian pearl industry, most islands in the Tuamotus, Gambier, Marquesas and Australs have dismal growth rates below 1%. The Leeward Islands, especially the ones with a bigger tourist industry such as Bora Bora, Huahine and Ra'iatea, are growing at the same steady rate as the Windward Islands. The birth rates throughout the islands are dropping steadily, although they are still relatively high at 16.9 births per 1000 population (it's around 12 births per 1000 population in Australia and France), down from 20.4 in 2001.

On all of the islands the majority of the population lives in coastal zones. The rugged interior is virtually uninhabited, but archaeological evidence indicates that this wasn't always the case. Only in the Marquesas do people live mostly in the valleys; this is a habit left over from times when living near the beach left people more vulnerable to warring neighbouring tribes.

### MULTICULTURALISM

From the times of the first European ships, Tahitians have been incredibly tolerant of the many races and cultures that have arrived at their ports. Whether as a symbol of welcome or as acts of free-spirited curiosity, girls descended upon the ships, arms open to what must have been a bunch of scabby, bony sailors. Babies born from these encounters were raised as any other Tahitian child would have been and thus the mix of genes began. Today, most islanders have a surprisingly rich genealogical background ranging from European to American Indian to Asiatic.

Europeans came and went but, early on, very few stayed. In the last few decades, most French immigrants were in the military or on lucrative four- to six-year teaching contracts; when the contract was up most chose to leave. Some Americans and a handful of other nationalities bought land or moved to Tahiti in the 1970s but soon stricter laws were put in place making it very difficult for non-French nationals to immigrate to Tahiti. Because of this, Tahiti is very much its own country even if its government is not entirely its own. Unlike Hawaii or New Zealand, land has remained primarily in the ownership of the population that can claim Polynesian ancestry.

This is changing. French Polynesia is now a part of the EU and Europeans, still predominantly French, are catching on that this is a really great place to live. Most choose to reside in Tahiti or Mo'orea where they mix very little with the locals. The few that choose to live on the outer islands integrate more with islanders although tension is sometimes created if locals feel that newcomers are taking away business opportunities. In general, those immigrants that are sensitive to local culture have little problems assimilating.

Chinese, who make up about 5% of the population of French Polynesia, have done a splendid job of seeping into Polynesian culture and filling in the commercial cracks. Shipped to Tahiti during the 19th century as cheap labour for soon-to-be-defunct cotton plantations, the Chinese began as the most underprivileged members of society to become some of the strongest business people in the country. Nearly every shop in French Polynesia is Chinese owned, and the biggest names in the pearl industry (Wan and Yip) are also Chinese. Some Chinese still speak their ancestral language (Hakka) and most have excelled in learning Tahitian.

In between the three dominant cultures (particularly European and Tahitian) are the *demis*, the mixes. *Demis* occupy some of the most important positions in public life and dominate the political sphere. They are concentrated in Pape'ete.

Very few French Polynesians chose to leave their country long-term. Some go to university in France or marry foreigners, but nearly all of them come back if they can. When Tahitians do expatriate it is usually to France or the USA.

Racial tension is rare but does exist. A few unsavoury insults have been created for each race although they are usually only uttered on drunken binges or in schoolyards. Outward displays of racism are usually from Polynesians to French while the more insidious kind goes from the French to the Polynesians.

### SPORT

The national sport is, without dispute, *va'a* (*pirogue*, or outrigger-canoe) racing. You can admire the *pirogue* teams training on the lagoon, and if you are on Tahiti in late October or early November, you might catch the Hawaiki Nui canoe race (see the boxed text, p36).

Surfing was an ancient Tahitian sport that is once again gaining popularity. The Billabong Pro international surf competition, held every May at the nearly mythically scary wave at Teahupoo in Tahiti Iti, brings worldwide coverage to Tahitian surfing. Slowly more and more surfers are travelling to French Polynesia to tempt fate at crystal-clear waves breaking inches over razor-sharp reef; many return home with 'reef tattoos', a cheaper but less aesthetically attractive alternative to the inked variety.

In pre-European Tahitian surfing (*fa'ahe'e*) only chiefs stood up on their surfboards; the rest of the population were more like ancient boogie boarders.



## HAWAIKI NUI CANOE RACE

In Europe it's lithe lads in shiny shorts, in the USA it's men in shoulder pads and in Australia it's burly boys with an oval ball. In French Polynesia it's square-shouldered, muscled men in canoes.

The sporting spectacular that has French Polynesians glued to their TV sets and talking passionately about favourites and challengers is indeed a canoe race. The three-day, four-island, Hawaiki Nui *va'a* race pits around 60 of the islands' best six-man *pirogues* against each other and against anyone who is brave enough to turn up from overseas.

The 116km race, held in November, starts on Huahine. The brawny paddlers, who often sport vivid Tahitian tattoos, head across the open sea to Ra'iatea, from there to Taha'a, and then finally on to Bora Bora. The canoes are a superb sight, with men paddling three on each side for about 10 strokes before switching sides with precise timing and lightning speed.

There's also a women's Hawaiki Nui race, known as the Va'a Hine, a play on words (*va'a* is Tahitian for 'canoe', and *vahine* is Tahitian for 'woman'). The Va'a Hine is usually held in October.

Check out [www.hawaikinui.vaa.pf](http://www.hawaikinui.vaa.pf) (in French) for more details.

## RELIGION

The Polynesians were polytheistic, worshipping *atua* (gods) who were surrounded by a pantheon of secondary gods. The main gods were Ta'aroa (God of Creation), Tu (Man God), Tane (God of Craftsmen), 'Oro (God of War) and Hiro (God of Thieves and Sailors). Gods competed with each other and could be ousted. Moreover, their power was geographically limited – they were not recognised in all the archipelagos. Tane, for instance, was ousted by Ta'aroa who was in turn replaced by his son 'Oro, whose cult never extended beyond the limits of the Society Islands. Hiro was worshipped on Ra'iatea and Huahine. All these legends were handed down via spoken legends relating the exploits and adventures of the gods.

Central to Polynesian beliefs, and notions that still linger on today, are *mana* and *tapu*. *Mana* is a supernatural force that can be transmitted between objects or persons. A *tiki* (carved representational statue) or a *marae* (ancient Polynesian religious site) might emanate great *mana* – a spiritual energy that is almost palpable. Alternately, a person with good *mana* is someone who emits 'good vibes'; someone with bad *mana* makes the skin crawl.

*Tapu* is what modern English has adopted as the word taboo. Basically, anything that is *tapu* is forbidden, and grave and mysterious consequences befell anyone crazy enough to break the rules. Ancient Polynesian society was governed and kept in check by many *tapu* such as fishing restrictions, limitations on who could enter certain religious sites and even on who was high ranked enough to eat special foods such as turtle meat. Today the word is used more often on signposts forbidding people to enter private land or to describe marriages between people who are too closely related.

The arrival of Protestant missionaries at the end of the 18th century, followed soon after by the Catholics, marked the suppression of traditional religious beliefs. Although the missionaries were not immediately successful, over time Christianity gained dominance, helped in a large part by the Pomares, the ruling family who befriended the missionaries.

The missionaries changed the religious and cultural landscape forever, and even today French Polynesia has a surprising number and variety of churches relative to its population. Around half of the population is Protestant, particularly in the Society Islands and the Australs. Catholics make up around 30% of the population and live mostly in the Marquesas,

*Si Loin du Monde* (2003) by 'Tavae' (in French) is the true, heroic story of a local Tahitian fisherman who survived 118 days lost at sea in his tiny fishing boat.

the eastern Tuamotus and the Gambier Archipelago, but also on Tahiti (many of the *demis* and Chinese are Catholic). The balance is made up of Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Sanitos (the local name for the reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, a dissident branch of the Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses and Jews (Pape'ete has a synagogue). Most Chinese converted to Catholicism in the 1950s and '60s, although there are three Chinese temples in Pape'ete.

A few pre-Christian rituals and superstitions still survive alongside Christianity. In some dwellings a light is always left on overnight for fear that *tupapau* (ghosts) or *varua ino* (malevolent spirits) might be on the prowl. Christian Polynesians continue to respect and fear ancient *tapu* sites, and nothing would persuade a Polynesian to move a *tiki* or *marae* stone. On occasion, a *tahua* (faith healer) is still consulted and *raau tahiti* (traditional herbal medicine) is making a comeback.

## ARTS

The zealous missionaries endeavoured to wipe out all forms of 'primitive' Polynesian art and culture. They destroyed temples and carvings, banned tattooing and dancing, and generally took a lot of the joy out of life. Fortunately some traditions survived this period of cultural censorship, and in recent years there has been a revival of Polynesian culture, particularly in music, dance and tattooing. See p253 for more information on crafts.

## Dance

The early explorers didn't know what had hit them when they first caught sight of Polynesian dancing. Naturally, it was one of the first things the missionaries banned when they arrived, although it continued clandestinely. Since the 1950s, dance has been revived and is now one of the best ambassadors for Polynesian culture. See p42 for more information.

## Music

Traditional Polynesian music, usually performed as an accompaniment to dance, is heard reverberating through the islands. Ukuleles and percussion instruments dominate this style of music, which is structured by a hypnotic and often complex drum beat (see p42 for more information). Song, both traditional and religious, is also popular and important. Sunday *himene* (hymns) feature wonderful harmonies.

Modern Polynesian music by local artists is the blaring soundtrack to everyday life, whether it's in a bus, at a café or on the radio – some groups also perform in hotels and bars.

## RECOMMENDED LISTENING

**Angelo Neuffer** Highly political and poetic lyrics have made Angelo one of the most popular Tahitian artists of all time. One of his best albums is *Te Nuna'a no Ananahi*.

**Ester Tefana** For old-fashioned, ukulele-accompanied, Tahitian mood music, Ester is your best bet.

**Tapuarii Laughlin** Most modern classics are written by 'Tapu' who mixes surfer cool with the traditional.

**Bobby** Very listenable, almost dreamy Polynesian music. His album with Angelo, titled *Bobby & Angelo*, is one of the most listened-to albums in Tahiti.

**Te Ava Piti** This is your classic Polynesian music with plenty of fast ukulele riffs.

**Trio Kikiriri** Perhaps a bit cheesy to Western ears, this synth/ukelele group is an all-time favourite for weddings and parties where people dance the Tahitian foxtrot.

**Fenua** Bringing Tahitian music into the future, this group fuses the traditional with techno for an explosive sound.

There are culture articles about nearly all of the islands of French Polynesia in the archives of [www.airtahitimagazine.com](http://www.airtahitimagazine.com).

## Literature

Polynesia has been getting the Western pen flowing since the first European explorers returned with accounts of paradise islands and beautiful people. But oral recitation was the fountain pen of the Pacific, and the written word only came into being after the missionaries began producing texts in Tahitian in the 19th century. This dependence on the spoken word has meant that Polynesia's history has been re-created out of European observations, and the Polynesian experience constructed out of European suppositions. It also means that literature written by Polynesians has only started to grace the bookshelves relatively recently.

There are a number of interesting Polynesian writers who are slowly changing the literary landscape, but few have been translated into English. If you read French, writers such as Henri Hiro, Turo Raapoto, Hubert Bremond, Charles Manutahi, Michou Chaze, Chanter Spitz and Louise Peltzer are all of interest. A search on the Internet, or when in Pape'ete, asking at one of the many good bookshops, will yield information about these authors and their works.

