



Tahiti, Society Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW

Introduction

A name synonymous with tropical relaxation, Tahiti is the busy hub of French Polynesia, located 160 mi/260 km southeast of Bora Bora. Most of the activity is centered around the city of Papeete (pronounced *pah-pay-EH-tay*). It's the part of the island most visitors see, if only in passing.

We recommend you stick around in Papeete for at least a two-night stay. This exciting city has many flashy boutiques, a colorful local market, a black pearl museum and active nightlife. As the only real city in French Polynesia, Papeete can teach you a lot about life in the South Pacific. And although you will experience some traffic jams and noise, it's relatively clean, safe and efficient for a tropical city.



Geography

Tahiti has something of an hourglass shape with a larger portion (Tahiti Nui—where Papeete is located) and a smaller one (Tahiti Iti). Mountains soar to 7,352 ft/2,241 m in central Tahiti Nui and to 4,430 ft/1,323 m on Tahiti Iti.

SEE & DO

Sightseeing

If you have the time to venture out of Papeete, we suggest you head out along the north shore of the island. Make a stop at Point Venus, on the outskirts of Papeete. Matavai Bay, which is enclosed by the point, was used as an anchorage by many of the early European ships to reach Tahiti. Captain Cook built a fort on the point during his first visit to the island. The black-sand beach near the point is a popular seaside destination. Farther east is the Arahoho Blowhole, where water from incoming waves explodes through a hole in the rocks.

A little past the blowhole is the turnoff for the Trois Cascade (three waterfalls), which is a short walk from the parking area.

If you continue along the 75-mi/117-km coastal road, you'll reach the town of Taravao, where the two portions of the island meet. There, you can choose to head along the north coast of Tahiti Iti toward Tautira or along the south coast to the surfing town of Teahupoo. Both these roads end in a dead end, and the eastern portion of Tahiti Iti can be reached only by boat or on foot.

Turning west along the south coast of Tahiti Nui, you'll soon reach the Gauguin Museum, which details the artist's life and has some reproductions of his work. Marama Tours runs daily bus tours around Tahiti with a stop at the Gauguin Museum. Phone 689-507-474. <http://www.maramatours.com>.

The wonderful Harrison Smith Botanical Garden is right next door to the museum. It has a lovely miniature forest of Tahitian chestnuts and other examples of local plant life. From there, the road circles back toward Papeete. About 9 mi/15 km from the city, you'll reach the Museum of Tahiti and its Islands, which has good historical and cultural displays.

Recreation

Tahitian surfers ride the waves at many points, but white sandy beaches are in short supply because the sands of this volcanic island are black. To find the beaches of your dreams, you must cross the Sea of the Moon to Moorea.



Nightlife

Papeete is one of few places in French Polynesia where things remain lively well into the night. Try to visit at least one of the clubs or discos opposite the ferry terminal downtown to watch the locals cut loose on the dance floor.

Shopping

Start with a walk along the harbor. Just a few blocks inland is the Papeete Market, which is a must-see. Catering to both tourists and residents, it includes handicrafts, flowers and fresh-food items. There's lots of local color—people sitting on the floor making flower leis, tables full of brilliantly colored fish, and locals drinking Hinano beer in the upstairs bar and restaurant. The crafts are largely souvenir grade, but it's a good place to pick up small knickknacks and woven-pandanus items.

For pricier fare, you'll find galleries, pearl shops and designer-clothing stores on nearby blocks, especially near Vaima Centre. Walk along the waterfront to the southwest for about 10 minutes to find the Robert Wan Pearl Museum, which explains the pearl-growing business and gives you yet another chance to make a purchase.

DINING

Dining Overview

Most Papeete restaurants can be classified as either Asian, French or Italian, while the city's pubs and cafes serve mostly French dishes. To sample traditional Polynesian cuisine, you should attend an island night at a large resort where a buffet dominated by seafood, pork and local vegetables comes with Tahitian dancing. Similar fare on a more modest scale is obtained by ordering *maa'a Tahiti* at the restaurant upstairs in the market or on a nearby street.

