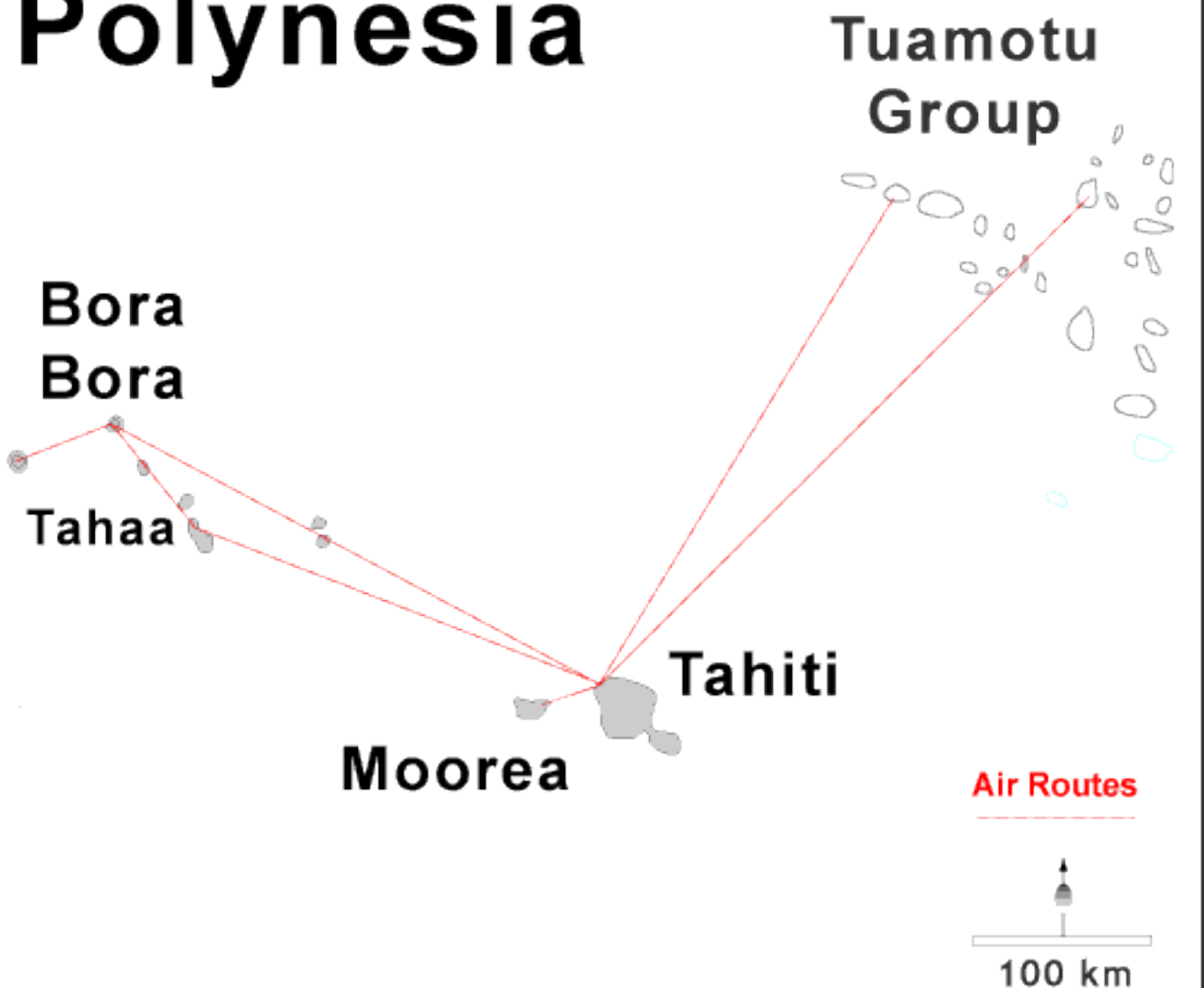


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## French Polynesia Travel Guide

# French Polynesia



# Tahiti Island

Tahiti is the main island and population centre of French Polynesia. Tahiti Island is almost 1000 sq. km in size and is larger than all of its neighbouring Society Islands put together and takes about 6 hours to circumnavigate by car. Tahiti offers lovely coastal scenery, high mountains with tropical rain forests, and some of the best hiking and surfing in the South Pacific. However, lacking decent beaches, it is mostly neglected by tourism with the large airport hotels catering to tourists in transit to other islands. The capital Papeete, and the international airport are located on the north west tip of the island facing Moorea.