*Breadfruit*, by Celestine Hitiura Vaite, a Tahitian living in Australia, is a novel set in contemporary Tahiti. The poverty and social problems facing many Tahitians are not glossed over; the dialogue is garnished with Tahitian and French (don't worry, a glossary is provided).

## Architecture

Apart from the naturalistic, rustic-chic style popular with hotels and *pensions*, today's Tahitian architecture veers towards square, white and bland. Due to threat of cyclones, traditional *fare* (pronounced 'far-ay'), made of wood beams, thatched coconut fronds and plaited bamboo, are rare. Even most of the colonial-era buildings have been supplanted by the ubiquitous cement block. Government-aid housing, available to low-income residents and cyclone victims, can be purchased by any paying party and is the most affordable housing option in French Polynesia. These unsightly structures, with their particle board and corrugated-iron roofing, have few windows and lack the aesthetic qualities of their forbearers. Even with basic housing, Tahitians like to dress up their homes with turquoise or pink paints, brightly coloured fabrics, shells and year-round Christmas decorations; this is particularly true in the outer islands.

## Painting

Even today, well over a hundred years after his arrival on Tahiti, painting in the South Pacific is synonymous with Paul Gauguin, the French post-impressionist painter. Gauguin spent much of his later life in Polynesia, and presented Europe with images of the islands that moulded the way Europeans viewed (and, arguably, continue to view) Polynesia. In his wake a number of predominantly European artists – working in media ranging from watercolour to line drawing – have also sought inspiration in the region. These artists have contributed to the very characteristic painting style of the region, which is largely representational.

Matisse made a short visit to Tahiti, but his work on Polynesia is eclipsed by Jacques Boullaire's. Boullaire, a French artist who first travelled to Tahiti in the 1930s, produced magnificent watercolours; reproductions of his work are readily available today.

Other artists of French and Polynesian descent who have influenced the art scene locally and internationally include Christian Deloffre, François Ravello, Michèle Dallet, Bobby (also a singer and musician; he died in 1991), André Marere, Jean Masson, Yrondi, Noguier and Erhart Lux.

*Typee* – A Peep at Polynesian Life (1846) is Herman Melville's idealistic account of three weeks spent with the Typee tribe of Nuku Hiva. Many customs and mannerisms he describes parallel Polynesian life today.

## Sculpture & Woodcarving

Traditionally the best sculptures and woodcarvings have come out of the Marquesas, where fine *tiki*, bowls, mortars and pestles, spears and clubs are carved from rosewood, *tou* wood or in stone. The best-known contemporary sculptor is the potter Peter Owen, who lives on Huahine, but the work of the appropriately named Woody on Mo'orea is also well known.

Some of the woodwork sold in French Polynesia is actually made elsewhere (much of it is from Indonesia), so if you feel strongly about authenticity and supporting Polynesian artists, ask around to ensure you are getting the real thing.

## Clothing & Decoration

Dress in French Polynesia is an odd combination of the very dowdy, inspired by the missionaries, and the very sexy, inspired by Baywatch, Brazilian soap operas and practicality – it's a hot country!

For day-to-day wear, T-shirts and surf shorts are the most popular for men and women, along with the traditional *pareu* which, like the Southeast Asian sarong, is a cool, comfortable, all-purpose piece of fabric. Men don't wear *pareu* out in public much these days but often wrap *pareu* around their waists like a skirt to wear around the house. Women have a variety of ways of wearing *pareu*: it can be worn as a skirt, tied above the breasts to make a simple dress or worn with two corners tied behind the neck as a halter neck. It's considered casual wear, appropriate for the store, beach or in town, but is not worn for dressier occasions such as church or eating out at a nice restaurant.

On the more remote islands, local women usually wear shorts and T-shirts in the water, although the bikini is unlikely to shock. French and Tahitian women sometimes go topless, particularly near Pape'ete and at hotel beaches. Elsewhere, use your common sense: if you are the only person on the beach over 12 baring your breasts, best to cover up.

## MONOI

What can't it do? This local concoction, made from coconut oil and *tiare* flowers, is deliciously perfumed with sandalwood, vanilla, coconut or jasmine. It's used liberally as hair oil, ointment, sunscreen and even mosquito repellent. It costs from 400 to 600 CFP a bottle, is great on the skin after a day of sizzling in the sun and makes a great gift (although it does solidify in cooler climates).

## TAPA

Traditionally made throughout the Pacific, *tapa* (paper-like cloth) is a nonwoven fabric made from the bark of *uru*, banyan or *aute* (paper mulberry) trees. It was the semi-disposable clothing fabric of pre-European Polynesia. The colour depends upon the wood used, and varies from white to chestnut. The bark of young trunks or branches is removed then soaked in water to soften. The outer layer is scraped away with a shell, leaving just the sapwood. The sheets of bark, about 15cm wide, are spread out on a flat, elongated stone then pounded repeatedly for several hours. At this point the bark becomes thinner and gradually stretches.

When the piece is finished, it is dried and then dyed with the sap of various plants or decorated with traditional designs.

The making of *tapa* rapidly declined when European cloth became available in the region, but it is still produced, particularly on Fatu Hiva in the Marquesas, for ceremonial use and for collectors.

The Malay-Polynesian language group spreads from Madagascar in the east to Easter Island in the west.

**PLAITING & BASKETWORK**

Baskets, hats and the panels used for roofing and the walls of houses are all made by women. Coconut-palm leaves are used for the more rough-and-ready woven work, while pandanus leaves or thin strips of bamboo are used for finer hats, bags and mats, which are often decorated with flowers or shells.

Some of the finest work comes from the Australs, where hillside pandanus (rather than common lagoon-side pandanus) is used.

**FLOWERS & SHELLS**

Flowers are omnipresent in French Polynesia. From the moment you arrive at the airport, where you'll be presented with a *tiare* (Tahiti's national flower) to sniff as you brave the customs queues, to hotel rooms and even public toilets, flowers are displayed, offered and worn. Both men and women tuck a *tiare* or other flower behind their ear in the world's most simple yet graceful gesture of physical adornment.

Engraved mother-of-pearl is another favourite and is often used to decorate dance costumes. Traditionally flower crowns or necklaces are given as gifts on arrival while shell necklaces are given on departure.

**Tattoos**

Another good reason for Tahitians to show some skin is the resurgence of tattooing. Since the early 1980s, tattooing has enjoyed a strong revival, becoming one of the most expressive and vibrant vehicles of Polynesian culture.

With encouragement from the great Samoan masters, young Tahitians have delved into their ancient traditions and have brought this ancestral form of bodily adornment, with its undisputed artistic qualities, completely up to date. Today many Polynesian men and women sport magnificent tattoos as symbols of their identity.

Modern tattooing is completely for the sake of style or beautification; in ancient times it was a highly socially significant and sophisticated art. Firstly, it was a symbol of community or clan membership and geographic origin. Each island group had their own style of tattoo: the Tuamotu Islands used simple, geometric shapes, while the Marquesian designs were the most intricate and elaborately designed and are the inspiration for contemporary tattoos. It was also an initiation rite: in the Marquesas, the onset of adulthood was marked by a ceremony during which young men would display their tattoos as symbols of bravery; women were not allowed to help with the cooking until they passed a rite of having their hands tattooed. Social status was also displayed through tattooing: as people progressed through different stages of life, they covered their bodies with more tattoos. This aesthetic adornment played a part in the seduction process as well. Finally, tattooing served to intimidate: in the Marquesas warriors tattooed their faces to make themselves look terrifying to enemies.

**Cinema**

There's a dearth of films made about or set in French Polynesia. Tahiti's role as a movie backdrop is almost exclusively tied up with the *Bounty* (see the boxed text, opposite). James Michener's *South Pacific* may have been about Polynesia, but it certainly wasn't filmed there. Oddly enough, the film world has turned a blind cinematographic eye to the great Polynesian migration voyages, European exploration, French colonialism and – apart from *The Thin Red Line* – the world wars in the Pacific.

**MUTINY IN THE CINEMA**

Everybody loves a filmic mutiny, and nobody loves an excuse for a good-guy-versus-bad-guy flick more than Hollywood. The story of the famous uprising aboard the *Bounty* has been embellished by big-budget film-makers three times in 50 years. If another version is ever made, audiences could be forgiven for having a mutiny of their own.

The original *Mutiny on the Bounty* epic was made in 1935. It was directed by Frank Lloyd and starred Charles Laughton as Bligh and Clark Gable as Fletcher Christian (it was Gable's last moustache-less film). Although critics insist that this is the classic *Bounty* film, it certainly played fast and loose with history. Bligh flogs, keelhauls, lies and cheats his way through the entire film, while Christian is a charming, brave, purposeful, rather American aristocrat. Poetic licence has Bligh storming back to Tahiti to round up the mutineers, while Christian et al dutifully wait for British naval justice. Very little of the film was actually shot on Tahiti.

The lavish three-hour 1962 remake, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, was directed by Lewis Milestone, and stars Trevor Howard as Bligh and Marlon Brando as Christian. This film is a much more extravagant affair than the black-and-white original and was filmed on Tahiti and Bora Bora, to the great benefit of the local economy. Bligh is again portrayed as a monster, while Christian is a sort of simpering fop who clearly would have driven any captain nuts.

The third and final remake of the now-familiar tale, *Bounty*, produced by Dino de Laurentis and directed by Roger Donaldson, is surprisingly respectable. Most of the location filming was done on Mo'orea, and 1980s cinematic freedom meant that Polynesian nudity, and those goddess-like 'celestial forms' Bougainville so enthusiastically described, finally made it onto the big screen. Anthony Hopkins plays the not-quite-so-bad-and-mad Bligh and Mel Gibson is the more-handsome-than-ever Christian. The scenery on Mo'orea looks fantastic.

Perhaps Tom Hanks will play Captain Cook in a Hollywood extravaganza sometime soon.

*Tabu*, released in 1931, was filmed on Bora Bora. This work of fiction explores the notions of *tapu*, and when one of the directors was killed in an accident shortly after finishing filming, there was plenty of speculation that his death may have been the result of including *tapu* parts of the island in the film.

In 1979, a big-budget remake of *Hurricane*, the 1937 classic based on a Nordhoff and Hall novel, was filmed on Bora Bora. The film was a major flop, despite an all-star cast; for TV it was retitled *Forbidden Paradise*.

'Today many Polynesian men and women sport magnificent tattoos as symbols of their identity'

# Tahitian Dance

Tahitian dance is not just a tourist attraction, it's one of the most vibrant forms of expression underlying Maohi (Polynesian) culture. The dances that visitors see performed in French Polynesia are not created for tourists – they are authentic performances, and they play a major part in spreading the influence of Tahitian culture abroad. Behind every performance lies months of rehearsals, rigorously standardised choreography and a specific legend that is consummately acted out with its own hierarchical structure and meaning. In this land of oral traditions, dance is not merely an aesthetic medium but also a means of preserving the memory of the past. It is also a discipline in a constant state of evolution and a social mirror that reflects the frictions in current Tahitian society, which is torn between tradition and modernity.