A Papeete institution not to miss is the evening food market on Tahua Vaiete, near the cruise ship wharf on the waterfront downtown. There, several dozen *roulottes* (food trucks) begin setting up around sunset to serve Chinese food or popular French dishes such as steak and fries to a largely local clientele. Dining under the stars among Tahitian families, with ships, palms and the colorful lights of the city all around, is simply magnificent. Alcohol is not available.

Just across Boulevard Pomare from Tahua Vaiete, young professionals crowd the sidewalk tables outside Les 3 Brasseurs. Styled after the microbreweries of northeastern France, this lively pub specializes in the many varieties of a pizzalike dish called *flammekeuche* that pairs marvelously with the house beer. Open daily. Phone 689-506-025. <http://www.3brasseurs-pacific.com>.

Restaurant l'O a la Bouche, on a back street near the Vaima Center, ranks among the capital's top French restaurants. Nouvelle cuisine dishes such as mahimahi or shrimp marinated in passion fruit and ginger or Tahitian vanilla will have you raving. Finish with strawberry cheesecake. Closed Sunday. Phone 689-452-976.

Around the corner from l'O a la Bouche, Pizzeria Lou Pescadou is the right place to sidestep Tahiti's high prices while enjoying some of the best pizza and spaghetti in French Polynesia. The trattoria decor is fun, and your host will offer you a free nonalcoholic drink if you have to wait for a table. Closed Sunday. Phone 689-432-555.



FACTS

Transportation

Papeete's Faa'a Airport—4 mi/6 km west of Papeete—handles all international flights and most interisland planes, and many of the cruise and freighter excursions begin at Papeete's harbor.

Tahiti has one big advantage over other islands as far as visitors are concerned. It has a frequent, reliable and inexpensive form of public transit. Modern buses have now completely replaced the more interesting, old-style wooden Le Truck of former years. They follow set routes and can transport you short distances in and around Papeete, including to and from the airport. Several routes extend halfway around the island, although bus tours and rental cars work better there as the public buses don't connect at Taravao on the narrow waist between Tahiti Nui and Tahiti Iti.

Half a dozen car rental companies have offices at the airport and downtown. While not cheap, the vehicles do usually come with unlimited mileage, which makes driving around the island more practical. Some companies will rent to drivers ages 18-24 provided they have a major credit card, but the compulsory insurance charge and deductible will be higher in that case. To be sure of getting the car you want at a price you're willing to pay, it's not a bad idea to book

Moorea, Society Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW

Introduction

One of French Polynesia's "big three" tourism islands, Moorea sits right next door to Tahiti, 12 mi/20 km northwest of Papeete and just a five-minute flight from the international airport or a 20-minute ferry ride from Papeete's harbor.

Despite their proximity, Moorea is quite different from the capital. There's no urban buildup (in fact, the populated areas are villages more than towns), and the large island absorbs its many visitors with few signs of stress. With a turquoise lagoon, several bays and steep mountains, Moorea ranks with Bora Bora in the looks department. All in all, it's a terrific place to spend three nights, though many devote a week or more to the island.



SEE & DO

Sightseeing

A variety of sights are scattered around the island. Plan to take the better part of a day to circle the coastal road and make a visit to the interior. Lots of tour companies are available to take you to the highlights if you don't want to drive yourself. Among them is Albert Transport, which has a number of bus and boat tours on Moorea. Phone 689-552-110. <http://www.albert-transport.net>.

Be sure to take the winding road up to the Belvedere Lookout, which begins at the foot of Cook's Bay, one of Moorea's two large inlets. Cook's Bay features many small restaurants and hotels, while Opunohu Bay is more unspoiled: The 1984 remake of *The Bounty* was filmed there. The Belvedere offers a panoramic view of both of Moorea's bays as well as the mountains surrounding them. On the way up or down, you can stop at several ancient *marae* that have been excavated from the underbrush. Some of the sites were once used for archery competitions.



