

Welcome to Tahiti & French Polynesia

Sculpted by sky-piercing, moss-green peaks and lined with vivid turquoise lagoons, sultry French Polynesia is a place to take it slow and experience warm, laid-back island culture.

The Dream

Tahiti: just the word conjures up centuries' worth of images: hibiscus flowers; grass skirts; a humid breeze over turquoise sea. The islands of French Polynesia became legend the minute European explorers reached home with tales of a heaven on earth where the soil was fertile, life was simple and lust was guilt-free. While the stereotypes are outdated, French Polynesia is still as dreamy as reality gets. The lagoons are just as blue, but there are now freeways, more conservative values and nine-to-five jobs. It's not the untainted paradise of explorer lore, but at least there's internet.

Polynesian Culture

Slowly, and particularly since the 1980s, islanders are bringing their culture back. Once forbidden, Reo Maohi (the Tahitian language) is now taught to university level; traditional tattoos are all the rage; and Tahitian dancing is the highlight of any party or festival. You'll see national pride swell during the Hawaiki Nui outrigger canoe race in November, the Miss Tahiti pageant in June and the highlight of the year, the Heiva festivals in July. So tuck a *tiare* (gardenia flower) behind your ear, smile and say *maururu* (thank you) for this time of revival.

Lagoon Spectacular

The slim stretches of white-, pink- and black-sand beaches in French Polynesia are really just pretty springboards into the real draw: the lagoons. Most high islands are surrounded by fringing reef that creates a protected swimming pool of the most intense aqua imaginable. Coral atolls have this same calibre of lagoon minus the big island in the middle. Fish, dolphins, rays, sharks, turtles and more inhabit these clear-water coral gardens that are as excellent for snorkelling as they are for diving and swimming. Surfers ride glassy wave faces at reef passes while kitesurfers fly across the water with the trade winds.

To Luxe or Not to Luxe

Over-the-top indulgence has become French Polynesia's – more specifically Bora Bora's – signature, and it often overshadows what the rest of the country has to offer. Resorts on the 'Pearl of the Pacific' are a honey-mooner's dream, with private overwater bungalows and views of the island's iconic, square-topped peak. But if this isn't your cup of coconut water, or not in your budget, don't let that dissuade you from visiting French Polynesia. Small, family-run lodgings offer a closer-to-the-culture experience for considerably less financial output.



Why I love Tahiti & French Polynesia

By Celeste Brash, Lonely Planet Writer

It's not just because it's the most beautiful place on Earth. No, really. I love French Polynesia for the sound of rain on a tin roof, the smell of *tiare taina* gardenias in November, the floral taste of a perfect mango, the silky warmth of the ocean, a sea turtle swimming peacefully below me, the gift of a flower *hei* (flower necklace) from a friend, the tapping of a *toere* (hollowed-out piece of wood) drum in the distance and simply, the way islands slow the pulse and make the world feel like a softer, better place.

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Above: Polynesian children wearing *hei* (floral necklaces)