The luxury hotels offer top-quality dance shows about twice a week. On Tahiti and Mo'orea they are performed by the very best semiprofessional groups; on other islands the companies are rather more amateur but it will never be a typically 'touristy' show. These shows come with a buffet (costing around 7000 CFP) and are open to all. If you only wish to attend the show, inquire about the hotel's policy.

## HISTORY

Arriving unprepared from an 18th-century Europe where women would rarely bare even an ankle, the first Westerners to view Tahitian dancing must have been shocked and mesmerised by the grace and sexuality of Tahitian dance. Little is known about what the dances were like before the arrival of the Europeans. What we do know, from the accounts of these early visitors, is that entertainment, and especially dancing, held an

important place in the society of that period. Dancing was performed at group rituals and ceremonies on the *marae* (traditional temples), and was accompanied by *pahu* (drums) and *vivo* (nasal flute). It also had sacred overtones that were embodied by the *ario'i*, the actor-dancer troubadours who performed in various clans. Many different *heiva* (celebrations) in the life of the community incorporated dancing, singing and mime.

After the arrival of the missionaries, dancing inevitably suffered the same fate as tattooing and the traditional places of worship. Deemed to be both pagan and lewd, dancing was forbidden by the Code of Pomare of 1819, but was carried on in secret. From 1895 a number of tightly controlled dance performances were allowed to take place to celebrate the festival of 14 July (Bastille Day) called Tiurai (and now known as the Heiva).

From 1956 onwards traditional dancing was modernised by Madeleine Moua, a former primary school teacher, and was given a new image free of demonic overtones. She created Heiva, the first professional dance group, perfected the costumes and made choreography more straightforward, while still drawing on the rich Maohi cultural heritage. Other dance companies have since appeared on the scene, and Tahitian dance has become vibrant once again, even though the dancing we see today probably has little to do with the spectacles of former times.

## TYPES OF DANCE

There are five types of dance. They are seldom performed on their own but instead are integrated into a programme where each is performed in turn. It's important to note that the *tamure*, a term of recent origin, refers to the popularised, hip-jiggling form of Tahitian dance that has absolutely no traditional cultural basis.

### THE OTEA

Impressive and highly physical, the *otea* is what comes to mind for most people when they think of Tahitian dance; the accompanying music is provided entirely by percussion instruments. Originally this was a male-only war dance but nowadays dancers are more likely to be both male and female. The 'manly' character is preserved in the body language, however, and in the rhythm and sudden loud cries of the dancers.

The men's steps are radically different from the women's. They use mainly their legs to perform a very specific and highly spectacular movement known as *paoti*: with knees bent and heels together but slightly raised, they alternately open and close their knees with a scissor-like movement that can be fast or slow, depending on the tempo set by the percussion. The basic female movement is a swaying of the hips caused by intensive bending and straightening of the knees, with the feet kept level on the ground.

Both men and women move their arms and hands in sharp and angular movements towards the upper part of the body. On stage the dancers are placed in a geometric formation, in men-only or women-only rows.

The *otea* occasionally includes a solo performance, the group sitting or kneeling while a single performer or couple dances, each in turn.

Volcanoes, sharks, historical events or legends, all of which may be suggested by the use of props, are the underlying themes dictating choreography. Because it is so gruelling, an *otea* sequence lasts only a few minutes.

### WARNING!

At a local dance performance, prepare to shake your hips: tourists are often asked up to the stage to dance once the show is over.

TRADITIONAL TAHITIAN DANCERS  
LINDA CHING



In French only, [www.tahitigrandsballets.com](http://www.tahitigrandsballets.com) is the site of Le Grands Ballet de Tahiti; it includes the troupe's international performing schedule.

## THE APARIMA

The free-flowing and graceful *aparima* beguiles and soothes the spectator. In very rough terms, the *aparima* is a mixed-gender dance that tells a story using hand movements and song. The story may be a legend, a love song or a scene from everyday life. In contrast to the *otea*, the hand and arm movements are predominant. There is a great deal of expressiveness and realism in the *aparima*: the dancers mime each scene very effectively (eg paddling, opening a coconut), using props where necessary.

Guitar and ukulele provide the musical accompaniment, percussion being used only to set the tempo. The dancers follow every hand movement with their eyes and faces.

There are two variants of the *aparima*: the *aparima himene*, sung by the orchestra and the dancers, and the *aparima vava*, which is instrumental, the story told entirely by means of gesture. An *aparima* sequence lasts only a few minutes.

## THE HIVINAU

Inspired by the body language of English sailors hoisting the anchor, the *hivinau* takes its name from the phrase 'heave now'.

For the dance, men and women form a double circle surrounding the orchestra (drums only) and a male vocal soloist, who is known as the *ra'atira hivinau*. The *ra'atira hivinau* recites a few words and the dancers, playing the part of the choir, reply with a chorus. The two groups of dancers either cross and turn in opposite directions or proceed together in a clockwise direction. During the chorus, the dancers in each circle turn and face a partner and dance as a couple. The steps are the same as those of the *otea* but are less complicated. The drums merely keep time.

The predominant aspect of the *hivinau* is the interplay between the vocals of the soloist and the responses from the choir. Performance of the *hivinau* is becoming something of a rare occurrence since it requires such a large number of participants.

## THE PAOA

The *paoa* is said to have its origins in the manufacture of *tapa* (bark cloth). The women, sitting in a circle, would sing for motivation as they pounded the bark. One of them would get the group going by singing the words and the others would respond. Every so often a woman would get up to dance a few steps.

A male and female choir seated on the ground forms a semicircle, in the centre of which a male vocal soloist recites a few words, often based on legend. The members of the choir respond and keep time by slapping their thighs with both hands. The orchestra (drums only) maintains a position next to the soloist. One couple then comes into the centre and improvises a dance using the simplified steps of the *otea*, interspersed with shouts of 'hi' and 'ha' that have strong erotic overtones. As in the *hivinau*, it is the dialogue between the leader and the choir that is the key element of the *paoa*.

## THE FIRE DANCE

This dance, which is thought to have originated in Samoa, is frequently included in hotel shows because it is so impressive. The performer, always a man, juggles a flaming torch alight at both ends, against a background of drums.

## MARQUESAN DANCE

The Marquesans have their own distinctive cultural identity, and have developed types of dance that are very different from the *ori Tahiti* (Tahitian dances). These dances are performed on the Marquesas for specifically Marquesan festivals. The most famous of these is the *Haku Manu*, modelled on the movements of a bird. The Dance of the Pig, very impressive on account of its physicality, mimics the symbolic phases of the animal's life. The action is punctuated by loud, husky shouts of 'hi' and 'ha'. Percussion instruments alone are used, and the enormous drums can be up to 1.5m high. Marquesan costumes are usually plainer than Tahitian ones, being simply loincloths made out of plant fibres.

## INSTRUMENTS

Dancers and musicians must display perfect harmony and synchronisation. The musicians, who are invariably all men, usually stand at the front of the stage and to one side so as to maintain visual contact with the group. Very much all-rounders, the musicians play both percussion and stringed instruments and they also sing.

Drums are the Maohi instruments par excellence. The *toere* is a drum that is carved entirely out of a piece of wood. It is cylindrical in shape, and hollowed out with a narrow slit down the whole of its length, and it is this that produces resonance. The orchestra comprises different sizes of *toere*, each of which produces a distinct sound. Usually an orchestra comprises between one and five *toere*.

The *ja'atete* is a drum with a single skin. It is played with two sticks and rests on a support aimed at raising the height of the resonance chamber.

The *pahu*, or *tari parau*, is a drum with two skins, rather like a bass drum. The musician plays from a seated position and strikes the drum, held on his side, with a special beater to produce a more muffled sound.

String instruments are of European origin, though the ukulele, a mini-guitar with four strings, comes by way of Hawaii. Guitars are also now an integral part of the orchestra.

## COSTUMES

Costumes are a key component of Tahitian dance and the glamour surrounding it. A distinction is made between two types of costume, one for the *otea* and the other for the *aparima*.

For the *otea*, the outfit covers the dancers' bodies from head to foot. Dancers wear a crown of fresh flowers (frangipani, *tiare* or gardenia, and bougainvillea) or a huge and elaborate headdress, as well as garlands of flowers and seashells. Women wear a bikini top made of two halves of a coconut, polished and dyed black, and held together with a piece of string. Dancers of both sexes wear a *more* (skirt) made of *purau* (a type of hibiscus) bark cut into very thin strips, sewn together and dyed red or yellow. Men's *more* hang down slightly below the knees and are attached to the waist; women's are knotted around the hips and hang down as far as the ankles.

A decorative belt of flowers, mother-of-pearl, pieces of polished coconut and seashells is worn over the *more*. The inner part of the belt is fitted

Tahitian dance is now taught in schools from nursery school onwards.

'Costumes are a key component of Tahitian dance and the glamour surrounding it'

with pendants made of vegetable fibres and seashells, which emphasise the swaying movements of the hips as the women dance. Men wear *purau* fibres around their calves, and dancers of both sexes sport plumes that they wave in their hands to emphasise movement of the upper limbs.

The outfit for the *aparima* is simpler and usually consists of a *pareu* (sarong-type garment) worn as a loincloth for the men, or tied like a skirt or dress for the women. Garlands of flowers or seashells are used as hats.

## DANCE GROUPS

A dance company might well perform with as many as 150 participants on important occasions but, as a rule, there is a core of about 20 dancers.

There are three truly professional groups: O Tahiti E, Temaeva and the Grand Ballet. The three groups travel internationally but also play occasional shows at the Place Toata, the waterfront amphitheatre in Pape'ete. Groups performing in hotels are generally smaller and semi-professional; there is usually not enough local work for a dancer to live on their art alone.

The dancers are most often aged between 15 and 35, and are from very different social and ethnic backgrounds. Polynesians are in the majority, but you also find *demi* (mixed race, of Polynesian and European heritage), Chinese and even *popaa* (Westerners). The criteria for employment are motivation and a love of bodily expression, rather than a beautiful physique, but given the sheer physical energy required and the bodily exposure, dancers' bodies tend to be very impressive.

Companies are highly structured. The *ra'atira* (leader) is choreographer and conductor, directing rehearsals, choosing costumes, selecting themes and deciding on the exact positions of performers on stage. During major performances the *ra'atira* encourages the dancers by circulating among the spectators and shouting out recommendations. The *'orero* (orator) announces the theme to the public. The most experienced dancers, male and female, are called *pupahu* and are placed at the front of the stage.

The highly versatile musicians are an integral part of the group, singing and playing percussion and strings.

## THE HEIVA

The Heiva is the high point in the celebration of Maohi culture. Each year for a month, late June to late July, islanders from all the archipelagos join together for a full programme of festivities in Pape'ete and on some of the other islands. The emphasis is on traditional dance contests and singing competitions, but there are numerous other activities on offer. Other features of the Heiva include demonstrations of *niau*-making (woven coconut-palm leaves), *tifafai*-making (appliqué) and *tapa*-making, as well as a stone-carving competition, a procession of floral floats, voting for Miss Heiva and Mr Heiva, a funfair, firework displays, fire walking and tattoo displays. For the tourist, this is a unique opportunity to discover first-hand the rich Maohi cultural heritage.