On the west side of Cook's Bay, look for the turnoff to the Moorea Distillery and Fruit Juice Factory. There's really no tour to speak of—it's mostly an elaborate gift shop where you can taste and purchase the company's liqueurs and liquors. Lots of other souvenir merchandise is available, as well.

Beyond Opunohu Bay, the road reaches the busy Hauru Point area, where several resorts are located, as well as a string of shops, restaurants, and bike and car rental offices. From there, the road heads down the island's west coast.

Tiki Village Theater is the main attraction in this stretch. It's a Polynesian theme park of sorts, with traditional-style buildings and craft demonstrations. Elaborate dinner and dance shows take place there several nights a week. Farther south, at Haapiti, make a stop at the pretty Catholic church on the inland side of the road.

The southern curve of the island is dotted with small villages populated by locals more than visitors. You may see children surfing just offshore. Over on the island's east coast, near the village of Afareaitu, are two tall waterfalls. You can see them from the main road, but if you want to get closer, you need to head inland along some rough roads, then hike. Those on organized Jeep tours will have an easier time getting there, especially if there has been a lot of rain.

Recreation

Scuba diving, snorkeling and trips aboard submersible craft are popular on Moorea. Most resorts have excursions and facilities available. Tiahura at the west end of Moorea has the island's longest beach, plus an offshore snorkeling area where you can swim with manta rays. Try to find a lagoon excursion that includes a trip to feed the rays; they're accustomed to being fed and will swim up to you for their snack.

A Dolphin Encounter is offered at the Moorea Beachcomber. Participants get to interact with the captive animals in an enclosed pool. If you prefer to see dolphins in their natural surroundings, check into the boat trips conducted by Dr. Michael Poole, a renowned dolphin expert based on the island. Dr. Poole and several other companies also lead whale-watching and sometimes swimming-with-whale tours July-October when humpbacks swim close to the fringing exterior reef.

Raiatea, Society Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW Introduction

Near Bora Bora and Huahine in the Society group, 135 mi/220 km northwest of Papeete, Raiatea is a large and tall volcanic island whose central mountains reach heights of 3,350 ft/1,000 m. (Mount Temehani is the highest point—be sure to see its radiant *tiare apetahi* flowers.) Its twin island, Tahaa, sits just across a mile-/kilometer-wide lagoon.



Despite its size, Raiatea has less to offer visitors than do Tahaa and nearby Huahine and Bora Bora. Its central location and large lagoon have made it popular with yachters, however. Those chartering a boat to cruise the Society Islands may well begin and end their trip there.



Uturoa is the largest town on Raiatea and the second largest in French Polynesia, but it offers relatively little to do. In an effort to make the island more appealing to tourists, especially those arriving by cruise ship, the government built a port area with a palm-lined promenade, a man-made white-sand beach and a few upscale restaurants and boutiques. Try to visit on a market day (Wednesday and Friday mornings are best), when the whole island turns out to shop and trade and greet the commercial freighters delivering and picking up goods. The island has a large Chinese population, and many of them operate stores that carry T-shirts, sandals, pareu cloth, liquor, canned foods and other staples.

Rent a car, bicycle or scooter to explore the 50 mi/80 km of paved coastal road. The primary sight is Marae Taputapuatea in the southeast corner of the island. At the time of European contact, this was the most sacred *marae* in all of Polynesia. When new ceremonial sites were constructed on other islands, a stone from Taputapuatea would be incorporated in their designs.

Bora Bora, Society Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW

Introduction

Hyperbole seems to surround Bora Bora, French Polynesia. (Locals often refer to it with a singular "Bora.") Author James Michener called Bora Bora "the most beautiful island in the world," which may be a stretch, though its steep mountain peak and brilliant lagoon certainly are beautiful.

More recently, Bora has been targeted by some travel writers as the French Polynesian island where tourism has gotten out of control—too many hotels, too many people, too much traffic. Apparently too many hotel rooms were built too quickly, however, for the global economic slump of the late 2000s saw several major resorts close their doors and shutter their over-the-water bungalows for lack of sufficient business.