Papeete Town lies on the north-west coast of Tahiti on a small harbour backed by rolling hills. Papeete is a rather congested town with a population of over 100,000 people. The town has a distinct French flavour, there are exciting nightclubs, lovely cafes and the delightful nightly les roulettes takes over the waterfront car park overlooking the harbour where all types of food are cooked and served at makeshift plastic tables. There is little tourist interest in Papeete except for the huge market which has a good selection of handicrafts from around the islands, perfumes, oils, flowers, island style clothes as well as a few small restaurants upstairs serving fresh raw tuna.

The north coast of Tahiti has the islands' best mountain scenery and a few noteworthy scenic attractions. Here too are several picturesque black sand beaches with excellent surfing. At Arahoho Blowhole a road leads a few km inland to the three waterfalls of Faarumai. Twenty kilometres before reaching Papeete, the inland road from Papenoo offers lovely mountain scenery and is the venue for several 4WD day tours, walking tours and horse back excursions. The closest attraction to Papeete is Point Venus, a stunning lookout over tranquil Matavai Bay which has excellent swimming and a Radisson Hotel - you can sometimes spot dolphins in the water.

The large beach resorts are found 8km south of Papeete Town just beyond the airport where there are several small beaches, but nothing resembling the tourist brochures. There are however excellent views overlooking Moorea Island in the distance which is perfectly silhouetted by the setting sun. The most beautiful of these is the imposing Intercontinental Hotel set in large landscaped grounds. The hotel puts on the best Tahitian dance show and feast twice a week. On the adjacent bay is the rather less impressive but more affordable Sofitel Maeva with its bland 4 story block of rooms. The beach here has good swimming although at times the bay can be stagnated with seaweed.

The most accessible beach on Tahiti is along the south west coast at Punaauia where the fine white sand makes a picturesque setting looking down the coast and over to Moorea Island. At the northern end of the beach is the grand Le Meridien Hotel.

On the South Coast, just beyond the bustle of Paea Village, is a beautifully reconstructed marae at Arahurahu which makes for the spectacular setting for several cultural

performances. The south coast of Tahiti is rather featureless, with few attractions except the popular Gauguin Museum, The Fern Grotto and the scenic golf course at Atimaono. Nearby, an inland 4WD track that winds up the mountain through a tunnel to Lake Vaihira.

Tahiti-I ti, the isolated land mass at the eastern end of Tahiti is very rural with some attractive Polynesian style villages and a few small beaches on its south coast. Hiking trails are excellent on both the south and north coast and the coastal road passes some of the country's most outstanding scenery making this a must for those who like exploring. The south coast road on Tahiti I ti runs for 17km to Teahupoo before it too is halted by the rugged mountains. There's a nice beach at Toouo where locals catch fish with spears in the bay. The surfing at Teahupoo offers some of the largest waves in the South Pacific.

The road around Tahiti I ti's north coast winds along the coastline with nice views. The road ends at the tranquil Tautira Village which has spectacular mountain views and a nice beach where village kids spend their days splashing around in the water. From Tautira you can take the 15-km walking track along the stunning Pari Coast where you can see petroglyphs and sacred marae along the way. Another road from the north coast heads inland climbing the gentle cattle grazing hills. From the summit of Vaifaufa are stunning views of both Tahiti I ti and Tahiti Nui, seen at its best for sunrise and sunset.

