The Tuamotus

Until you see a coral atoll with your own eyes you haven’t experienced everything our great planet has to offer. According to Darwin’s theory of atoll formation, these rings of coral are the barrier reefs of volcanic islands that sank to the bottom of the Pacific millions of years ago. Today the raised reefs (with an average elevation of just a few metres) sustain coconut palms, a variety of local trees and shrubs and hardy, sea-loving people known as the Paumotu. Life in the atolls is equal parts harsh and paradisiacal: hardly anything grows so there’s little fruit or vegetables, the wind blows salty air over everything and the only drinking water is collected from the rain.

Yet the silence, the starry skies far from light pollution, the blinding-white beaches, intense blue lagoons, plentiful fresh fish, phenomenal diving and languid pace of life capture the hearts of nearly everyone who makes it out here. While an atoll is solid dry land, the small strips of coral squashed between the lagoon and the open ocean make you feel that you’re somehow floating on the sea.

The vast archipelago is made up of 77 atolls scattered over an immense stretch of ocean 1500km northwest to southeast and 500km east to west. The closest islands are about 300km from Tahiti. With a total combined land area of only about 700 sq km, the rings of coral islets, known locally as motu, encircle an astounding 6000 sq km of sheltered lagoons. You can visit developed atolls like Rangiroa, Fakarava and Tikehau in complete luxury if you wish, or experience authentic Paumotu life (but with plumbing and plentiful food and water) on beauties like Ahe, Takapoto and Mataiva.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Trying to forget the movie *Jaws* while diving the sharky passes of *Rangiroa* (p180) and *Fakarava* (p186)
- Watching a lustrous dark pearl being ‘birthed’ from an oyster while visiting a pearl farm at *Manihi* (p192), *Ahe* (p193), *Takaroa* (p194) or *Fakarava* (p185)
- Walking along the endless swathes of pink- and white-sand beaches on *Tikehau* (p188)
- Biking through the coconut plantations and past the emerald lagoon of *Mataiva* (p191)
- Visiting the Tuamotus’ spread of *marae* tucked in the bushes of *Takapoto* (p194)
History

Early Tuamotu history is a mystery. One theory is that the Paumotu people fled from the Leeward and Marquesas Islands following conflicts during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. Another theory is that the eastern Tuamotus were populated at the same time as the major Polynesian diaspora moved on from the Marquesas to the Gambier Archipelago and Easter Island, around 1000 AD.

European explorers were less than complimentary about the group – in 1616 Jacques Le Maire and Willem Schouten spoke of the ‘Islands of Dogs’, the ‘Islands without End’ and the ‘Islands of Flies’. In 1722 Jacob Roggeveen called them the ‘Pernicious Islands’ and in 1768 French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville dubbed them the ‘Dangerous Archipelago’.

Thus the reputation of the group as an uninviting place was sealed and the Europeans turned their attention towards the more welcoming Society Islands.

Towards the end of the 18th century, around the time of first European contact, the ferocious warriors of Anaa Atoll spread terror across the whole region. Islanders from many atolls fled to Tahiti, where they were sheltered by the Pomares. Many of them were converted by the missionaries who were establishing themselves on Tahiti, and when the islanders returned to the Tuamotus in 1817 they brought Christianity with them.

Christian missionaries established copra production in the 1870s and by 1900 copra represented 40% of the total exports of the colony. Pearl diving and mother-of-pearl production both enjoyed a golden age around 1850.

From 1911 until 1966, phosphate mining on Makatea was the principal export activity not only for the Tuamotus but for all of French Polynesia. The population of other islands began to decline dramatically in the 1960s as copra production fell away and plastic buttons killed off the mother-of-pearl button business.

In the 1970s, when airstrips were built on many of the islands, the population decline was slowed and the group’s economic prospects began to brighten. The flights back to Tahiti carried not only suntanned tourists but loads of fresh reef fish for the busy markets of Pape’ete.

The 1970s brought another far less congenial employment prospect to the Tuamotus when France’s Centre d’Expérimentation du Pacifique (CEP) took over the central atoll of Hao and began to test nuclear weapons on the western atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa (see p38).

Pearl culturing began in the 1980s and the atolls flourished with wealth and reverse migration from the late 1990s till around 2003 when pearl prices began to plummet. Today, on atolls such as Manihi and Tikehau, abandoned grafting houses dot the lagoon.

Culture

Hats off to these people, who managed to survive in the harsh conditions of atoll life long before the arrival of supply ships and canned goods. Fish are plentiful in the fertile lagoons, but farming a lump of coral with little water supply is a feat of exceptional ingenuity. To overcome the lack of water, people traditionally dug pits, sometimes stretching for hundreds of metres, down to the water table. These pits were then filled in with vegetable matter, an improvised compost that enabled the cultivation of taro, which was the staple. Direct supplies from Tahiti by schooners eventually made these systems obsolete but some islanders still make small pits for kitchen gardens.

Tuamotu life has always centred around the sea, and the people of the atolls are regarded as some of the best navigators and fishermen in Polynesia. Some people still speak a Paumotu dialect that is a variant of Tahitian, but Tahitian and French are quickly taking over.

Activities

You don’t go to the Tuamotus for monuments or museums – activities are in the lagoons. Scuba diving is the number-one activity. Rangiroa, Tikehau, Manihi, Fakarava, Ahe and Makemo have dive centres, and dive cruises are a pricier but practical way to dive the Tuamotus – see the boxed text, p256.

You can visit the ubiquitous pearl farms, where you’ll probably get to see the grafting operation. Some places to stay also have pearl farms.

Both spear and line fishing are available and you can also see fish parks, snorkel, explore archaeological sites and visit bird reserves on remote motu. Definitely bring a mask and snorkel.

There are numerous tourist operators, although hotels and pensions (guesthouses) often organise trips for guests. The best