The island, 160 mi/260 km northwest of Papeete, does get a lot of visitors (many of them from Europe and the U.S.), but it's still a far cry from a Cancun- or Florida-style buildup. (Some of the bustle results from the fact that Bora is rather small compared to larger tourist islands such as Moorea.) The amazingly clear blue-green water alone is enough to satisfy most visitors.

Black pearl boutiques and fancy restaurants line the road south from Vaitape, and frugal travelers may feel out of place. Yet snorkeling among the myriad lagoon fish near Matira Point is free, and in a half-day you can easily peddle a rental bicycle the 20 mi/32 km around the island.

Potpourri

Black pearls are an important industry in French Polynesia, and, as visitors quickly discover, they are heavily marketed to tourists on Bora Bora. Every shop seems to be selling pearls, and The Farm also offers tours that let you see how they're created.

Couples Retreat, starring Vince Vaughn, was filmed at the St. Regis Bora Bora Resort.

The ashes of French author and sailor Alain Gerbault, who introduced soccer to French Polynesia, are buried on Bora Bora.



The first chapter of James A. Michener's novel *Hawaii* is set on Bora Bora.

Magasin Chin Lee, the island's oldest general store, is still an important gathering place for local residents.

Transvestites (or *mahu*) are an accepted part of the French Polynesian community and often work in restaurants, on airplanes and in boutiques on Bora Bora.

Hinano beer, the local brew, is named after the flower of the pandanus plant, which smells somewhat like beer. The leaves of this same plant are used to weave local hats and baskets.

SEE & DO Sightseeing

More than anywhere else in French Polynesia, Bora's around-the-island sights take a back seat to relaxing at a resort (assuming you can afford to stay at one—this is French Polynesia's most expensive island). Plan on a three-night stay.

If you're going to splurge on an over-water bungalow, Bora is a good island to do it, because the lagoon is truly spectacular. Once you slide open your glass coffee table and start feeding the fish swimming below your living room, you may never leave your bungalow.

You can rent a bicycle or small car to circle the island on its winding, two-lane road. Jeep safaris take you up steep tracks to interior viewpoints. Seven large cannons installed at four different sites during World War II can still be visited. (Bora was the site of a U.S. base during the war.) Several ancient ceremonial sites, or *marae*, are also open to visitors.

The many gift shops and car rental companies make Vaitape, the island's main village, seem less colorful than some Polynesian communities, but it's a pleasant place to while away an hour or so. The village's charming yellow church is poised against the green backdrop of the mountainside.

Recreation

You'll find the usual lineup of Polynesian excursions on Bora: snorkeling, scuba diving, fishing, shark feeding and island tours. Many are combined into popular all-day boat tours around the island, including snorkeling and swimming, a beachside picnic lunch and watching sharks being fed.

The fenced-in Bora Bora Lagoonarium makes a safe haven to swim with rays and other sealife while watching sharks on the other side of the fence. Phone 689-677-134.

Perhaps more than on any other French Polynesian island, you're likely to see thrill-ride-style activities such as parasailing and Jet-Skiing on Bora Bora.

TOPdive, French Polynesia's largest operator, frequents sites off Bora Bora. Dives with black-tip sharks, moray eels and manta rays are available. Phone 689-533-496. <http://www.topdive.com>.

Bora Diving Center is the island's largest operator (it merged with Nemo World Diving Center). Phone 689-677-184. <http://www.boradiving.com>.



Shopping

Shopping on Bora Bora revolves around handicrafts, art and pearls. The Artisans Market near the wharf in Vaitape is a good place to shop for pareus, beachwear, T-shirts, black coral jewelry, woodcarvings and mass produced souvenirs. Also at Vaitape, the island's two largest supermarkets are a good source of locally-produced oils, soaps and lotions.

A number of artists, including Garrick Yroni (<http://www.yroni.pf>), have studios at Pofai Bay on the southwest side of the island. Upscale black pearl shops are sprinkled along the road from Vaitape to the Matira Bay resort area with a cluster at Pofai Bay. Visit a few and be inquisitive before producing your credit card.