## Moorea Island

Moorea Island lies just 18km west from Papeete and is clearly visible from the west coast of Tahiti. This ancient volcanic island covered in rich tropical rainforest with deep bays and razor back mountains offers some of the best sightseeing opportunities in the South Pacific. Getting to Moorea is easy - there are 10 ferry crossings from Papeete every day, taking under one hour with departures commencing from 6am. There are also hourly flights from Faa'a Airport which take less than 10 minutes. With such easy access, nice beaches and beautiful scenery, it is no wonder that Moorea is the most popular holiday destination in Tahiti.

All tourists arrive on the north east coast of Moorea, the side facing Tahiti Island. The ferry terminal is at Vaiare Bay, opposite the large marina, the busiest of Moorea's towns and close to the island's longest stretch of beach that starts at Teavaro and extends all the way along the north east coast beyond the airport. The large I a Orana Resort sits in the heart of the beach, set in wonderful landscaped gardens with bungalows well spaced apart. North of I a Orana is the public access beach which has good swimming.

The north coast of Moorea is punctuated by two deep and spectacular bays: Cooks Bay and Opunohu Bay (the latter is where Captain Cook actually anchored). The panoramas of both bays are exceptional and should be viewed not only along the coastal road, but from the water as well as from above. The 900 metre high Mt. Rotui separates the two bays and the steep trail to the summit can be climbed for stunning views but most tourists opt for the easy

option - by taking the winding road to the Belvedere Lookout in the heart of Moorea and overlooking not only Mt. Rotui but the two bays as well. Along the way are several interesting marae with many ancient temple foundations.

The north coast has several fishing villages including Papetoai which boasts the oldest building in the South Pacific - the Protestant church here was built in 1822 by one of the first missionaries to settle in the South Seas. Three luxury resorts are found along the coast: The Pearl Resort is located on a small beach front between the airport and Cooks Bay; The Sheraton Resort sits on a lovely beach between Cooks Bay and Opunohu Bay; and Hotel Intercontinental, with its man made lagoonarium and Dolphin Quest is located west of Opunohu Bay close to Hauru Beach on the north west tip of the island. There are also a few guesthouses which offer good value for money.

The north west coast of Moorea has the most concentrated tourist strip alongside Hauru Beach. The beach is pretty but is very narrow and at high tide the sea reaches the sea wall that protects the line of hotels and guesthouses here. The beach at Hauru is public access but because the coast here is so built up it can be difficult to get to. Of the accommodation, Fare Vai Moana has the most spacious grounds and offers 13 thatch bungalows. Hauru has a small modern shopping area with supermarket, bank and several restaurants. There are also several backpacker hostels at the southern end of Hauru with camping.

Offshore from Hauru are three small islands within the shallow lagoon. This is a good place for water activities including kite surfing, kayaking and snorkelling. There is also abundant shark populations along the Moorea coast, sometimes in packs of 50 or more. Oponohu Canyons off the north coast and Tiki Point off the West Coast are the best shark feed dives in Tahiti.

South of Hauru Beach is the popular Tiki Village cultural centre, with replica temples and houses, handicraft displays, tattooing demonstrations and traditional dances. All good fun for a light half day outing. Heading south along the quiet south western coast, the mountain scenery once again becomes spectacular and culminates in the gorgeous coastal setting of Atiha bay. There are several guesthouses here including as well as the small settlement of Haapiti which has an attractive Catholic Church built in 1891.

The south east coast is also very quiet with virtually no beaches and no tourist accommodation. At Afareaitu, the administrative centre of Moorea, a walking tracks leads inland to pretty Atiraa Waterfall and takes about 30 minutes. Uninhabited Motu Ahi lies offshore from town. There's lots of activities around Moorea from cruises around the bays and coast to 4WD tours of the interior. Moorea has a well developed tourist infrastructure - there are plenty of car hire companies at the wharf and airport, lots of restaurants around the coast, shopping centres and gift and boutique shops for browsing.

