

# Understand Tahiti & French Polynesia

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Polynesian culture makes a comeback while the economy takes a nosedive.

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Take it slow, tuck a *tiare* flower behind your ear and get your boogie on, and you'll fit right in.

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# Tahiti & French Polynesia Today

Even though French Polynesia is far from everywhere aside from other Pacific nations, it's closest ties are with France and thus, the TV news is a mix of local reporting and emissions from Europe. Major events in France hit Tahiti deeply, but daily talk is usually about local issues ranging from corrupt politics to school sports. Recently the country has fostered closer relations with the rest of Polynesia (from Hawai'i to New Zealand), but overall French Polynesia is disconnected from its sister cultures, a real island unto itself.

## Best in Film

**The Ultimate Wave Tahiti** (2010) The Teahupoo monster in IMAX.

**The Last Reef** (2012) Gorgeous underwater footage.

**Blood & Ink** (2012) Exploration of tattoos.

**Les Possédés de Faaité** (2009) Reporting into scary, real-life witch hunts.

## Best in Print

**Mutiny on the Bounty** (1932; Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall)

The classic, fictionalised tale of the real-life mutiny in the late 1700s.

**Breadfruit** (2000; Celestine Hitiura Vaite) The first book in a series of three that vividly brings the reader into Tahitian culture via strong female protagonist Materena Mahi.

**To Live in Paradise** (1996; Renée Roosevelt Denis) Autobiography of an extraordinary woman's life on Mo'orea.

**Piracy in the Pacific** (1976; Henri Jacquier) Fascinating and entertaining account of islands' only ever mother-of-pearl pirates.

## Best in Modern Music

**Tikahiri** Goth punk amazingsness fronted by hunky tattooed twins from the Tuamotus.

**Pepena** Tahiti's favorite live band plays covers and their own style of Tahitian-inspired rock and roll.

## Cultural Renaissance

Culturally, French Polynesia is rediscovering itself. In the last 25 years, the Tahitian language has been reclaimed as a subject now required in schools and as a university-level discipline. Tahitian dance is flourishing, tattoos have become the norm and *Ma'a Tahiti* (traditional Tahitian food) has been transformed into haute cuisine. Even a few pre-European Tahitian events are being resuscitated, such as the Matariki i Ni'a in November, marking the beginning of the 'season of abundance' – Westerners more pessimistically call this the 'wet season'.

## Government Gymnastics

While technically a part of France, French Polynesia is, for the most part, self-governing. Since 2004 the government has been in turmoil as the main political parties battle it out and try to woo members of the assembly to flip-flop the balance of power. While democratic elections decide how many assembly seats go to each party, once there the members can switch allegiances. When it's a fragile majority, which is usually the case, one or two changes can overturn the entire government. From 2004 to 2014 this happened 13 times, but Édouard Fritch is blowing the trend by remaining president since September 2014.

## Tourism in Free Fall

While elsewhere in the Pacific tourism is back on the rise, Tahiti's stats fell and now are rising only slightly; this makes the number of visitors per year not much greater than those of 1996 (around 150,000, compared to 180,000 visitors in 2014). This is a harsh blow to a country whose primary industry is tourism. Many blame the costly airfare, but the country's reputation as a high-end-only destination may also be to blame. Another thing to think about, a large part of tourism is