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Tahiti Travel Guide

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.