# Bora Bora Island

The Lagoon island of Bora Bora is recognised by many as one of the most beautiful spots on earth. Others, let down by its rather false and commercial aspect, claim it is polluted and vastly over rated. The truth lies somewhere in between and depends entirely what you are looking for: if its a luxury resort with stunning views, a tranquil lagoon, snorkelling and lots of marine life then Bora Bora may seem perfect. However, if you are expecting the Bora of old, of fishing villages and simple lifestyles, of a quiet retreat away from the fast pace of modern life, then you may well be disappointed.

The main island of Bora Bora rises sharply from the turquoise lagoon with its recognisable flat top peak and craggy points covered in tropical forest. Visually, the setting is nothing but spectacular. Around the outer edge of the lagoon is a fringing reef with a string of low lying coral atolls (motu) protecting the north and west side of the island. The main island can be easily explored from the 32km coastal road that circumnavigates the island.

Matira Point on the southern tip of Bora is the main centre of tourism and has the only stretch of picturesque white sand beaches on the main island. The most elegant accommodation is the Intercontinental Hotel which has private beach access at the very southern point of Matira. However, the lagoon is too shallow for swimming from the beach although there's reasonable snorkelling further out. The beach extends along the east coast of Matira Point for a kilometre with the excellent value Maitai Polynesia being one of several resorts along the beachfront. Behind Hotel Matira you can climb the hill to the American Guns for a good view of the lagoon and hills.

The beauty of Bora Bora is best viewed from afar or from the air, and for this reason the most spectacular views with the nicest palm fringed beaches is on the offshore islands. There are plenty of day cruises taking in the stunning scenery around the lagoon which invariably include a lunch on one of the motu and a snorkel amongst thousands of colourful reef fish. If you don't see reef sharks, manta rays and mooray eels you are unlucky. Dolphins can also be spotted around Te Ava Nui Pass on the west coast of the lagoon. There are also several exceptional dive sites on the outer reef making Bora Bora one of the best scuba diving destinations in the South Pacific.

The largest of the offshore islands is Toopua which in fact marks the western side of the collapsed crater attached to the main island. Here are some of the best snorkelling reefs in Tahiti. On the northern tip of the island is the lovely setting of Bora Bora Lagoon Resort which has unparalleled views from its restaurant and overwater bungalows looking back to the mountains of Bora Bora. Off the southern tip of the island is Motu Toopua I ti which boasts one of the finest white sandy beaches in French Polynesia - you can stay at the luxury Bora Bora Nui Resort in overwater bungalows or splendid hillside villas with exceptional views looking out to the open ocean.

Anau Reef in Bora Bora Lagoon is renowned as the most prolific Manta Ray Sanctuary in the South Pacific. Whilst there's a good chance of seeing Manta Rays all over French Polynesia, at Bora Bora you'll see hordes of them, particularly at Teavanui Pass. It's also great for sharks: lemon tips, black tips. There are also lots of snorkelling trips into the lagoon to see sharks, rays and moray eels and loads of colourful tropical reef fish, including the Lagoonarium, where Manta Rays, Sting Rays, Eagle Rays and Sea Turtles are rescued, bred, reared and released back into the ocean at maturity. You can swim with the Rays, and even touch them.

Off the north side of Bora are a string of tiny islands. These islands are popular amongst day trippers and there's good snorkelling off Pearl Beach Resort. Extending south from the airport along Bora's eastern reef is an almost continuous stretch of long thin and flat islands that flank the entire east side of the island. Here you'll find the longest stretches of beaches where you can walk for miles alongside the sandy shoreline backed by palm trees. There are several large resorts on these islands including the delightful Le Meridien Resort which sits on a small bay surrounded by beach front and looking out onto almost 100 over-the-water bungalows.

The picturesque lagoon island of Maupiti in the western end of the Society Islands is a mini version of Bora Bora. At 11 sq. km it is about a third of the size of Bora, its highest peak of 380metres is about half as high as Bora and its population of 1,271 is less than a quarter that of Bora. More importantly for tourism though, is that there are just a handful of guesthouses on the islands, no resorts and no organized tours. For some, this is paradise and there are a couple of lovely guesthouses where tourists can escape mass tourism.