Handicrafts made in the islands are the least expensive mementos to take home. Favorites include woven-pandanus baskets, tapa-cloth decorations, hand-painted pareus (fabric wraps worn as a skirt or dress) and intricate wood carvings such as tiki statues, war clubs and ukuleles. Be careful about what you're buying, though. Some items you see in gift shops and markets, especially carvings and pareus, are mass produced in Indonesia and other countries. You can usually identify them because you'll see dozens of the exact same design.

Products made from *monoi* (coconut) oil, such as soaps and skin lotions, also make nice gifts that are relatively inexpensive. Tamanu oil (extracted from a local tree nut) works well for sunburns and healing wounds, with a variety of oils and lotions available. The local cure-all, *noni* juice, is sold in 1-qt/1-l bottles. We recommend you shop in the grocery stores for such items. They offer a selection just as good as most gift shops with better prices. Groceries also stock jams and preserves made from fruits grown in the islands, including pineapple and *pamplemousse* (a sweet grapefruit). The fruits are also used to make liqueurs.

Two other "souvenirs" are popular, but they shouldn't be impulse buys. Visitors can find black pearls for sale in every large hotel, in hundreds of shops and at Bora Bora's one farm where they're grown. Prices may be lower than what you'd pay elsewhere in the world, but that's not to say they're inexpensive. We recommend you understand how to judge a pearl's quality before you buy—they can vary greatly.

A more personal (and painful) decoration is the tattoo. Polynesia was one of the places where the practice originated, and many residents—especially men—still proudly wear tattoos. A lot of talented artists work in the islands, many of them basing their work on ancient designs.

Shopping Hours: Generally Monday-Friday 7:30 am-5 pm, Saturday 7:30-11 am. Smaller stores, especially those not geared toward tourists, often close 11:30 am-1:30 pm, sometimes as late as 3 pm, and may not be open on Saturday.

DINING

Dining Overview

Seafood rules in this watery world, and a common local delicacy is *poisson cru*, raw fish marinated in coconut milk. Also popular, tuna and mahimahi are prepared in a variety of ways—don't miss the opportunity to try them in vanilla sauce. In fact, rich sauces and other aspects of French cuisine are a big part of cooking on Bora Bora.

The prime exception is Bloody Mary's Restaurant and Bar, the island's most famous eatery, where seafood is char-grilled American-style. Every celebrity to visit Bora ends up there (you'll see their names proudly posted out by the road). Celebs aside, we like the south seas-castaway motif that includes a sand floor and bar stools fashioned from wooden stumps. Phone 689-677-286. <http://bloodymarys.com>.



As with most things on Bora Bora, eating out can be expensive, but it's not necessarily outrageous. Prices are generally comparable with those in most large cosmopolitan cities. As you might expect, the large resort hotels have some of the priciest menus, though the quality is generally quite good. Ask about island nights where Polynesian dancing comes with a buffet of island delicacies. Most resorts have one at least once a week. You should make a point of eating out once or twice rather than taking all meals at your resort. Many of the restaurants provide free transfers to those with reservations.

Two types of inexpensive eateries are available: *roulottes* (food trucks—most complete with stools and a dining counter) and "snacks" (small restaurants that usually serve sandwiches and basic fare such as chow mein and sashimi). You can find good food at both, but use discretion when making your choice.

Another good way to trim food costs is to buy the delicious and inexpensive French baguettes sold at grocery stores. A do-it-yourself Continental breakfast with the bread can propel you well into the afternoon.

Bora Bora's top French restaurant is La Villa Mahana on Pofai Bay. Since 2004, chef Damien Rinaldi-Dovio has earned accolades from those fortunate enough to occupy one of the seven tables at his Mediterranean-style dining establishment. Reservations well in advance are essential (and don't go if you're on a budget). Phone 689-675-063. <http://www.villamahana.com>.

