

Understand South Pacific

SOUTH PACIFIC TODAY.....540

From ancient customs and climate change to cyclones and emerging democracy, the South Pacific is a region in transition.

HISTORY542

With 50,000 years of exploration, trade, adventure and war, the history of the South Pacific is a real ripping yarn.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES555

Nuclear testing has ended but the Pacific's natural splendour faces new threats: rising sea levels, overfishing, soil salination, nonbiodegradable rubbish and whaling.

CULTURE, LIFESTYLE & RELIGION.....559

Devoted to family and deeply spiritual, South Pacific islanders are warm, friendly and welcoming by default, and their cultures rich and diverse.

ISLAND LIFE.....563

Celebrate the colours, cultures and crafts of island life in the South Pacific.

ART & INFLUENCE.....569

The arts frequently take centre stage in the South Pacific, whether through the graceful swaying of grass skirts or the modern beats of Polynesian hip hop.

FOOD & DRINK.....573

It's an endless summer of eating and drinking in the South Pacific. Expect plenty of fresh fish, root veggies (taro, cassava, *kumara*) and tropical fruit; plus a muddy, magical concoction called kava.

South Pacific Today

The island nations of the South Pacific are a varied bunch: strewn across this vast ocean, it's not all kava, cocktails and good times. This region has a mindset all of its own, equal parts sleepy, stubborn and progressive. Political upheaval is par for the course here, but climate change presents a more profound threat than a coup or two – a threat to existence itself.

Best in Print

Blue Latitudes (Tony Horwitz; 2002) Retraces Captain Cook's voyages, comparing past and present.

The Sex Lives of Cannibals (J Maarten Troost; 2004) Laugh-a-minute escapades on a Kiribati atoll.

Mutiny on the Bounty (Nordhoff & Hall; 1932) Page-turning critique of Captain Bligh's management style.

The Happy Isles of Oceania (Paul Theroux; 1992) Theroux kayaks through the South Pacific.

Best on Film

Cast Away (director Robert Zemeckis; 2000) Tom Hanks befriends a volleyball and removes a tooth. Filmed in Fiji.

The Blue Lagoon (director Randal Kleiser; 1980) Brook Shields and Christopher Atkins hit puberty. Filmed in Fiji.

Mutiny on the Bounty (directors Frank Lloyd, Lewis Milestone & Roger Donaldson; 1935, 1962 & 1984 respectively) Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian disagree. Filmed in Tahiti, Bora Bora and Mo'orea.

Tanna (directors Bentley Dean & Martin Butler; 2015) Romantic drama filmed entirely in Vanuatu.

A Changing Climate

If there's one issue on which all South Pacific nations are aligned, it's climate change. Low-lying island nations such as Tuvalu and Tokelau are most at risk from rising sea levels, but flow-on environmental effects come into play across all island groups. With rising seas comes rising soil salination, and any reduction in land area in the Pacific means less space for agriculture. The precious corals of Fiji and French Polynesia are also under threat, bleaching as sea temperatures rise. Warmer seas also mean more intense storms. Cyclone Pam, which leveled much of Vanuatu in 2015, is a prime example – the second-most savage storm ever recorded in the South Pacific. An ongoing drought is making it hard for crops to recover.

When member nations of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) convene, climate change is a hot topic (pardon the pun), along with reducing the region's reliance on fossil fuels. Member nations have pledged aid for research into climate change, improving food and water security and ensuring ecosystem protection. Ironically (if you don't factor in Australia's high per-capita emissions), the South Pacific region is one of Earth's lowest emitters of greenhouse gases, yet is among the hardest hit by the effects.

Colonial Powers & New Democracy

Right across the South Pacific, political freedom continues to tread a rocky road. A referendum for New Caledonia's independence from France is scheduled for some time before 2018, but the 2014 elections here handed power to anti-independence parties. Across in French Polynesia, former French Polynesian president Oscar Temaru pushed for independence for his country, but his pro-France successors Gaston Flosse and Édouard Fritch have set the independence cause back somewhat.

In 2010 Tongans voted for the first time in democratic elections, and did so again in 2014. Monarchy-linked