## Tuamotu Group

The vast expanse of the Tuamotu Islands has a collection of 76 small islands and fringing atolls. The closest of these lie some 350km from Papeete or an 90-minute flight. The turquoise lagoons and white sandy beaches are some of the best in the South Pacific. Several of these island groups have luxury resorts and hotels and small pension guesthouses and along with Pearl farming, is the groups major source of income. Scuba diving is exceptional and the romance of being lost amongst remote islands draws the honeymoon market.

Rangiroa Atoll is the closest atoll to Tahiti and the most developed island for tourism. It is also the second largest atoll in the world with a lagoon in its centre measuring 75km across and 25km wide. Surrounding this lagoon are over 200 tiny islands, stretching for 200km around the lagoon, most no more than 300 metres wide. Few places rise above 10 metres from sea level making the threat of cyclones or, worse still, tsunamis, a real worry for its 2000 inhabitants. From the airport, it's an hour by boat across the centre of the lagoon to the delightful Kia Ora Sauvage Resort. It's another hour by boat to the unusual pink sands of Les Sables Roses the far eastern tip of Rangiroa.

Rangiroa is the most famous shark diving destination in the South Pacific with over 10 species commonly sighted. There are 2 channels at the northern end of the atoll with fast flowing currents (good for experienced divers), lots of fish and the ocean plunges 1,200 metres so there's a good chance of seeing humpback whales between July and August. Snorkelling is also excellent and you'll see thousands of colourful reef fish, turtles and rays.

About 250km south west of Rangiroa or 450km north of Tahiti is Fakarava Atoll, the second largest atoll in the group and with a flourishing tourism industry. The airstrip is located on the north eastern side of the atoll, close to Rotoava Village which has 500 inhabitants, mostly fishermen. The delightful Le Maitai Fakarava Resort is found here with several small guesthouses including Pension Havaiki located in a pretty beach. Snorkelling in the lagoon is excellent and there are several dive companies offering courses and dive excursions to the outer reef passages.

Tikehau Atoll, Rangiroa's smaller neighbour, is the second most westerly of the Tuamotu Group. Here you'll find fantastic diving and lots of nesting sea birds on its uninhabited motu, as well as the fabulous Tikehau Pearl Resort. About 150km to the north east of Rangiroa is Manihi Pearl Resort, another popular luxury retreat for honeymooners and divers. Manihi is famous for its black pearls which are farmed extensively in the lagoon and the tiny huts on stilts that are scattered around the lagoon can be visited on day tours.

Most of the Tuamotu Atoll have great diving and lots of dive operators but each island has its own unique features. Rangiroa has its sharks whilst Tikehau has exceptionally rich coral reefs with numerous and often vast schools of fish. On Manihi there are moderate channel drift dives, good for intermediate and beginners, with the chance of seeing lots of rays. Fakarava is very similar to Rangiroa with lots of sharks but it's a lot less touristy. Garvae Pass in the north offers drifts in 3 to 4 knots with silver tips, grey's, hammerheads and the possible white tip encounter. Tumakohua Pass in the south is narrower and more concentrated.

Apart from diving, the Tuamotus make an excellent honeymoon destination away from the crowds. There are several upmarket resorts and lots of guesthouses scattered around the islands. Secluded beaches, sailing cruises to uninhabited motu, lots of sea birds and black pearl farming are some of its other highlights. There are daily flights to the main tourist destinations which take between 1 and 2 hours to reach from Tahiti.

## Marquesas Group

The unusual Marquesas Islands to the north of Tuamotu are unique in that there is no reef. The volcanic islands just pop out from the deep ocean and the bays and cliffs make this one of the most scenic regions to visit. The two largest islands, Nuku Hiva and Hiva Oa have a small variety of accommodation from luxury resorts to guesthouses.