Closer to the resorts of southeastern Bora Bora is the open-air Restaurant La Bounty. The seafood and pizza served under its thatched roof is as popular among the locals as it is with visitors. Reservations recommended for dinner. You may want to take along your French translator to read the menu. Phone 689-677-043.

If you decide to go grocery shopping in Vaitaoe, be prepared to consume everything you buy as a picnic lunch because many island resorts do not allow outside food and drink to be brought onto their properties. Check your resort's policy before heading into town.

SECURITY

Personal Safety

Crime is relatively rare on Bora Bora. Still, it's wise to practice commonsense precautions. Don't leave valuables unattended in public areas or on the beach.

For more information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

Health

Bora Bora gets its drinking water from a modern desalinization plant, and drinking it from the tap isn't as risky as it is elsewhere. However, if you would rather not take any chances, prepackaged water and other drinks are widely available.

Mosquitoes are plentiful, especially when you're out of the coastal breezes. They do not carry malaria, but cases of dengue fever have been reported in recent years, so take along insect repellent containing DEET and cover up as much as you can. Note that the dengue-carrying mosquito only bites during the daytime. Known by the locals as *no-nos*, nearly invisible sand flies populate many beaches at dawn and dusk.

The sun can be brutal, so take along a hat and plenty of sunscreen. Don't forget a comfortable pair of walking shoes. When swimming on rocky or coral-laden beaches, always wear sandals, flip-flops or some other footwear to avoid stonefish, the lagoon's only common danger. These fish look just like rocks and have spines that inject a poison if you step on them, which can be extremely painful and



occasionally fatal. If you do step on one, apply heat immediately and head to the nearest doctor or hospital.

The island's doctors and dentists speak English. If you become really ill, you'll most likely be flown to Papeete, which has two hospitals and a number of smaller clinics. Several private dentists and doctors have offices in Vaitape, where a pharmacy is also found.

For more information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

Dos & Don'ts

Don't expect to get much attention from service personnel by saying "we're on our honeymoon." Bora Bora gets many newlyweds, and the special treatment goes only so far.

Do pick up a fish identification guide so you'll know what you're looking at when you're snorkeling or diving.

Do sign up for one of the shark- and ray-viewing lagoon tours offered at Bora Bora. Be aware that these trips involve getting in the water with feeding reef sharks, something dozens of visitors do every day without incident. If you're not convinced, it's also possible to stay in the boat for that part of the tour.

Don't expect to find many bargains on Bora Bora. This is easily the most expensive island in the South Pacific—and also one of the most memorable.

Do ask about the operator's policy on shark feeding if you plan to scuba dive or snorkel. Shark feeding is a common practice on Bora Bora, though some experts feel it's unwise to make the animals dependent on handouts and to make them associate people with food. If you agree, or if you just don't like the idea of being near hungry sharks, seek out an operator who doesn't engage in feeding, though they can be hard to find.

Do take along everything you need (from camera supplies to sunscreen) if you want to save money. Prices for most items are far higher than what you'll pay at home. Also consider stowing a few food items in your suitcase to save on a trip or two to the pricey restaurants.

Do be careful if you're swimming near an offshore *motu*. At certain times, strong currents can be created that have the potential to sweep you out into the open sea.

Don't be frightened if you find a gecko in your room (usually you'll find more than one). They're harmless unless you're an insect, though their high-pitched "barking" can be a strange sound to wake up to.

Do book flights and hotels well in advance, especially if you're interested in the high-end resorts or if your vacation falls during a school holiday.

Do invest in a pareu and experiment with a few of the many ways to wear it.

Do take in the view of tombstonelike Mount Otemanu from the pier at Bloody Mary's Restaurant and Bar.

Don't feed the local dogs. There are so many strays that they have become major pests.



FACTS

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: For a stay of up to 90 days, citizens of Canada and the U.S. need a valid passport and proof of onward passage. Passports should be valid for at least six months after the date of entry.

Reconfirm travel document information with your carrier before departure.

Languages: French, Tahitian, Marquesan, English.

