

welcome to Tahiti & French Polynesia



The Dream

Tahiti: just the word conjures up centuries' worth of images: hibiscus flowers; svelte, bronzed dancers in grass skirts; a humid breeze over turquoise sea. The islands of French Polynesia became legends the minute the first European explorers reached their home shores with tales of a heaven on earth where the soil was fertile, life was simple, and sex was plentiful and guilt-free. While the lingering hype is outdated, French Polynesia is still about as dreamy as reality gets. The trees are still heavy with fruit, the mountains rise as majestically as ever and the lagoons are just as blue. Today, however, there are freeways,

Christianity has instilled more conservative values and people work nine-to-five jobs. French Polynesia has not escaped the modern world but embraced it. True, it's not the perfect, untainted paradise of explorer lore, but at least there's a pretty fast internet connection.

Lagoon Spectacular

While there are plenty of slim stretches of white-, pink- and black-sand beaches in French Polynesia, they are 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 hue



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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 chic.

(left) Intercontinental Bora Bora Le Moana Resort (p135)

(below) Girls set to perform a traditional dance (p231) on Tahiti



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of aqua imaginable. Coral atolls have this same calibre of lagoon minus the big clunky 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 and windsurfers fly across the water terrain with the trade winds.

To Luxe or Not to Luxe

Over-the-top indulgence has become French Polynesia's – or more specifically Bora Bora's – signature, and often overshadows what the rest of the country has

to offer. Resorts on the 'Pearl of the Pacific' are a honeymooner's dream, with private overwater bungalows, every luxury trapping and spectacular views of the island's iconic, square-topped peak. But if this isn't your cup of coconut water, or simply not in your budget, don't let that dissuade you from visiting French Polynesia. Small, family-run hotels and bed and breakfasts offer a closer-to-the-culture experience at prices that require a financial output similar to what you'd need for a midrange trip to Europe.