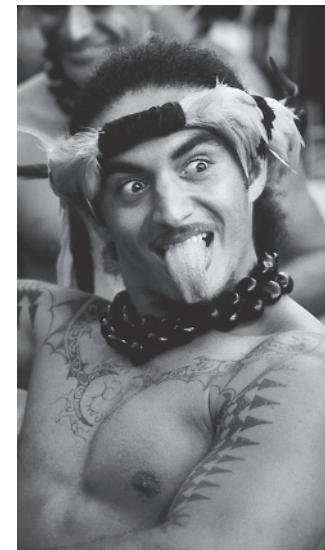
Prior to 1985 the Heiva was known as Tiurai (July). The first Heiva took place in 1882, when the object of the event was to celebrate 14 July (Bastille Day), but dancing remained banned. Gradually the festival's republican overtones disappeared and the Tiurai became a festival of Polynesian culture, with dance slowly regaining prominence.

The Heiva is organised by **Tahiti Nui 2000** (☎ 50 31 00). Reservations for the evening dance contests can be made from May onwards at the kiosk at Place Toata in Pape'ete. You can also inquire at the tourist office. The evening will set you back between 1000 and 2500 CFP. Dance performances take place next to the cultural centre.

### DANCE CONTESTS

The star events of the Heiva are the dance contests. Over a period of several evenings around 20 groups from different islands compete before a jury for a number of different prizes including Best Group, Best Orchestra, Best Costume, Best Couple and Best Piece of Music. A strict set of rules governs the performances. The jury pays great attention to synchronisation, thematic interpretation, costumes and choreography.

There are two categories: freestyle and traditional. In the traditional category, each group must perform a classical dance based on a theme that's inspired by Polynesian history or legend. In the freestyle category, innovations in choreography and body language are the order of the day.



TAHITIAN DANCER JOHN BORTHWICK

### VOCAL CONTESTS

Although singing competitions are less prestigious than dancing, they are part of the Heiva, and various competing choirs are held in high esteem. Unfortunately, they are more or less impenetrable to the novice, owing to the complexity of the polyphonic structures of songs such as the *himene ruau*, *himene tarava tahiti*, *himene tarava raromatai* and *ute paripari*. The choirs are mixed, both male and female, and comprise up to 10 voices.

In ancient times the *'orero* acted as the 'memory' of Maohi culture, reciting ancestries and passing on cultural heritage. The *'orero* contest, launched at the 1998 Heiva, aims to revive and preserve this tradition. The *'orero* each recite a text lasting five to 10 minutes, either based on legend or on a theme particular to their group.

### PHYSICAL CONTESTS

The national sport of canoeing is highlighted at every Heiva festival. Competing in crews of one, three, six or 16 men and women, the finest rowers in French Polynesia participate in several races over a distance of 2600m or 3500m in the Tahiti lagoon or out at sea. One of the races goes all the way round Mo'orea (84km), but changes of crew are allowed during this race.

*Amoraa ofae* (rock lifting), which originated in the Australs, is truly spectacular and calls for great strength and skill. Competitors are required to lift a smooth rock weighing between 90kg and 145kg, which they must hoist onto their shoulders.

If you want to take home a reminder of the dances you see, check out the music recommended on p37.

The ancestral sport of *patia fa* (javelin throwing) from the Tuamotus truly comes to life at the Heiva. The object is to hit a coconut tied to the top of a 7.5m pole from a distance of 22m. Individuals or two-person teams can compete in this event.

Coconut husking, which is still widespread on the Tuamotus and the Marquesas, has been turned into a competition for the Heiva. Each team of three competitors has to split open and scoop out the insides of between 150 and 200 coconuts in the shortest possible time and place the meat in a hessian sack. The tools used are an axe and a *pana* (curved knife).

In ancient times, Polynesian fruit bearers would hang the fruit they had picked from both ends of a stick, which they carried on their shoulders. There are two fruit-bearing races over a distance of about 2km. The first is run with a burden of 30kg and the second with a load of 50kg.

# Diving

Diving in French Polynesia is a life-altering experience. One of the best destinations on Planet Scuba, it offers seasoned and novice divers the full slate: jaw-dropping topography; gin-clear visibility; warm waters year-round; glittering blue seas; gorgeous reefs ablaze with technicolour tropical fish; high-voltage drift dives; close encounters with sharks, hump-back whales and dolphins; and even one-of-a-kind-sites such as famed Tiputa Pass of the Pygmy Orcas. Add the unbeatable bonus of having idyllic backdrops as you travel to and from the sites, and you'll have a fair view of the picture.

From Rurutu in the Australs to Fakarava in the Tuamotus or Hiva Oa in the Marquesas, you'll be spoilt for choice. Just as the individual islands have their distinct personalities, so the dive sites have their own hallmark. Just take your pick!

## DIVING CONDITIONS

There are consistently optimal diving conditions throughout the year. Outstanding visibility is the norm – it runs to 40m and more except when it has rained for several days, which washes out the island and clouds the sea with runoff. The lack of pollution is an added bonus. Current conditions vary a lot, from imperceptible to strong.

Water temperatures range from a low of 26°C to a high of 29°C in most islands. You won't need anything more than a thin neoprene wetsuit. The only exception is the Australs, where water temperatures drop as low as 20°C during the coolest months (June to August). At this time of year a 3mm wetsuit is recommended.

## DIVE SITES

### TAHITI

Tahiti is often overlooked by the been-there-done-that crowd, but it offers some truly excellent diving, with about 20 lagoon and ocean sites between Arue and Paea, plus the odd wreck. You could easily spend three days of diving here to do them justice.

Should you need to brush up your skills, the Aquarium is a good start. Off Faa'a airport's runway, this site is a feast for the eyes, with multihued tropicals flitting among coral boulders scattered on a sandy floor in less than 10m. There are also two minor wrecks, an old Cessna aircraft and a cargo boat. In the same area, the *Cargo Ship* and the *Catalina* refer to a shipwreck and an aircraft wreck. Of particular interest is the *Catalina*, a twin-engine WWII-vintage flying boat that was scuttled in 1964. The 15m structure is in fine condition, its right wing tip resting on the seabed at 20m. Overall there's nothing spectacular but it's very scenic.

Just outside the reef at Puna'aiua, St Etienne Drop-Off is a perfect wall dive. Further south, don't miss the Spring, a very atmospheric site featuring three towering coral mounts and a couple of freshwater springs bubbling up from the ocean floor. Fish life is quite copious, with schools of snappers and smaller species as well as occasional turtles.

On the east coast near Matavai Bay (Baie de Matavai), local divers swear by the Faults of Arue and Dolphin Bank. This area features a good mix of gentle coral plateaus and steep drop-offs broken up by a series of fissures.

The site rundown in this section is by no means exhaustive. For more information see Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Tahiti & French Polynesia*. It details nearly 50 of French Polynesia's best sites, with full-colour photos throughout.

If you're after breathtaking walls, the south coast of Tahiti Iti is a must. The Marado epitomises the type of dive you'll encounter in Tahiti Iti, with a steep wall that plunges to the abyss. It's lavishly draped in graceful gorgonians – a very uncommon sight in French Polynesia. The only flaw is the lack of fish life in the area. Another recommended site, the Tetopa Grotto features a cavern that penetrates well into the reef. The entrance is at 8m. The nooks and crannies shelter large concentrations of lobster and soldierfish, as well as a group of pufferfish. The Hole in the Lagoon, as the name suggests, refers to a large circular basin inside the lagoon. This 'lagoon in the lagoon' has a smooth, sandy floor that gently slopes down to 27m. Several columns of corals that rise from the seafloor are home to a host of colourful reef fish and more unusual species, including batfish, leopard rays and white-tip reef sharks. On the sand, approach slowly to watch swaying conger eels slip down into their burrows.

See p64 for dive centres on Tahiti.

### MO'OREA

Mo'orea is a diver's treat, with a good balance of reef dives, deep dives and shark dives. Most diving is focused at the entrances to Cook's Bay and Opunohu Bay, and off the northwestern corner of the island. Unlike those in neighbouring Tahiti, the reefs here do not drop off steeply, but slope gently away in a series of canyons and valleys.

The Tiki and Opunohu Canyons have achieved cult status among shark lovers. Because of the sites' long history of fish feeding, there are gangs of black-tip, grey and lemon sharks, all vying for the free meal offered by the divemaster – usually hunks of tuna or *mahi mahi* (dorado). Reef life is also prolific at these sites. Here you'll be able to get quite close to a variety of fish that are normally skittish and hard to approach.

Taotoi is another fave, with a pleasant seascape. Watch for eagle rays passing through a nearby channel – up to a dozen can be seen gliding by if you're lucky.

In the mood for a deep dive? Ask for the Roses. It features a vast expanse of *Montipora* coral that stretches as far as the eye can see. You might descend to 40m to hover over this gorgeous field for a closer look at the coral. Don't expect swarms of fish – it's the scenery that makes this dive so rewarding. Some dive centres also venture as far as Taota Pass on the western side of the island and Temae on the eastern side.

Sightings of wandering pods of dolphins are also frequently reported – the perfect end to any dive.

See p64 for dive centres on Mo'orea.