Predominant Religions: Christian (Protestant, Catholic).

Time Zone: 10 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-10 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is not observed.

Voltage Requirements: 110 volts.

Telephone Codes: 689, country code;

Money

Currency Exchange

The Polynesian franc (CFP, or XFP in bank lingo) is the currency in Bora Bora. It is also used in the other South Pacific French colonies of New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna. The CFP is linked to the euro.

American Express, MasterCard and Visa credit cards are widely accepted. Discover cards are not accepted. ATMs are present at the banks in Vaitape. Make sure you have a four-digit PIN.

Taxes

There is no local sales tax. Hotel taxes are 5%-14% depending on the class and location of the hotel. Tourist services such as transportation and excursions have a 10% tax. In some cases (particularly with smaller hotels and tour operators), the tax might already be included in the price, so it's always good to ask. Restaurant meals are subject to 10% value added tax and 4% service charge, and these are usually (but not always) included in menu prices.

Tipping

In general, you don't need to tip because it goes against the traditional Polynesian notion of hospitality. As tourism grows, tipping is slowly becoming more accepted, but it's still not expected in most situations. It's a good idea to take along T-shirts, caps and the like to thank those who have assisted you in various ways.

Weather

Almost any time is pleasant, with day temperatures generally in the 70s-80s F/23-32 C and nights in the 60s-70s F/15-27 C. December-February is the hottest, most humid and rainiest time. May-November gets the least amount of rain but is up to 10 degrees F/5 C cooler. Our favorite months are April-August. An added incentive for going during July is the three-week-long Heiva or Tiurai festival, which combines Bastille Day festivities with competitions in traditional dance and music (it's a popular time to travel to Bora Bora, so book early).



What to Wear

Stuff your suitcase with shorts, swimsuits, lightweight tops and at least one skirt or pair of long pants and a long-sleeved blouse or shirt. A light sweater will probably come in handy on the occasional cool evening. Most locals dress very casually during the day and wear slightly more dressy clothes (such as a summer dress for women or a button-up aloha shirt for men) if going out at night. Women can swim and sunbathe topless, but total nudity is illegal for both sexes.

Communication

Telephone

Pay phones on Bora Bora use phone cards, which are available in values up to 5,000 CFP from the post office, most grocery stores and Vaitape's sole news agent.

Cell phones operate on 900 GSM. Most of Bora Bora is covered. You can purchase SIM cards at the post office for around 2,500 CFP, which includes about one hour of local minutes. Additional minutes can be bought at the grocery stores and some boutiques from 500 CFP. Many U.S. cell phone services have coverage in French Polynesia, but the roaming fees are usually quite high.

Internet Access

Internet access is available on Bora Bora, but fees are very high, particularly at big resorts. The best way to access the Internet is at any of an increasing number of Wi-Fi hotspots in the Matira hotel district and in Vaitape village (most reliably at the post office). A one-hour access card is about 800 CFP, and you can buy them at the post office. A list of current post office-operated Wi-Fi hot spots is available at <http://www.manaspot.pf>.

Most hotels have wireless connections, which you can access with a prepaid card bought at the reception desk.

Mail & Package Services

Mail service to and from Bora Bora is slow but reliable. At the post office, you get the most security by sending items via Chronopost (despite what the post office claims, it's not any faster than regular snail mail).

For speed, FedEx operates to French Polynesia, as does DHL. They both have offices on Tahiti, but deliveries can be arranged to Bora Bora.

Newspapers & Magazines

La Depeche and *Les Nouvelles* are French Polynesia's two major daily newspapers, both published on Tahiti in French only. *La Depeche* has a daily calendar of local events. If you read French, the most interesting local magazine is *Tahiti Pacifique*, which is a monthly, opinionated review of local culture and politics.

The Tahiti Beach Press is a free English-language paper available in most hotels. It's a light read, mostly about local culture and history, and has some listings of tourist-friendly events and activities.



Transportation

French Polynesia's international gateway is Tahiti-Faa'a International Airport (PPT), on Tahiti. Air Tahiti provides frequent daily service between there and Bora Bora.

