

The Australs & the Gambier Archipelago

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Best Outdoor Experiences

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Why Go?

Isolated and straddling the Tropic of Capricorn, the magnificent and pristine Austral Islands are arguably French Polynesia's most underrated destination. The climate here is temperate, but everything else befitting a tropical paradise is here: flower-filled jungles, sharp peaks, outrageously blue water and genuinely friendly people. The islands here have had less of a history with Europeans and less influx from the outside world, so have kept their culture alive.

If, after visiting the Australs, you still feel the urge for more off-the-beaten-track adventures, consider travelling to the Gambier, where visitors are an absolute rarity. All the makings of an island holiday paradise can be found in this jaw-droppingly beautiful archipelago, but it's so far away (about 1700km southeast from Tahiti) and expensive to get to that it remains one of the best-kept secrets in French Polynesia.

When to Go

- ➔ During the dry season (May to October), the climate is significantly cooler than in other parts of the country.
- ➔ With average daily temperatures around 20°C, which can drop to a low of 15°C at night, the June to September period is not the best time to visit if you're hoping to laze around on a beach, but is an ideal time for hiking.
- ➔ The islands are hottest in January and February.
- ➔ The Australs have two important religious festivals: the Tere, which is held in early January, and the Me, which is celebrated in May.
- ➔ The whale-watching season runs from July or August to October.

THE AUSTRALS

Fly south towards the Tropic of Capricorn to find the blustery Austral Archipelago, where it's cool enough to grow peaches yet warm enough for bananas, coconut palms and turquoise, coral-laden lagoons. On these outrageously fertile islands, you'll find some of the most authentic Polynesian culture in all of French Polynesia. Best of all, they are wonderfully varied, from the limestone caverns of Rurutu and the Bora Bora-like lagoon of Raivavae to the windy bays of Tubuai and the alluring coastline of Rimatara.

What you shouldn't expect, though, is a thriving nightlife. These are quiet islands. There are no resorts, just a smattering of welcoming family-run guesthouses where visitors can sample delicious local-style meals and genuinely interact with their hosts.

History

The Australs were the last of the Polynesian islands to be settled; the first arrivals were believed to have come from Tahiti between

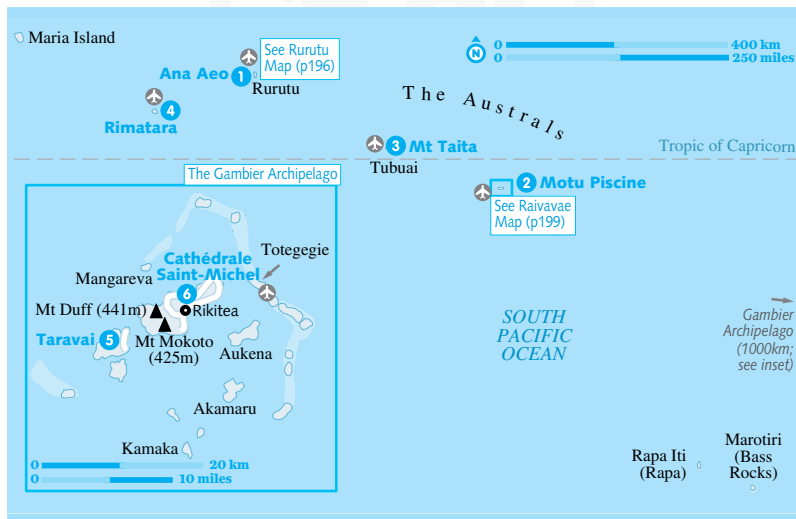
AD 1000 and AD 1300. The islands came to European attention during the second half of the 18th century.

Apart from a colourful chapter in the *Bounty* saga, when the mutineers unsuccessfully tried to establish themselves on Tubuai, contact with Europeans and the Western world was limited until the late 19th and 20th centuries. This long period, during which English missionaries (or more frequently their native representatives) held sway, has ensured that Protestantism remains strong to this day.

Rurutu

POP 2400

The island's geology makes it unique; Rurutu is one of the South Pacific's largest raised atolls (*makatea*). Vertical limestone cliffs pockmarked with caves line the coast, while the volcanic interior is a fertile, mind-bogglingly abundant jungle. While there's very little fringing reef, there are a few



The Australs & The Gambier Highlights

- 1 Exploring the surreal limestone cave of **Ana Aeo** (p195) on Rurutu.
- 2 *Motu*-hopping in the radiant Raivavae lagoon and picnicking on idyllic **Motu Piscine** (p198).
- 3 Scaling **Mt Taita** (p197) and feasting your eyes on 360-degree views of the lagoon.
- 4 Watching the magnificent Rimatara lorikeet in its natural habitat on **Rimatara** (p200).
- 5 Taking a lagoon and island tour to **Taravai** (p201) in the Gambier.
- 6 Marvelling at the imposing **Cathédrale Saint-Michel** (p201) of Rikitea.