### HUAHINE

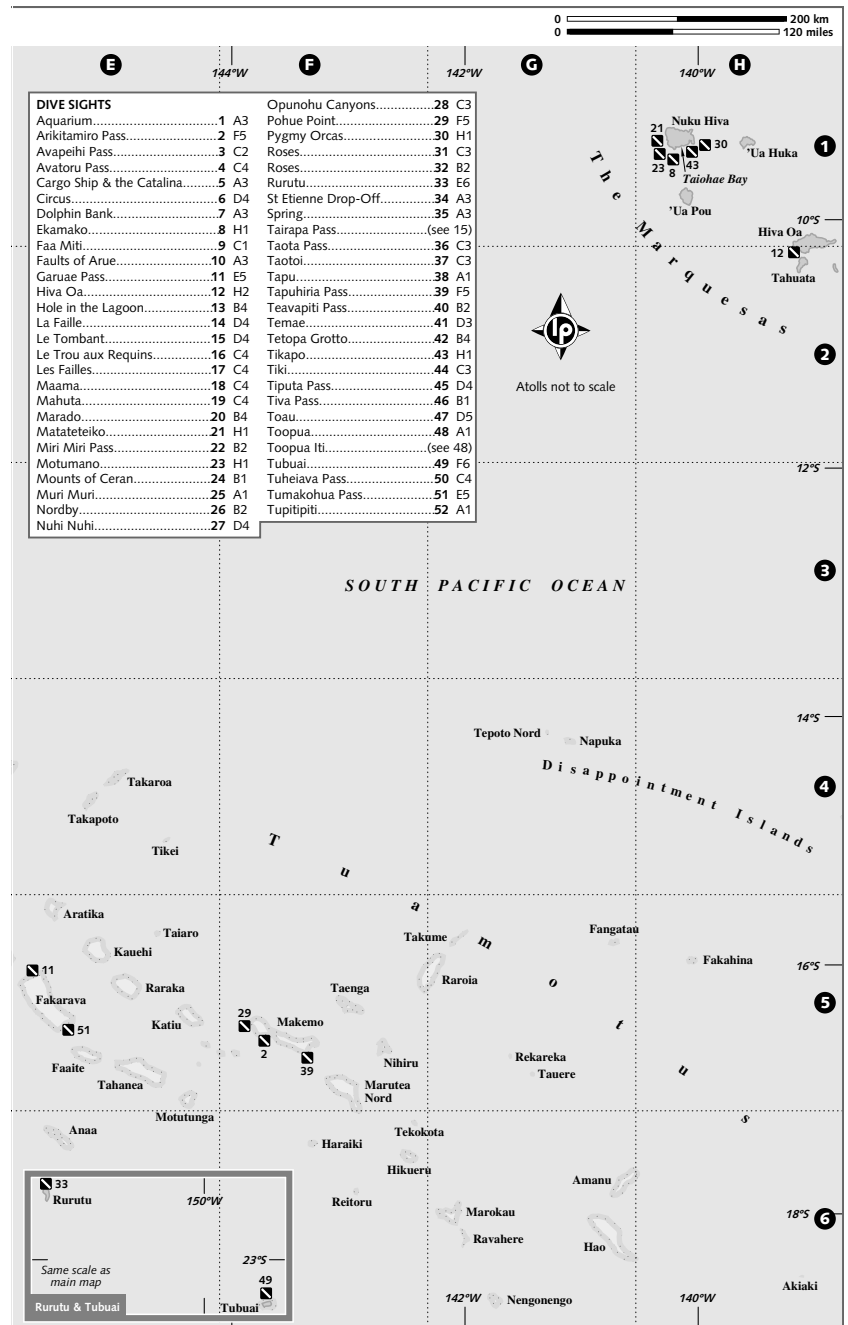
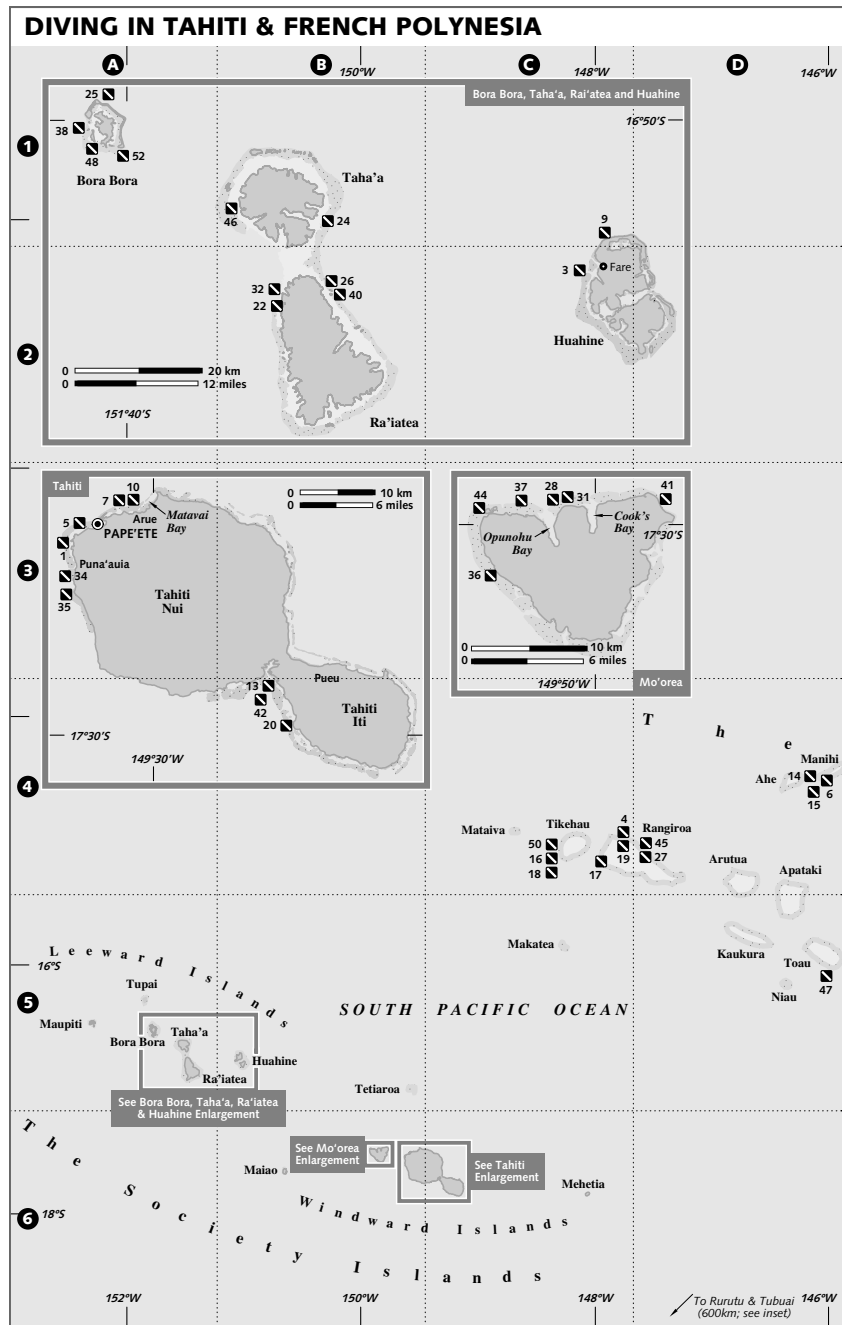
If you want relaxed diving, Huahine will appeal to you. Novice divers in particular will feel comfortable – the dive conditions are less challenging than anywhere else but still offer excellent fish action. There are some superb reef dives off Fare and near the airport, to the north of the island.

#### TO FEED OR NOT TO FEED?

Whether or not shark-feeding is a good idea is open to debate. On the one hand, these artificial encounters undeniably disrupt natural behaviour patterns. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly spectacular and it has been conducted without any accident so far. Some experts think that these shows can have educational virtues and are a good way to raise awareness among divers. If you're against shark-feeding, do not hesitate to ask for a 'regular' dive.

The only weak point of the diving in French Polynesia is the lack of impressive wrecks.





A longstanding favourite, Avapeihi (Fitii) Pass is a five-minute boat ride from Fare. The highlight of the site is the dazzling aggregation of barracuda, snappers, trevallies and grey reef sharks. The best opportunity to spot predators is during an outgoing current, when they patrol the pass in search of drifting lagoon fish. The only drawback is the slightly reduced visibility, which averages about 20m.

Another highlight, Faa Miti, just before the airstrip, features a series of atmospheric coral boulders laced with sand valleys at around 25m. Keep your eyes peeled for moray eels hiding in the recesses, stingrays buried in the sand, soldierfish, perches, surgeonfish and several species of butterflyfish.

See p65 for dive centres on Huahine.

## RA'IAATEA & TAHA'A

One of the star attractions in Ra'iatea is the *Nordby*, the only real wreck dive in French Polynesia. Good news: she's easily accessible, right off the Raiatea Hawaiki Nui Hotel, lying on her side on a sandy bottom, between 18m and 29m. This 50m vessel sank in August 1900 after a storm drove her ashore. She is relatively well preserved and can easily be

### ADRENALINE FOR EVERYONE

If you're after some thrilling dives, French Polynesia has a repertoire of once-in-a-lifetime experiences that will seduce even the most blasé divers.

#### Drift Diving

Drifting with the current is part and parcel of the dive experience in many of the sites in the Tuamotu Archipelago and in most of the Society Islands. As the tide rises, enormous volumes of ocean water gush through the openings of the barrier reef (known as passes) to the lagoon, forming bottlenecks and creating strong currents. Outside the pass, divers drop into the flow and are sucked into the pass, surrounded by a procession of fish. A truly memorable experience.

#### Snorkelling with Dolphins

In Nuku Hiva (Marquesas) you'll have the unique opportunity to snorkel with dolphins that gather daily on the east side of the island. A mask, snorkel and fins are all that's necessary to join in.

#### Snorkelling with Whales

The highlight of diving in Rurutu (Australis) is the humpback whales that come to the area to reproduce, calve and nurse from July to October. Unlike other popular whale-watching spots in the world, whale-watching in Rurutu is still a wild experience; it's conducted differently. Under the guidance of a well-trained divemaster, snorkellers can actually get surprisingly close to these gentle giants. Unforgettable!

#### Shark Dives

If you're after close encounters with toothy critters, French Polynesia is the right place. Shark-feeding is a hugely popular activity at Mo'orea, Ra'iatea, Bora Bora and Manihi. On the bottom, the divemaster signals to the divers to form a semicircle, and produces a large hunk of fish from a feedbag. In a few seconds he is surrounded by a dense cloud of grey reef sharks, along with black-tip sharks and the occasional lemon shark. The scene is awesome: the predators tear hunks off the bait, ripping it away with a shake of the head. This controversial performance lasts about 15 minutes.

In the Tuamotus, feeding is not necessary to ensure the presence of sharks: dozens of grey reef sharks, white-tip and silver-tip sharks can be encountered near the passes.

penetrated. Look for the resident fish that hide in the darker parts, including groupers, soldierfish, Moorish idols, lionfish, a couple of moray eels and crustaceans. The *Nordby* is also encrusted with soft and hard species of coral. Visibility is not the strong point of this dive, but the atmosphere offers ample compensation.

Teavapiti Pass is a must. As in all passes in French Polynesia, a strong tidal current runs through it, providing food for the little guys at the bottom of the food chains, who, in turn, attract middle- and upper-chain critters. Off the western coast, don't miss Miri Miri Pass, with lots of fish action and delicate bunches of purple *Distichopora* coral. Seasoned divers will enjoy the Roses. At about 40m, the seabed is blanketed with gorgeous *Montipora* coral formations.

Off Taha'a, renowned sites include the Mounts of Ceran and the Tiva Pass, with a superb underwater terrain and a fine cast of reef fish and pelagics.

See p65 for dive centres on Ra'iatea and Taha'a.

## BORA BORA

This magical island has several outstanding dive sites outside the lagoon. The catch? There's only one pass into the lagoon, which means that some of the dive sites involve a long boat trip.

Tapu is an exciting spot, although it tends to be pretty congested these days by hordes of snorkellers and divers. Sharks are the major attraction – a result of regular fish-feeding. Apart from black-tip reef sharks, you'll certainly come across massive lemon sharks, usually found at around 25m. The reef is gently sloping and is studded with healthy coral formations that play host to a smorgasbord of reef species.

South of Teavanui Pass, Toopua and Toopua Iti are also well-regarded dive sites. Enjoy the channel where you can spot eagle rays, or explore the area's varied topography, with numerous canyons, gullies, corridors and swim-throughs.

In the mood for a thrill-packed dive? Ask for Muri Muri, also known as the White Valley, at the northern apex of the ring of islets encircling Bora Bora. Strong currents and regular feedings ensure a respectable crowd of sharks.

Another hotspot is Tupitipiti. This magical site boasts an elaborate underwater terrain, with caves, tunnels and chasms galore. It's not that fishy but the scenery will take your breath away. Given its isolation and the time involved in getting there (about 45 minutes by boat), Tupitipiti is not always proposed by the dive centres. This is a distinct advantage as it consequently retains its atmosphere of virgin beauty, far from the hustle and bustle of the more easily accessible Tapu or Toopua sites.

See p65 for dive centres on Bora Bora.

## RANGIROA

Rangiroa is the stuff of legend, and for good reason. It's brimming with adrenaline-pumping dive opportunities.

