

Tahiti

This probably isn't the island whose photograph was on your holiday brochure. No, there aren't any sweeping white-sand beaches, and vistas over a neon-blue lagoon are few and far between. Yet this is the heart of French Polynesia and it would be a shame to bypass the waterfall-laden, shadowy mountains, unpretentiously beautiful black-sand beaches and distinctly Polynesian buzz that make Tahiti a gem in its own right. Many people immediately hightail it out of Tahiti for the white-sand bliss of Mo'orea or Bora Bora so that ironically, the most accessible and well-known island of French Polynesia remains more off the beaten track than its far-flung sisters.

The island is very much centred on Pape'ete, the pint-sized chaotic capital with its traffic jams and smells of flowers, sweat and salt air. To islanders addicted to the city pace of life, this is the only place to be and they lap up the gritty nightlife, cinemas, music and endless array of food on hand.

While visiting Pape'ete is a must, it's the outdoor action outside the city and cultural offerings that woo visitors to extend their stay. Hike through archaeological sites, up never-ending river valleys and past coastlines dotted with wild passionfruit. In July catch the country's most spectacular festival, the percussion and dance-heavy Heiva, and from July to October go whale-watching with far fewer tourists than you'll find on Mo'orea. Year-round on Tahiti there's a chance there will be big waves at Teahupoo and you can hire a boat to watch pro surfers tackle the break's cavernous tube up close.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Canyoning or hiking in the divinely lush and craggy interior inland from **Papenoo** (p77)
- Grabbing an ice-cold coconut to sip while perusing the colourful **Marché de Pape'ete** (p84)
- Watching the best of the best shake their hips and waggle their knees at the Heiva festival's **dance competitions** (p89) in July
- Taking a boat excursion past the road's end at **Teahupoo** (p104) to visit the remote and wild Fenua Aihere
- Dancing the night away with locals, surfers, sailors and transvestites in Pape'ete's rocking **nightclubs** (p93)



■ POPULATION: 169,624

■ AREA: 1045 SQ KM

History

Tahiti was not the first of the Society Islands to be populated in the Great Polynesian Migrations. Legends have the first settlers arriving in Tahiti from Ra'iatea, which was the most politically important island despite being much smaller than Tahiti.

Tahiti's importance increased as more and more European visitors made the island their preferred base, and it soon became a minor pawn in the European colonial game.

Tahiti's population is currently about 170,000, constituting more than 60% of French Polynesia's entire population. Tahiti is the economic, cultural and political centre of French Polynesia.

Geography & Geology

Tahiti is neatly divided into two circles connected by an isthmus: the larger and more populated Tahiti Nui (Big Tahiti) to the northwest and the smaller Tahiti Iti (Little Tahiti) to the southeast. The narrow coastal fringe of Tahiti Nui, where the vast majority of the population is concentrated, sweeps rapidly inwards and upwards to a jumble of soaring, green-clad mountain peaks.

A fringing reef encloses a narrow lagoon around much of the island, but parts of the coast, particularly along the north coast from Mahina through Papenoo to Tiarei, are unprotected. There are 33 passes through the reef, the most important of which is the Pape'ete Pass into Pape'ete's harbour. Less than 10km east is Matavai Bay (Baie de Matavai), the favourite anchorage point of many early explorers.

The mountainous centre of Tahiti Nui is effectively one huge crater, with the highest peak being Mt Orohena (2241m). A ridge runs northwest from the summit to Mt Aorai (2066m), and continues south to the spectacular rocky Diadème (1321m) then north to Mt Marau (1493m). A number of valleys run down to the coast from the mountains, the most impressive being the wide Papenoo Valley to the north. Tahiti Iti has its highest point at Mt Ronui (1332m).

Orientation

The *pointe kilométrique* (PK; kilometre point) markers start at zero in Pape'ete and increase in both a clockwise and an anticlockwise direction around Tahiti Nui until they meet at Taravao, the town at the isthmus that connects

Tahiti Nui with Tahiti Iti. Taravao is 54km from Pape'ete clockwise (via the east coast) and 60km anticlockwise (via the west coast). The counting starts again on Tahiti Iti, where the markers only go as far as the sealed road – remarkably, there's no road along the easternmost coast.

Activities

Whatever Tahiti lacks in beachlike postcard appeal, it sure makes up for with its huge array of fun stuff to do. If the following options don't sound thrilling enough, you could also take an aerial tour with **Polynesia Hélicoptères** (☎ 54 87 20; www.polynesia-helicopter.com). Twenty-minute flights cost from 20,000 CFP per person for four to five passengers. See also p103 for activities on Tahiti Iti.

BEACHES

Tahiti isn't as much of a beach destination as the outer islands but that doesn't mean you can't catch a few rays on the sand. The best stretches of white sand and decent snorkelling are between PK15 and PK21 on the west coast and there are public entries with parking at PK15, PK18 and PK18.5. Any Pa'ea-bound bus can drop you there. One of Tahiti's widest beaches is at Papara's Taharuu Beach (Map pp78–9; between PK38 and PK39), which has black sand, big surf and lots of local guys hanging out and drinking beer.

Three kilometres east of Pape'ete in Pira'e is a stretch of black-sand beach by Le Royal Tahitien hotel. There's also a nicer stretch of beach at Point Vénus (Map pp84–5; PK10). Little roadside beaches dot the rest of the island and as long as you don't have to walk through someone's property, feel free to take a dip. Tahiti Iti's best black-sand beaches are found in the villages of Tautira and Teahupoo.

CIRCLE THE ISLAND TOURS & 4WD EXCURSIONS

Taking a 'circle the island tour' can help you get your bearings and knock off most of the island's sights in one day. The following minibuses take up to 10 passengers and charge 4500 CFP per person:

Adventure Eagle Tours (☎ 77 20 03)

Dave's VIP Tours (☎ 79 75 65; tahiti1viptours@yahoo.com) Dave is a super-friendly and knowledgeable American expat.

For more bumpy thrills take a 4WD to the island's centre around Lake Vaihiria. Full-day