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Tahiti Travel Guide

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 plummets 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 islands support a number of small traditional villages which retain a rich culture. The Marquesas are renowned for its dancers, wood carvers and tattooists. The two largest islands, Nuku Hiva and Hiva Oa have a small variety of accommodation from luxury resorts to guesthouses.