With its amazing drift dives and dense concentration of pelagics, Tiputa Pass is almost a religious experience. Thrilling rides are guaranteed every time, as are bewildering numbers of grey reef sharks at the entrance of the pass. Eagle rays and hammerheads are also regularly seen. Avatoru Pass is another not-to-be-missed site, with regular sightings of manta rays. But there's more to diving in Rangiroa than the passes. Mahuta, below Avatoru Pass, features a contoured topography, with canyons, sand valleys and coral boulders surrounded by a wide assortment of reef

Alas, all the manta rays that used to patrol the coral ridges at Anau dive site, off Hotel Le Meridien in Bora Bora, have left. The building of new hotels on the nearby islets have scared them away.

**TAKE THE PLUNGE!**

You've always fancied venturing underwater on scuba? Now's your chance. What could be better? French Polynesia is a perfect starting point for new divers, as the turquoise, warm water in the shallow lagoons is a forgiving training environment. Most resorts offer courses for beginners and employ experienced instructors, most of them competent in English.

Just about anyone in reasonably good health can sign up for an introductory dive (*baptême* in French), including children aged eight and over. It typically takes place in shallow (3m to 5m) water and lasts about 30 minutes. It's escorted by a divemaster.

If you choose to enrol in an Open Water course while in French Polynesia, count on it taking about three days, including classroom lectures and open-water training. Another option is to complete the classroom and pool sessions at home and perform the required Open Water dives in a PADI- or SSI-affiliated dive centre in French Polynesia. Once you're certified, your C-card is valid permanently and recognised all over the world. The greatest variety of instruction is found in the Society Islands.

fishes, including trevallies and groupers. Also known as the Aquarium, Nuhi Nuhi is a coral islet that stretches across Tiputa Pass just inside the lagoon. It's a favourite for novice divers, with a jumble of coral pinnacles providing a haven for a vast array of small critters in less than 10m.

On the southern side of the atoll, Les Failles is a stunner. The catch? The dive centres don't go there on a regular basis. They prefer to focus on nearby Tiputa Pass. Should they decide to bring you there, you'll be rewarded with a fantasyland of textures and shapes. The elaborate reef system is filled with countless arches and fissures and festooned with healthy corals, including vivid-yellow *Stylaster*.

See p65 for dive centres on Rangiroa.

**TIKEHAU**

Although it's less charismatic than neighbouring Rangiroa, Tikehau has its fair share of underwater delights and deserves attention for less-crowded dive sites. Most dives take place in or around Tuheiva Pass, 30 minutes by boat from Tuherahera village. Grey sharks, barracudas, trevallies and the usual reef species regularly cruise by. South of the pass you'll enjoy steep drop-offs at Le Trou aux Requins and Maama. The reef is peppered with fissures, ledges and overhangs. Colourful marine life and the regular occurrence of sharks enliven the dive sites.

See p65 for dive centres on Tikehau.

**MANIHI**

Some 175km northeast of Rangiroa, Manihi has only one pass, Tairapa Pass, with dive sites around it. With an outgoing current, you can dive the northern wall of the pass at a place named Le Tombant. When the tide is incoming, you start your dive with a brief exploration of Le Tombant before letting yourself get carried away by the current into the pass. You'll be captivated by the prolific fish life, including barracudas and sharks. Take time to explore the undercuts housing soldierfish, groupers and white-tip sharks. Air permitting, finish your dive at the Circus, an area in the lagoon at the exit of the pass. You'll have a reasonable chance of seeing eagle and manta rays. Another highlight is the scenic topography, with large boulders forming a lunar landscape in less than 25m.

La Faille features a large fissure in the reef north of the pass. Fish-feeding in Manihi usually takes place here.

See p65 for the dive centre on Manihi.

**FAKARAVA**

A 40-minute plane hop from Rangiroa, Fakarava is one of the most fascinating atolls in the Tuamotus, with a true sense of wilderness and frontier diving. There are only two dive areas, Garuae Pass at the north end of the atoll and Tumakohua Pass at the south end.

Don't know what the Tahitian word *moana* means? Dive Garuae Pass, and you'll get a hands-on education. Swimming through the intense cobalt-blue (*moana*) water towards the entrance of this gigantic pass is an unsurpassable, if slightly intimidating, experience. Expect to come across hunting sharks, numerous reef fishes and, if you're lucky, manta rays. The dive usually finishes at Ali Baba Cavern, a large coral basin at 15m, replete with schooling fish. When the tide is going out, you dive along the outer reef, away from the current.

At the south end of the atoll, the beauty of the Tumakohua Pass can bring tears to the eyes. The usual dive plan is a drift dive with the incoming current. At the entrance of the pass, you'll see a profusion of small and large reef fish, including bigeyes and marbled groupers (they breed here in July). Dozens of grey reef sharks hang around a cave carved in the right side of the pass, at 28m. Other attractions include white-sand gullies, where white-tip sharks usually lie, as well as healthy coral formations in the shallows at the end of the dive, near Tetamanu Village guesthouse.

See p65 for dive centres on Fakarava.

**TOAU**

You've probably never heard about Toau, and for good reason: this is wilderness at its best. This atoll is almost uninhabited and absolutely pristine. There's no infrastructure but it's accessible from neighbouring Fakarava atoll. Fakarava's dive centres (p65) organise day trips there. Don't miss the opportunity to sample some sensational dives in the two fish-filled passes. Be a pioneer!

**MAKEMO**

Makemo is still a secret, word-of-mouth destination for divers, and the local dive centre is adamant in protecting the site from mass tourism. If you venture this far in the central Tuamotus, you'll be rewarded with pristine sites, such as Arikitamiro Pass, a five-minute boat ride from the village. Sharks, Napoleon wrasses, barracuda, tuna, groupers and the whole gamut of tropicals can be spotted here. As if it wasn't enough, the reef is perforated with canyons and swimthroughs and the corals are in good condition. The second pass, Tapuhiria Pass, is well worth the 90-minute boat ride from the village, with lots of fish action during tidal changes and a surreal atmosphere due to the remoteness of the site. Pohue Point is a virgin tract of reef about 45 minutes from the dive centre. It's overgrown with corals and has loads of medium and small fish.

See p66 for the dive centre on Makemo.

**THE MARQUESAS**

A two-hour flight from Rangiroa, the Marquesas open up a whole new world of diving. The main highlight is the dramatic seascape, with numerous drop-offs, caverns, arches and ledges, giving the sites a peculiarly sculpted look and an eerie atmosphere. To top it all, the environment is still pristine. However, if you expect gin-clear waters, you'll be disappointed. Since the Marquesas are devoid of any protective barrier reefs, the water is thick with plankton and visibility doesn't exceed 10m to 15m. Also be prepared to cope with sometimes-difficult conditions to get to the sites.

Go to [www.polynesia-diving.com](http://www.polynesia-diving.com) and [www.diving-tahiti.com](http://www.diving-tahiti.com) for more information.

### Nuku Hiva

Nuku Hiva's main claim to fame is the Pygmy Orcas, a bewildering dolphin gathering that will enthral even the most jaded divers. Picture this: dozens (and at times, hundreds) of melon-headed whales (*Peponocephala electra*) congregating off the east coast in the morning. They usually stay at the surface, vertical or horizontal, sometimes playing, sometimes motionless. Snorkelling with these graceful creatures is sheer delight, but keep in mind that the encounter cannot be guaranteed.

Tikapo consistently sizzles with electric fish action. Rising from the depths, approximately 400m south of Tikapo Point, this exposed seamount acts as a magnet for pelagics as well as reef species, including eagle rays, schools of trevallies, unicornfish, barracuda, tuna, parrotfish, white-tip reef sharks and the occasional mantas.

If you're after a cave-diving experience, Ekamako, not far from Taihoa Bay, is hard to beat. It features a large, open-fronted cavern that is hollowed out in the basaltic cliff. It is sufficiently wide and high, making it suitable for novice divers. Look for the resident group of stingrays resting on the sandy bottom at about 10m and the numerous lobsters hiding in the fissures.

Other recommended sites include Motumano at the southwestern tip of the island and Matateteiko, the farthest site from Taihoa, at the western side. Motumano refers to a rocky promontory at the bottom of

Silver-tip sharks over reef with diver, the Society Islands

MICHAEL AW



the cliff that seldom fails to produce good sightings of manta rays, eagle rays, hammerheads, trevallies and white-tip reef sharks. Another stunner, Matateteiko features a similar topography, with an underwater platform jutting out to the open ocean. From this natural viewing platform you can spot schools of prowling predators. The small canyons and scattered boulders harbour soldierfish, octopuses, lobsters and snappers. You don't need to go deeper than 30m to enjoy these sites but be prepared to cope with strong currents.

See p66 for the dive centre on Nuka Hiva.

### Hiva Oa

Savvy divers will add Hiva Oa to their itinerary. Diving off Hiva Oa is a recent affair – the first commercial dive outfit started late in 2005. Here you can expect the unexpected. Most dive sites are located off the *motu* Anakee in Atuona Bay and in the vicinity of Teahoa Point at the southwestern tip of the bay. The local dive centre also organises trips to Tahuata, across the Bordelais Canal. You'll be hypnotised by the dramatic seascape, with arches and caves carved into the basaltic cliffs. Regular appearances by manta rays also spice up the diving.

See p66 for the dive centre on Hiva Oa.

## THE AUSTRALS

### Rurutu

Rurutu is one of the most dependable locations in the world for close encounters with whales. From July to October, several whales congregate around the island. Over the past decade or so, Raie Manta Club, one of the most renowned dive operations in French Polynesia, has developed a programme that allows snorkellers a reliable way to safely approach these behemoths. It's an ideal place because the fringing reef means that the whales come very close to the shore. Few experiences can compare with swimming with humpback whales in the open ocean.

See p66 for the dive centre on Rurutu.

### Tubuai

Yes, there's diving in Tubuai! The local dive centre shuns publicity but this off-the-beaten track island is a true gem with numerous untouched sites for those willing to venture away from the tourist areas. Another draw is the atmosphere: there's a true sense of eeriness and you'll have the sites to yourself. There are about 10 dive sites, scattered off the northern section of the reef. Marine life is pretty diverse, with a good representation of reef species, but what makes the diving here so unique is the astounding quality of the coral and the stellar visibility.

See p66 for the dive centre on Tubuai.

## DIVE CENTRES

### FACILITIES & SERVICES

Dive centres are open year-round, most of them every day. All are land-based and many of them are attached to a hotel. They typically offer two to four dives a day. It's a good idea to book at least a day in advance.

They offer a whole range of services and products, such as introductory dives (for children aged eight years and over, and adults), night dives, exploratory dives and certification programmes. Major international certifying agencies are represented, including CMAS, PADI and SSI.

### HOW MUCH?

Introductory dive or single dive: US\$55 to US\$68 (including gear)

Open Water certification course: about US\$470

**DIVING AND FLYING**

Most divers who go to French Polynesia get there by plane. While it's fine to dive soon *after* flying, it's important to remember that your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts advise 24 hours) before your flight, to minimise the risk of residual nitrogen in the blood that can cause decompression injury. Careful attention to flight times is necessary in French Polynesia because so much of the inter-island transportation is by air.

Diving in French Polynesia is fairly expensive but there are multi-dive packages, which come much cheaper. If you're travelling around, consider taking a special 10-dive package. It's valid in 21 dive outfits in Tahiti, Mo'orea, Huahine, Ra'iatea, Taha'a, Bora Bora, Tikehau, Rangiroa, Manihi, Makemo and Fakarava. It costs 55,000 CFP and can be used by two people. Topdive dive centres have their own package that can be used in Tahiti, Mo'orea, Bora Bora and Fakarava.

