

# The Australs & the Gambier Archipelago

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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 of a tropical paradise is here: flower-filled jungles, sharp peaks, outrageously blue water and genuinely friendly people. The islands are wonderfully varied, from the limestone caverns of Rurutu and the Bora Bora-like lagoon of Raivavae to the fertile slopes and windy bays of Tubuai – heaven on earth for ecotourists.

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 milder than in other parts of the country. With average daily temperatures around 20°C, July and August are not the best time to visit if you're hoping to laze around on a beach, but are 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 to October.

## THE AUSTRALS

The islands here have had less of a history with Europeans and less influx from the outside world, so have kept their culture and delicious local-style cuisine alive. Pandanus weaving is still a mainstay and these crafted items are greatly sought after by islanders in other archipelagos. The climate means that peaches and carrots grow alongside banana trees and vast taro plantations.

### 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.

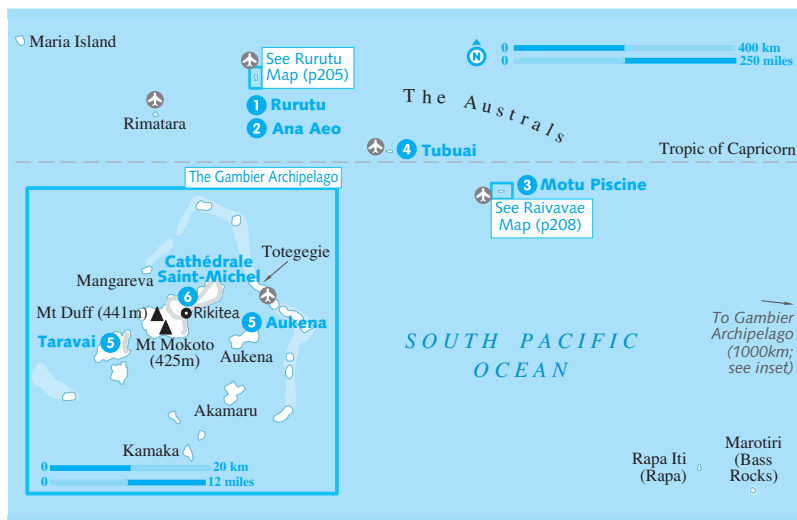
### **i** Getting There & Away

Rurutu, Tubuai, Raivavae and Rimatara are about 600km south of Tahiti.

**AIR Air Tahiti** ([www.airtahiti.pf](http://www.airtahiti.pf)) flies to Rurutu and Tubuai four days a week and to Raivavae and Rimatara three days a week. One-way fares include Tahiti–Rurutu (22,500 CFP), Tahiti–Tubuai (25,000 CFP), Tahiti–Raivavae or Tahiti–Rimatara (27,000 CFP).

Within the archipelago, interisland flights cost between 10,000 CFP and 18,000 CFP. You can also add an 'Australs Extension', which includes Raivavae, Rurutu and Tubuai to some Air Tahiti air passes (see p249).

**BOAT** The cargo ship *Tuhaa Pae IV* arrives three times monthly in the Australs; see p251 for details.



## The Australs & The Gambier Highlights

- 1** Swimming with awe-inspiring humpback whales at **Rurutu** (p206)
- 2** Exploring the surreal limestone cave of **Ana Aeo** (p205) on Rurutu
- 3** *Motu*-hopping in the radiant Raivavae lagoon and picnicking on idyllic **Motu Piscine** (p209)
- 4** Imagining the glorious past of **Tubuai** (p207) while visiting its unique *marae* (traditional temple)
- 5** Taking a lagoon and island tour to **Taravai** and **Aukena** (p210) in the Gambier archipelago
- 6** Marvelling at the imposing **Cathédrale Saint-Michel** (p211) of Rikitea