

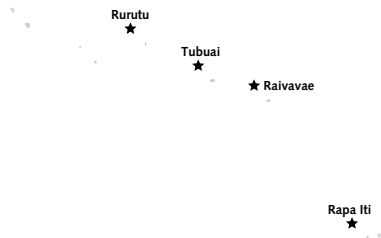
The Australs

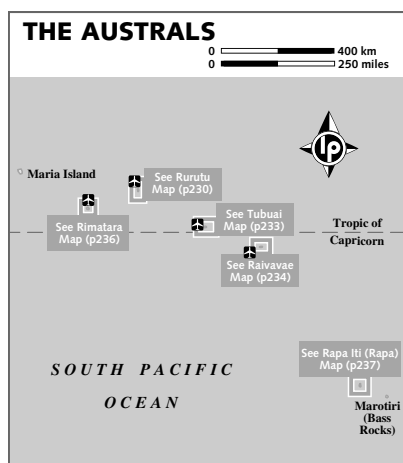
Isolated and straddling the Tropic of Capricorn, the magnificent and pristine Austral Islands are arguably French Polynesia's most underrated destination. The climate here is temperate – and sometimes downright chilly – but everything else befitting of a tropical paradise is here: flower-filled jungles, sharp peaks, outrageously blue water and genuinely friendly people. 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 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. The climate means that peaches and carrots grow alongside banana trees and vast taro plantations and it's not too hot to bike or hike all day long if you want. Whales visit the coastlines from July through October every year and Rurutu, with its lack of a fringing reef and clear waters, has become world renowned as a place to swim with the graceful mammals. In Rimatarā the wildlife is on land: the red, green, yellow and blue Rimatarā lorikeet draws in adventurous birders looking to add a rare species to their repertoire. If you tire of the present, the past is highly visible everywhere through the remains of great *marae* (traditional temples), some preserved while others lie hidden in the bush.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Swimming with awe-inspiring humpback whales at **Rurutu** (p231)
- *Motu*-hopping in the radiant **Raivavae lagoon** (p234) and picnicking on local specialities
- Hiking to peaks on each of the islands including the ancient *pa* (hilltop fortresses) on **Rapa Iti** (p237)
- Imagining the glorious past of **Tubuai** (p232) while visiting its unique *marae*
- Exploring the surreal caves and caverns of **Rurutu** (p230)





History

The Australs were the last of the Polynesian islands to be settled; the first arrivals were believed to be from Tahiti between 1000 and 1300 AD. Cook first saw Rurutu in 1769, Gayangos and Varela 'found' Raivavae in 1775, Cook was back to make the first landing on Tubuai in 1777 and Vancouver 'found' Rapa in 1791. It wasn't until Captain Samuel Pinder Henry chanced upon Rimatara in 1811 that the last of the islands came to European attention.

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.

Culture

Nearly all of French Polynesia was ravaged by disease at the onset of European contact, but the reverberation is felt most strongly in the Australs. During the islands' prime, before most of the population had been killed off by a series of imported maladies, the Australs produced some of the finest art known in the Pacific. The statue of the Rurutu ancestor god A'a on display at the British Museum in London is one of the most important surviving Polynesian wood carvings. Canoe paddles,

giant stone *tiki* and bowls were gradually pillaged and taken away to be displayed in museums far from the quiet islands from which they came. Today the Australs are renowned for their mats, hats and baskets woven from pandanus.

Getting There & Away

Air Tahiti flies to Rurutu and Tubuai four days a week and to Raivavae and Rimatara three days a week. One-way fares include Tahiti–Rurutu (19,500 CFP), Tahiti–Tubuai (21,500 CFP), Tahiti–Raivavae or Tahiti–Rimatara (24,000 CFP), Rurutu–Tubuai or Tubuai–Raivavae (10,000 CFP), and Rurutu–Rimatara (8000 CFP). You can also add an 'Australs Extension,' which includes Raivavae, Rurutu and Tubuai to some Air Tahiti air passes (see p260) for 27,000 CFP – a real bargain.

Getting to Rapa, over 1000km south of Tahiti, is an adventure. The cargo ship *Tuhaa Pae II* arrives weekly to the Australs, but stops off at Rapa only once every two months or more; see p262 for details.

RURUTU

pop 2098 / area 36 sq km

If it weren't so darned expensive to get here, Rurutu would surely be one of French Polynesia's premier destinations. Because of the island's geology (see the boxed text, p235) there is a variety of terrain rarely seen in the islands. Vertical limestone cliffs pockmarked with caves line the coast, while the volcanic interior is a fertile, mind-bogglingly abundant jungle. While there's very little fringing reef, there are plenty of white-sand beaches and bright-blue swimming areas close to shore. In our opinion it's a near-perfect tropical paradise – it just gets a bit nippy sometimes.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO...

- Raivavae, Rimatara and Rapa don't have banks or ATMs
- Many businesses don't accept credit cards
- There are very few restaurants, so you'll probably need to take at least half board at your *pension* (guesthouse)
- Expect some cold nights – or even days – if you visit between May and December