Prices include equipment rental, so you don't need to bring all your gear.

Generally, dive operations (except for those on Tahiti) offer free pickups from your accommodation. Almost all dive centres accept credit cards.

There's one recompression chamber in Pape'ete.

**DOCUMENTS**

If you're a certified diver, bring your C-card; it's a good idea to have your dive logbook with you as well. Centres welcome certification from any training agency (CMAS, PADI, NAUI), but may ask you to do a checkout dive.

**CHOOSING A DIVE CENTRE**

There are about 35 professional dive centres in French Polynesia. All of them are affiliated to one or more internationally recognised certifying agencies (PADI, NAUI, CMAS). In general, you can expect well-maintained equipment, well-equipped facilities and friendly, knowledgeable staff members. But like a hotel or a restaurant, each diving centre has its own style. On islands with several centres, do your research and opt for the one that best suits your expectations.

**Tahiti**

**Aquatica Dive Centre** (☎ 53 34 96; www.aquatica-dive.com; Intercontinental Resort Hotel)

**Eleuthera Plongée** (☎ 42 49 29; www.dive-tahiti.com; Taina Marina, PK9, Punaauia)

**Fluid** (☎ 85 41 46, 70 83 75; Taina Marina)

**Iti Diving International** (☎ /fax 57 77 93; www.itidiving.pf; PK6, Vairao) The only centre on Tahiti Iti.

**Scuba Tek Tahiti** (☎ /fax 42 23 55; www.chez.com/scubatek; PK4, Arue; ☒ closed Mon & afternoon Sun)

**Tahiti Plongée** (☎ 41 00 62, 43 62 51; www.tahitiplongee.pf; PK7.5, Punaauia; ☒ closed Mon) CMAS affiliation only.

**Topdive** (☎ 86 49 06; www.topdive.com; Sheraton)

**Mo'orea**

**Bathy's Club** (☎ 56 31 44, 55 19 39; www.dive-moorea.com; Intercontinental Resort)

**Moorea Blue Diving** (☎ 55 17 04, 74 59 99; www.mooreabluediving.com; Moorea Pearl Resort & Spa)

**Moorea Fun Dive** (☎ /fax 56 40 38; www.moorea-fundive.com; PK26.7)

**RESPONSIBLE DIVING**

The French Polynesian islands and atolls are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators in their efforts to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves, as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any litter you may find as well.
- Never stand on coral, even if they look solid and robust.

**Scubapiti** (☎ 56 20 38, 78 03 52; www.scubapiti.com; Les Tipaniers Hotel Restaurant, PK24)

The only dive centre that resolutely refuses to engage in shark-feeding.

**Topdive** (☎ 56 17 32; www.topdive.com; Cook's Bay)

**Huahine**

**Mahana Dive** (☎ 73 07 17; www.mahanadive.com; Fare)

**Pacific Blue Adventure** (☎ 68 87 21; www.divehuahine.com; Fare; ☒ closed afternoon Sun)

**Ra'iatea**

**Hémisphère Sub** (☎ 66 12 49; www.diveraiatea.com; Apooiti Marina)

**Te Mara Nui** (☎ /fax 66 11 88, ☎ 72 60 19; www.temaranui.pf; Uturoa)

**Taha'a**

**Tahaa Blue Nui** (☎ 65 67 78, 60 84 00; www.bluenui.com; Tahaa Private Island & Spa)

**Bora Bora**

**Bora Bora Blue Nui** (☎ /fax 67 79 07; www.bluenui.com; Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort)

**Bora Diving Centre** (☎ 67 71 84; www.boradive.com; Matira Point)

**Diveasy** (☎ /fax 67 69 36, ☎ 79 22 55; Matira Point)

**Nemo World** (☎ /fax 67 77 85; www.nemodivebora.com; Novotel Bora Bora Beach Resort)

**Topdive** (☎ 60 50 50; www.topdive.com; Vaitape)

**Rangiroa**

**Blue Dolphins** (☎ /fax 96 03 01; www.bluedolphins.com; Hotel Kia Ora)

**Paradive** (☎ 96 05 55; www.chez.com/paradive)

**Raie Manta Club** (☎ 96 84 80; http://raiemantaclub.free.fr; Avatoru)

**Six Passengers** (☎ /fax 96 02 60; www.the6passengers.com) About 500m east of Hotel Kia Ora.

**Topdive** (☎ /fax 96 05 60; www.topdive.com) About 300m from Hotel Kia Ora.

**Tikehau**

**Raie Manta Club** (☎ /fax 96 22 53; http://raiemantaclub.free.fr; Tikehau Village)

**Tikehau Blue Nui** (☎ /fax 96 22 40, ☎ 96 23 00; www.bluenui.com; Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort)

**Manihi**

**Manihi Blue Nui** (☎ /fax 96 42 17, ☎ 96 42 73; www.bluenui.com; Manihi Pearl Beach Resort)

**Fakarava**

**Te Ava Nui** (☎ 98 42 50, 98 43 50, 79 69 50; www.divingfakarava.com; Rotoava) Offers dives in the Garuae Pass, day trips to Toau and three-day packages to Tumakohua Pass.

Divers with a C-card get a 15kg allowance on Air Tahiti flights.

**Topdive – Fakarava Diving Center** (☎ 98 43 23, 73 38 22; [www.fakarava-diving-center.com](http://www.fakarava-diving-center.com); Maitai Dream Fakarava) Offers dives in the Garuae Pass, and day trips to Toau and to Tumakohua Pass.

**Makemo Scubamakemo** (☎ /fax 98 03 08, ☎ 78 49 13; [makemodive@hotmail.com](mailto:makemodive@hotmail.com)) Has its own accommodation for divers.

**Nuku Hiva Centre Plongée Marquises** (☎ /fax 92 00 88; [marquisesdives@mail.pf](mailto:marquisesdives@mail.pf); Taiohae)

**Hiva Oa Subatuona** (☎ 92 70 88, 27 05 24; Atuona) Offers diving trips off Hiva Oa and Tahuata.

**Rurutu Raie Manta Club** (☎ 96 84 80; <http://raiemantaclub.free.fr>) Offers whale-watching trips from July to October and regular dives the rest of the year.

**Tubuai La Bonne Bouteille** (☎ /fax 95 08 41, ☎ 74 90 97; [www.labonnebouteille.com](http://www.labonnebouteille.com) in French; Mataura)

# Food & Drink

Polynesians like to eat and they like it when you eat. Luckily, the food on offer is a pleasure on the palate. Fish and seafood lovers may well mistake French Polynesia for nirvana; vegetarians can happily pick through the available produce; and even carnivores hunting down a good steak can come away satiated.

Modern Tahitian food is a fairly balanced melange of French, Chinese and Polynesian influence; béchamel, soy sauce or coconut milk all have an equal chance of topping your entrée.

## STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

*Maa'a Tahiti*, traditional Tahitian food, is a heavy mix of starchy taro and *uru* (breadfruit), raw or cooked fish, fatty pork, coconut milk and a few scattered vegetables. On special occasions, the whole lot is neatly prepared and placed in a *hima'a* (cooking pit) where a layer of stones and banana leaves separate the food from the hot coals beneath. The food is covered with more banana leaves then buried so all the flavours and juices can cook and mingle for several hours. The result is a steamy, tender ambrosia of a meal.

## Main Dishes

Open-sea fish (tuna, bonito, wahoo, swordfish and *mahi mahi*) and lagoon fish (parrotfish, jack and squirrrelfish) feature prominently in traditional cuisine. *Poisson cru*, raw fish in coconut milk, is the most popular local dish, though fish is also served grilled, fried or poached. Lobster and *chevrette* (freshwater shrimp), often served in curry, are highly prized but limited in supply. Salmon and trout generally come from Australia or New Zealand, and prawns may be imported or farmed locally.

*Pua* (suckling pig) is the preferred meat for the traditional underground oven. Although chickens run wild everywhere, most of what is consumed is imported frozen from the US and is of low quality. Lamb and beef, from New Zealand, also often feature in dishes and are as good as you'll find anywhere in the world. In the Marquesas, goat meat takes pride of place, and dog is still eaten on the remote atolls of the Tuamotus. Although it is protected, turtle is still eaten in French Polynesia. You should categorically refuse to eat this endangered animal.

'Modern Tahitian food is a balanced melange of French, Chinese and Polynesian influence'

## TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

A distinctive feature of French Polynesian cooking is its usage of fermentation. In most cases this makes for a tangy, slightly salty flavour, but it can be more extreme. *Miti hue* is a mild example: it's a thick, lumpy sauce made from fermented coconut meat. This sauce is savoury, not sweet, and delicious with taro, *uru* (breadfruit) and fish. *Taioro* is a breakfast dish made from grated coconut and sea-snail meat (or fish if snail is unavailable) that is left to ferment in a small amount of crab juice overnight resulting in a rich, salty-sweet mush. In the Marquesas, the basic dish is *popoi*, a sweet-and-sour dish that looks like a yellow paste. It consists of cooked *uru*, crushed in a mortar and mixed with a dollop or more of fermented *uru* pulp for flavour. But the pariah to many visitors is reeking, fetid *fafaru*. This dish is made with raw fish that has been briefly marinated in *mitifafaru*, seawater that has been infused with rotting fish for ten days. The marination gives the fish a velvety, delectable texture and a tangy flavour – but the smell! *Fafaru* smells so strongly of old roadkill that eating it requires overcoming your strongest instincts for survival.

*Cuisine Chinoise de Tahiti* (in French) is the reference for Chinese Tahitian cooking, from the simple to the exceedingly difficult.

The most common accompaniments are coconut milk, which is obtained by grating the coconut meat and wringing it in a cloth, and *miti hue*, a slightly salty fermented sauce based on coconut flesh (see p67).

Among Chinese specialities, chow mein is the most popular. This fried noodle dish usually has pork and/or chicken in it, but vegetarians can always order a meat-free version. Pizza and pasta are also easy to find on the touristy islands.

Although you're not likely to find it served in restaurants, *punu pua'atoro* (canned corned beef) is Tahiti's answer to Spam. It's traditionally eaten with breadfruit and is probably one of the most frequently prepared dishes in French Polynesian homes.

### Fruit & Vegetables

French Polynesia is dripping with tropical fruit, including mango, grapefruit, lime, watermelon, pineapple and banana. *Pamplemousse* (grapefruit) is the large, sweet, Southeast Asian variety. The rambutan, another Southeast Asian introduction, is a red spiny-skinned cousin of the lychee. Fruits on the high islands are seasonal; different ones will be available depending on when you're visiting. In the Tuamotus fresh produce is always scarce.

Vegetables do not feature prominently in Polynesian cuisine. *Uru* is a staple, and is eaten roasted or fried as chips. *Fe'i*, a plantain banana, is only eaten cooked and is much less sweet than a common banana. Taro root is boiled, as are sweet potato and manioc (cassava). *Fafa* (taro leaves) are used to make *poulet fafa*, a stew with chicken and coconut milk.

