Tahiti & French Polynesia

Just the name Tahiti conjures up centuries of legend and lifetimes of daydreams. Its 18th-century reputation as a wanton playground of flower-bedecked Polynesians in an Eden-like setting has effortlessly morphed into a 21st century image of a chic and sexy holiday haven for the jet set. And yes, French Polynesia is seductively tranquil and lushly gorgeous, but there’s much more to the country than cocktails on the beach and flashing the platinum card.

When you’re not idling in the scent of gardenias, warm damp breezes and ukulele riffs by starlight, try hiking up a waterfall valley, paddling out on a surfboard or diving through sharky passes. While tours are available for everything, it’s just as fun to head out on your own to explore that enticing coral head with a mask and snorkel or rent a bike. While the resorts make headlines, the country’s unsung heroes are the impressive collection of family pensions that range from rickety rooms in someone’s home to luxurious boutique style bungalows on private islets. Staying at these places not only saves money, but also allows you to meet locals and have a more authentic experience.

From the vast lagoons of the Tuamotu atolls, to the culturally intense Marquesas Islands and the cool climate of the Austral Archipelago, French Polynesia’s 117 islands are spread over a marine area the size of Europe, providing enough diversity and surprises to last several voyages. If you can forgo a few frills you’ll find that French Polynesia can be considerably less expensive than most major cities in Europe. For this calibre of adventure and sublime setting, we think it’s worth it.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Wandering through jungle-clad archaeological sites before reaching *Mo’orea’s* (p420) magnificent belvedere viewpoint perched between mountains and bays.
- Learning to love sharks in the wild and diving in the fauna-rich Tiputa Pass of *Rangiroa* (p450) in the Tuamotus.
- Watching the best of the best wiggle their hips and waggle their knees at Tahiti’s *Heiva Festival* (p477) dance competitions.
- Strapping on your boots and exploring the wild green yonder of *Nuku Hiva’s* (p458) wild and rugged ridges and valleys.
- Pampering yourself on ultra gorgeous and over-the-top luxurious *Bora Bora* (p438), a temple to high-octane hedonism.
CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The dry winter period from May to October is the best time to visit: the weather is cooler and there is much less rainfall. Temperatures rise during the November to April summer rainy season when it’s humid, cloudy and very wet. Three-quarters of the annual rainfall occurs during this period, generally in the form of brief, violent storms, although torrential rains lasting several days are not uncommon.

French Polynesia is south of the equator, but school holidays fall in line with those of the northern hemisphere. This means the peak tourist season is July and August, and during this period it’s no mean feat getting flights and accommodation. Christmas to early January, late February and early March, the Easter period, early May and early October are also quite busy times. The peak July–August season coincides with the Heiva Festival (see p477), held throughout July, when the region comes to life.

Diving is popular year-round, as is surfing, but if you’re sailing, you’ll want to avoid the November to March tropical depressions. Check out p627 to see French Polynesian climate charts.

HISTORY

No one really knows why early peoples migrated here or even where they came from. Modern theories have Polynesian voyages originating from the Philippines or Taiwan, spurred on by territorial disputes or overpopulation. Whatever the reason, ancient Polynesians packed up their outriggers with coconuts, *uru* (breadfruit), taro, sugar cane, dogs, pigs and chickens and headed out into the blue. These were feats of maritime prowess, not to be matched by Europeans for more than 1000 years.

European Arrival

European explorers first ventured into the region in 1595, although major expeditions didn’t really get underway until the late 18th century. Lacking the navigation methods that Polynesians had developed over millennia of Pacific travel, the Europeans searched for islands in the Pacific by means of a rather random needle-in-a-haystack method.

MENDAÑA & QUIRÓS

Don Alvaro de Mendaña y Neyra came upon the Marquesas Islands in 1595 on his second search for Terra Australis Incognita, the non-existent great southern continent. Mendaña named the islands after his patron, Marquesas de Mendoza, but his visit resulted in open warfare and 200 islanders were killed. Mendaña’s pilot, Pedro Fernández de Quirós, returned in 1606 and discovered the Tuamotus before sailing to Vanuatu.

WALLIS

The *Dolphin* anchored at Matavai Bay in Tahiti’s lagoon in late June of 1767. A quarter of the crew was down with scurvy and Samuel Wallis himself was incapacitated during most of his visit. Initially, the arrival was greeted with fascination as hundreds of canoes surrounded the ship, including canoes carrying young women ‘who played a great many droll wanton tricks’. When the locals’ fascination turned to fear, Wallis began by firing grapeshot at the Tahitians and finished this chapter ‘budget’ lodging is anything up to 10,000 CFP per night, ‘midrange’ is from 10,000 CFP to 20,000 CFP and the sky is the limit for ‘top-end’. For eating, ‘budget’ goes up to 1200 CFP and ‘midrange’ is from 1200 CFP to 2500 CFP.