Bora Bora's airport (BOB) sits on a *motu*, part of the narrow coral ring that surrounds the main island, so soon after you arrive you will ride a shuttle boat across the lagoon. (Air Tahiti operates a large shuttle, which is included in the airfare, and many of the larger hotels have their own boats, which usually cost around 5,000 CFP extra per person.) On the way, you'll get plenty of nice views of Bora's flat-topped peak (provided it's not shrouded in clouds).

With so many visitors staying at isolated offshore resorts, renting a car isn't as common on Bora Bora as it is on the other Society Islands. The island is small enough to make scooters and bicycles a viable option, and the handful of car rental offices at Vaitape and Matira offer both.

There is no local bus service on Bora Bora. Taxis are available but relatively expensive. Restaurant shuttles and four-wheel-drive island tours take up much of the slack.

Nuku Hiva, Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW

Introduction

Taiohae on the south coast of Nuku Hiva, 875 mi/1,400 km northeast of Tahiti, is the administrative center for French Polynesia's Marquesas Islands. Many 19th-century vestiges of French colonialism can be seen around this small town, alongside recent reproductions of old Polynesian art. Notre-Dame Cathedral shelters some wonderful wood carvings.

Deep valleys radiate from the high plateau in the center of Nuku Hiva, making getting around by road a case of constant ups and downs. Many old stone tiki lie in the Taipivai Valley, where American author Herman Melville spent a month in 1842.

Another striking archaeological area with huge stone platforms can be found at Hatiheu on the north coast.

The U.S. reality-television program *Survivor* filmed its Marquesas episodes near Anaho in the uninhabited northeast corner of Nuku Hiva.



Rangiroa, Tuamotu Islands, French Polynesia

OVERVIEW

Introduction

The largest and most visited atoll in the Tuamotus, Rangiroa is, in fact, among the largest atolls in the world. It lies 185 mi/300 km northeast of Papeete. It consists of approximately 240 thin motu, or islets, that completely surround an enormous lagoon measuring 42 mi/67 km long by 14 mi/22 km wide. The name Rangiroa comes from a Polynesian word that means "huge sky," and that's appropriate. The expanse of blue sky and blue water dominate. Any land you see is flat and covered by palm trees.

Though its stark scenery and quiet surroundings appeal to many, scuba divers are Rangiroa's biggest fans. This is French Polynesia's premier dive site, but it's primarily geared to advanced divers. The two main passes from the sea are at opposite ends of the airport island. Twice a day, as the tides rise and

fall, strong currents flow through the Avatoru and Tiputa passes. The strong tidal currents that rush through the lagoon take divers on a thrill ride that shoots them past sharks—lots of sharks—as well as rays and a large variety of other sea life.

Beach fanatics will also like Rangiroa. Because virtually all of the land is on the water, there's no lack of unspoiled beaches and plenty of opportunities for shelling (delicate pieces of broken coral are everywhere). Perhaps the only minor drawback is that the beaches are coral gravel—those who demand endless stretches of smooth white sand will have to venture out to more distant *motus*. On the other hand, the seclusion and clear, colorful water more than compensate. The island is sunny, hot and dry, which means a greater chance of a blistering tropical sunburn. Take along a broad-brimmed hat and plenty of sunscreen.

The atoll's residents live in two villages, Avatoru (near many of the hotels and pensions) and Tiputa (on a nearby islet). The airstrip is near Avatoru. Because the land is actually a series of separated islands, most transportation is by boat. It's a good place to secure yourself at a well-appointed resort and rely on its staff to handle the details of getting about. Most visitors plan three nights, and that should be sufficient unless you're a dive fanatic. Those who don't dive and aren't fond of lazing by the water may want to skip Rangiroa.

Just west of Rangiroa is Tikehau, a smaller coral atoll. Home to one of the Pearl Beach Resort hotels, Tikehau offers many of the same features as Rangiroa, on a smaller, more secluded scale.