### Desserts

A traditional Tahitian meal doesn't include dessert; the sweet things are simply served alongside the main meal. *Ipo* (heavy, boiled Tuamotuan coconut bread) and *po'e* (baked, mashed fruit mixed with starch and sprinkled with coconut milk) are the two most common sweet side dishes. *Faraoa coco* (coconut bread), *firifiri* (donuts) and *pai* (little turnovers filled with coconut, banana, guava or custard) are eaten for breakfast or as snacks.

When dessert is served Western style, it's usually fresh fruit or some sort of fruit tart, but it's not hard to find more extravagant French cakes and confections in fine restaurants.

### DRINKS Nonalcoholic Drinks

Several delicious fruit juices are made locally, notably the Rotui brand. Freshly squeezed juices are sometimes available but are incredibly expensive. *Pape haari* (coconut water) is the healthiest, cheapest, most natural and thirst-quenching drink around. It is totally free of microbes and bacteria (if it has come straight from the coconut).

If you want a real coffee, order a *café expresso* (espresso coffee), otherwise you'll probably be served instant Nescafé. The further you get from the tourist hubs the further you get from espresso machines, so if you're an addict heading to the more isolated islands, prepare yourself for some instant coffees or some midmorning headaches (your best bet for an espresso is the bar of a top-end hotel).

### Alcoholic Drinks

The local brand of *pia* (beer), Hinano, is sold everywhere and is available in glass 500mL bottles, 330mL and 500mL cans, and on tap. It is a fairly light, very drinkable beer. Foreign beers, notably Heineken, are also available. Allow at least 350 CFP for a beer in a bar or restaurant.

### TAHITI & FRENCH POLYNESIA'S TOP FIVE

**Coco's Restaurant** (p103) Tahiti Nui. The finest French cuisine, with a view of Mo'orea.

**Snack Tavanaia** (p111) Tahiti Iti. It's worth the effort to find this local-style place, which serves the tastiest snack fare anywhere.

**Restaurant Te Honu Iti** (p125) Mo'orea. 'Live entertainment' from the local ray population, and gourmet dining.

**Lagon Burger** (p188) Rangiroa. A little shack with the best salads and sashimi in French Polynesia.

**Restaurant Mauarii** (p139) Huahine Iti. Scrumptious traditional Tahitian food, white sand and sunsets.

Most supermarkets stock red and white wines, imported from France. When the wine is imported in properly refrigerated containers it can be excellent. But the tropical heat is a good wine's worst enemy, and you sometimes happen upon a crate of bottles that has spent time sitting in the sun at the port. Urgh! The cheapest (and nastiest) is boxed (cask) wine for around 450 CFP for 1L; it's possible to find a good French bottle for about 1000 CFP and up. Restaurants enjoy a tax reduction on alcohol, which makes it affordable (allow 1500 to 3000 CFP for a bottle).

After several years of research, Domaine Dominique Auroy has begun producing red, rosé and white wines from grapes grown on the atoll of Rangiroa. The result is a highly unusual wine that Dominique Aury describes as having subtle flavours of *metua pua*, a Tahitian fern. Bottles are available in tourist boutiques for 4000 CFP and up.

You must try a *maitai*, a local cocktail made with rum, fruit juices, coconut liqueur and, in some cases, Grand Marnier or Cointreau. This concoction is also available readymade as 'Tahiti Drink' in 1L cartons. Go easy on it if you've had a long day in the sun.

### CELEBRATIONS

A Tahitian party – be it for a wedding, birthday, Christmas or just for the heck of it – is celebrated with copious amounts of food, drink and dancing. In general the food is cooked in a *hima'a* (Tahitian oven) and the beer starts flowing early. The food never runs out and, unless it's a religious gathering, obscene amounts of alcohol are consumed. In smaller get-togethers the night fades to morning with the sounds of ukuleles and slurring vocals; at bigger celebrations there is usually a band that plays local hits while couples dance the Tahitian foxtrot.

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There is a wondrous array of restaurants on the island of Tahiti, where you can experience fine French cuisine, Vietnamese, even sushi, but the rest of French Polynesia has more limited options. The prices are fairly intimidating – expect to pay 1500 to 2500 CFP for a main in a midrange restaurant – but the food is very good. Most hotel restaurants host buffet and dance performances a few times a week, which usually cost around 6000 CFP. This may seem steep, but the dancers are generally of a very high standard, and the buffets are usually excellent.

### Quick Eats

A *snack* in French Polynesia is actually a little snack-bar-cum-café. These places are simple, cheap, and serve everything from sandwiches (made from French-style baguettes) and salads to *poisson cru* (raw fish) and burgers (meat and fish).

In its 'Cooking by Country' section, [www.recipes4us.co.uk](http://www.recipes4us.co.uk) has some good Tahitian recipes (and others that are not Tahitian at all) plus information on Tahitian food.

The water inside a coconut is sterile and can be used in medical procedures.



*Hinano*, the fruit of the *pandanus*, was used in ancient times to make a fermented beverage – today it's the name of the local beer.

For the cheapest, quickest fare with the most local clientele, head for a *roulotte* (mobile food van), with a kitchen inside and a fold-down counter along each side. The inventive use of eskies (coolers) allows the *roulottes* to whip up surprisingly good food in a flash. The nightly gathering of *roulottes* near the tourist office in Pape'ete is a real institution.

### Self-Catering

Self-catering in French Polynesia can save you a lot of money; many budget and midrange places to stay have well-equipped kitchens. The Marché de Pape'ete (p88), in Pape'ete, is the heart and belly of French Polynesia. It opens at 5am and is laden with food from all the archipelagos.

Supermarkets of varying sizes are dotted around the islands. Some have dusty little collections of tins and packaged goods, while others, particularly those on Tahiti, Mo'orea and Ra'iatea, are very well equipped. The best supermarkets on Tahiti are the Carrefour chains (in Arue and Puna'auia). On other islands you're at the mercy of cargo-ship schedules.

European imports are heavily taxed, but a fresh baguette only costs about 50 CFP and a *pain au chocolat* (chocolate croissant) about 120 CFP.

### VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

There are no vegetarian restaurants in French Polynesia, so self-catering is the best option. A few commonly served dishes like chow mein and salads can be tinkered with and made vegetarian but make it very clear to whoever is preparing the food just what it is that you don't want included.

### EATING WITH KIDS

French Polynesian food is rarely spicy and, although child's portions are virtually unheard of, it's easy to find kid-friendly dishes on most menus. Don't expect to find booster seats or high chairs but do expect a welcoming atmosphere in most eateries. Tahitian food is traditionally eaten with the fingers; kids will love being able to really dig into dishes like *chevrettes*, *brochettes* or *poisson cru*. Western-style food is also available at most places.

For toddlers and babies self-catering might be a simpler choice: jarred baby food and infant formula can be found even in remote areas. Polynesians love children and you should not be afraid to ask for assistance in finding certain foods or cooking facilities.

### HABITS & CUSTOMS

Eating is central to both family and social life in French Polynesia. French, Tahitian and Chinese people converge on the concept of happiness through long meals in good company. In homes, lunch is usually

#### DOS & DON'TS

- Do eat Tahitian food with your fingers.
- Do use a knife and fork for Western food.
- Do greet men with a handshake and women with a kiss on each cheek.
- Do take your shoes off before entering anyone's home.
- Do take your own (large) bowl when ordering takeaway – you'll be given more food and use less plastic.
- Don't tip unless there is a sign asking you to or the service was exceptional.
- Don't forget to smile – it goes a long way in French Polynesia!

a large meal while dinner is a bit lighter; in restaurants both lunch and dinner are copious although it's easier to eat light at lunch. Breakfast is classically French – baguettes with butter and jam served with coffee – but it's possible to find omelettes, fish and fruit on the menu in restaurants that open for breakfast. As in France, the bill is never brought to the table until it is asked for.

Smoking is allowed in restaurants and is the biggest problem during lunch hours in Pape'ete, when the restaurants are packed with functionaries and office workers.

### EAT YOUR WORDS

#### Useful Phrases

##### A table for two, please.

oon ta-bler poor der seel voo play

*Une table pour deux, s'il vous plaît.*

##### Do you have an English menu?

es-ker voo a-vay um mer-new on ong-glay

*Est ce que vous avez un menu en anglais?*

##### What's the speciality here?

kel ay la spay-sya-lee-tay ees-ee

*Quelle est la spécialité ici?*

##### I don't eat...

zher ner monzh pa de...

*Je ne mange pas de...*

##### dairy produce

pro-dwee lay-tyay

*produits laitiers*

##### fish

pwa-son

*poisson*

##### meat

vyond

*viande*

##### pork

por

*porc*

##### poultry

la vo-lai

*volaille*

##### seafood

frwee der mair

*fruits de mer*

##### I'd like...

zher voo-dray

*Je voudrais...*

##### The bill, please.

la-dee-syo seel voo play

*L'addition, s'il vous plaît.*

##### Thank you, the meal was excellent.

mair-see ler ray-pa e-tay ek-say-lon

*Merci, le repas était excellent.*

### Menu Decoder

*brochette*

bro-shet

sheesh kebab of beef heart, beef or fish

*carpaccio du thon*

kar-pa-syo doo tonn

thinly sliced sashimi; quality raw tuna

with a sprinkling of olive oil, salt and pepper and capers

*casse-croûte*

kas kroot

sandwich on a French-style baguette

*chevrettes/crevettes*

shay-vret/kray-vet

fresh-water shrimp/fresh-water prawns

*chow mein*

chow men

Chinese wheat noodles with carrot,

cabbage, Chinese greens and chicken

macaroni, red beans, rice vermicelli,

Chinese greens and pork

spring rolls

raw fish marinated in lemon then doused

in coconut milk and mixed with tomato

and cucumber

battered and fried chicken with a lemony

Chinese sauce

thinly sliced raw tuna served with a sauce

steak and chips

chopped raw tuna mixed with olive oil

and a variety of seasonings and/or onion

Note that it is illegal and highly discouraged to bring local fruit and vegetables from Tahiti to islands in other archipelagos since you might also be bringing unwanted insect pests that could disrupt the balance of these fragile ecosystems.

## Food Glossary

<i>agneau</i>	a-nyo	lamb
<i>bière</i>	bee-yair	beer
<i>bœuf</i>	berf	beef
<i>café</i>	ka-fay	coffee
<i>café au lait</i>	ka-fay o lay	coffee with milk
<i>citron</i>	see-tron	lemon
<i>coco</i>	ko-ko	coconut
<i>eau</i>	o	water
<i>eau en bouteille</i>	o om boo-tay	bottled water
<i>jus de fruit</i>	zhew der fwee	fruit juice
<i>jus de fruit frais</i>	zhew der fwee fray	fresh fruit juice
<i>frit(e)</i>	freet	fried
<i>frites</i>	freet	chips
<i>glace</i>	glas	ice cream
<i>grillé(e)</i>	gree-yay	grilled
<i>lait</i>	lay	milk
<i>legumes</i>	lay-gewm	vegetables
<i>œuf</i>	erf	egg
<i>pâtes</i>	pat	pasta
<i>poisson</i>	pwa-son	fish
<i>poulet</i>	poo-lay	chicken
<i>riz</i>	ree	rice
<i>viande</i>	vyond	meat
<i>vin</i>	vun	wine

Each edition of the *Saveur* magazine series, found in Tahitian bookshops, focuses on specific Polynesian ingredients like fish, local vegetables or poultry.