

Ra'iatea & Taha'a

Includes ➔

Ra'iatea	106
Sights	106
Activities	109
Sleeping	111
Eating & Drinking	113
Taha'a	115
Sights	115
Activities	116
Sleeping	116
Eating & Drinking	118

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Sunset Beach Motel (p112)
- ➔ Raiatea Lodge (p112)
- ➔ Opoa Beach Hotel (p112)
- ➔ Fare Pea Iti (p117)
- ➔ La Pirogue Api (p117)
- ➔ Villa Tonoï (p112)

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Opoa Beach Hotel (p113)
- ➔ Tahaa Maitai (p118)
- ➔ La Plage (p118)
- ➔ Raiatea Lodge (p113)
- ➔ Le Ficus (p118)

Why Go?

Ra'iatea and Taha'a are encircled by a common lagoon, but the two islands couldn't be more different. Ra'iatea is high, imposing and fiercely independent, has the second biggest town in French Polynesia after Pape'ete and is considered by many to be the spiritual seat of the Polynesian Triangle. Taha'a, on the other hand, has graceful low hills, is famous for its sweet-scented vanilla and is arguably the quietest of the Society Islands. Both islands are ideal places to explore a mysterious and wild-feeling Polynesia.

The islands have few beaches but the reef is dotted with *motu*, secluded white-sand, palm-fringed, blue-lagoon islets. Within the vast lagoon itself is a never-ending aquarium perfect for diving, snorkelling, kayaking or just splashing around. On land, the mountains, particularly on Ra'iatea, make you want to hike off in search of breezy vistas, waterfalls and one of the world's rarest flowers, the *tiare apetahi*.

When to Go

- ➔ The dry winter period from May to October is the best time to go: the weather is cooler and there is much less rainfall – perfect for outdoor activities, especially hiking, but note that in this tropical climate it can rain or shine at any time of year.
- ➔ In July both islands are in full swing with the Heiva cultural festivities, including dancing contests.
- ➔ The Hawaiki Nui canoe race in early November is another highly colourful event, with the boats stopping en route from Huahine.
- ➔ Diving is popular year-round.

RA'IAATEA

POP 12,832

Ra'iatea is the second largest of the Society Islands after Tahiti and also the second most important economic centre, but its lack of beaches has left it relatively off the tourist radar. What dominates here are the high, steep mountains and the vast, reef-fringed lagoon – the combination of the two are quite awe-striking and tend to override any disappointment that there's no beach. The capital, Uturoa, is the only real town; explore the rest of the island and you'll find an intensely calm, back-to-nature reality.

Ra'iatea is home to Marae Taputapuata, once the most important traditional temple in Polynesia, which many believe still exudes power today. What is undeniable is that the island emanates a hard-to-pinpoint, mysterious energy that you won't feel anywhere else in French Polynesia.

History

Ra'iatea, known as Havai'iki Nui in ancient times, is the cultural, religious and historic centre of the Society Islands. According to legend, Ra'iatea and Taha'a were the first islands far to the northwest to be settled, probably by people from Samoa.

Cook first came to the island on the *Endeavour* in 1769, when he anchored off Opua. He returned in 1774 during his second Pacific voyage, and in 1777 he made a prolonged visit before sailing to Hawaii on his last voyage.

Protestant missionaries came to Ra'iatea in 1818 and from here continued to Rarotonga in the Cook Islands in 1823 and to Samoa in 1830. Following the French takeover of Tahiti in 1842 there was a long period of instability and fierce Ra'iatean resistance. It was not until 1888 that the French attempted a real takeover of the island, and in 1897, troops were sent to put down the final Polynesian rebellion.

Sights

We recommend hiring a vehicle and driving the 98km sealed-road circuit around Ra'iatea. Exploring the island this way gives you the opportunity to experience not only its wild natural beauty, but also its relaxed atmosphere.

Uturoa

At first glance you'd never guess this little place is French Polynesia's second largest town (after Pape'ete), but wander around and you'll catch its feisty buzz, especially on weekday mornings, when you'll experience the only traffic jams outside of Tahiti. For a peek at local life, nothing beats the **covered market** (☀6am-4pm Mon-Fri, 6am-noon Sat), right in the centre. The town's name means 'long mouth' in English and many islanders believe that the name comes from the locals' propensity for gossip.

The town is dominated by the bulky 294m **Mt Tapioi**.

DON'T MISS

MARAE TAPUTAPUATEA

The most important *marae* (traditional temple) in French Polynesia, sprawling Marae Taputapuata dates from the 17th century. It's dedicated to 'Oro, the god of war, who dominated 18th-century Polynesian religious beliefs.

Despite its relatively short history, this *marae* assumed great importance in the Polynesian religion. Any *marae* constructed on other islands had to incorporate one of Taputapuata's stones as a symbol of allegiance and spiritual lineage. This was the centre of spiritual power in Polynesia when the first Europeans arrived, and its influence was international: *ari'i* (chiefs) from all over the Maohi (Polynesian) world, including the Austrels, the Cook Islands and New Zealand, came here for important ceremonies.

The main part of the site is a large paved platform with a long *ahu* (altar) stretching down one side. At the very end of the cape is the smaller **Marae Tauraa**, a *tapu* (taboo) enclosure with a tall 'stone of investiture', where young *ari'i* were enthroned. The lagoon-side **Marae Hauviri** also has an upright stone, and the whole site is made of pieces of coral.

The well-restored *marae* complex is an imposing sight, but unfortunately there is little information for visitors beyond some signboards that explain what a *marae* is, with nothing specific about Taputapuata.