

DESTINATION REPORT

YOUR TRAVEL SPECIALIST

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YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Tahiti, Society Islands, French Polynesia

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INTRODUCTION

A name synonymous with tropical relaxation, Tahiti is the busy hub of French Polynesia, located 160 mi/260 km southeast of Bora Bora. Most of the activity is centered around the city of Papeete (pronounced *pah-pay-EH-tay*). It's the part of the island most visitors see, if only in passing.

We recommend you stick around in Papeete for at least a two-night stay. This exciting city has many flashy boutiques, a colorful local market, a black pearl museum and active nightlife. As the only real city in French Polynesia, Papeete can teach you a lot about life in the South Pacific. And although you will experience some traffic jams and noise, it's relatively clean, safe and efficient for a tropical city.

MUST SEE OR DO

Sights—Papeete Municipal Market.

Museums—The Museum of Tahiti and Her Islands in Punaauia on Tahiti; the Gauguin Museum on the south coast of Tahiti; the James Norman Hall Home in the Papeete suburb of Arue; lessons in pearling at the Robert Wan Pearl Museum in Papeete.

Late Night—Cut loose with the locals on a dance floor on Papeete's waterfront.

Walks—A tour of the Harrison W. Smith Botanical Gardens; a guided hike through the mountains and valleys of Tahiti.

GEOGRAPHY

Tahiti has something of an hourglass shape with a larger portion (Tahiti Nui—where Papeete is located) and a smaller one (Tahiti Iti). Mountains soar to 7,352 ft/2,241 m in central Tahiti Nui and to 4,430 ft/1,323 m on Tahiti Iti.

SIGHTSEEING

If you have the time to venture out of Papeete, we suggest you head out along the north shore of the island. Make a stop at Point Venus, on the outskirts of Papeete. Matavai Bay, which is enclosed by the point, was used as an anchorage by many of the early European ships to reach Tahiti. The black-sand beach near the point is a popular seaside destination.

Farther east is the Arahoho Blowhole, where water from incoming waves explodes through a hole in the rocks. A little past the blowhole is the turnoff for the Trois Cascade (three waterfalls), which is a short walk from the parking area.

If you continue along the 75-mi/117-km coastal road, you'll reach the town of Taravao, where the two portions of the island meet. There, you can choose to head along the north coast of Tahiti Iti toward Tautira or along the south coast to the surfing town of Teahupoo. Both these roads end in a dead end, and the eastern portion of Tahiti Iti can be reached only by boat or on foot.

Turning west along the south coast of Tahiti Nui, you'll soon reach the Gauguin Museum, which details the artist's life and has some reproductions of his work. The wonderful Harrison Smith Botanical Garden is right next door to the museum.

From there, the road circles back toward Papeete. About 9 mi/15 km from the city, you'll reach the Museum of Tahiti and its Islands, which has good historical and cultural displays.

HISTORIC SITES

Point Venus

Capt. James Cook named this peninsula sticking out from Tahiti's north shore, where he built a fort during his first visit to the island. He spent six months there in 1769 attempting to track the transit of the planet Venus across the sun. Now a public park, the peninsula sports a lighthouse, built in 1868, and a black-sand beach that is a popular local hangout on weekends. Mahina, Tahiti.

MUSEUMS

Gauguin Museum

On Tahiti's south shore, this small but interesting museum tracks the life of painter Paul Gauguin from the time he arrived from Paris in 1891 until he died on Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands in 1903. A few of Gauguin's original sculptures and wood carvings are on display; the paintings are copies. 600 CFP adults. Papeari, Tahiti. Phone 689-571-058.

James Norman Hall Home

Co-author (with Charles Nordhoff) of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and several other books, James Norman Hall lived most of his adult life in the village of Arue, now a Papeete suburb. His family has rebuilt his home and stocked it with his typewriter and other family heirlooms. Arue, Tahiti. Phone 689-500-160.

<http://www.jamesnormanhallhome.pf>.

Museum of Tahiti and Her Islands

Beside the lagoon in the glitzy west-coast suburb of Punaauia, the territory's official museum explores the island's history, cultures and geography. It's the best place to get an overall view of this corner of Polynesia.

Tuesday-Sunday 9 am-5 pm. Pointe des Pecheurs, Nu'uroa, Punaauia, Tahiti. Phone 689-548-435.

<http://www.museetahiti.pf>.

Robert Wan Pearl Museum

Founded by Robert Wan, one of the founders of French Polynesia's black pearl industry, this museum gives insight into the history and cultivation of pearls in French Polynesia, with many local pearls on display. It explains how the orbs are raised, harvested, graded and turned into jewelry, which the high-end store next door sells. Monday-Saturday 9:30 am-5:30 pm. Boulevard Pomare, Papeete. Phone 689-4046-1555. <http://www.robertwan.com/eng/museum.htm>.

PARKS & GARDENS

Harrison W. Smith Botanical Gardens

Adjacent to the Gauguin Museum, these botanical gardens were founded in 1919 by an American physics professor who relocated to Tahiti. It has a lovely miniature forest of Tahitian chestnuts and other examples of local plant life. It also contains tropical specimens from around the world. Daily 9 am-5 pm. Papeari, Tahiti. Phone 689-571-058.

RECREATION

Tahitian surfers ride the waves at many points, but white sandy beaches are in short supply because the sands of this volcanic island are black. To find the beaches of your dreams, you must cross the Sea of the Moon to Moorea.

GOLF

Olivier Breaud International Golf Course

This 18-hole course has been French Polynesia's premier course since it was created in 1970. The Tahiti Open in July is the main event of the year. Atimaono, Tahiti. Phone 689-4057-4042.

SURFING

Aloha Surf School

North of Papeete, a small surf school is run by a former surf competitor and avid environmentalist. The school donates 10% of its proceeds to protecting the environment. Great for beginners. Avenue Georges Clemenceau, Papeete. Phone 689-4033-8209.

Tahiti Surf School

Riding the big breakers on the reefs of Tahiti, Huahine and elsewhere is for experienced surfers only, but beginners can learn on the beaches with this company. Surfing and body-boarding courses are available. Phone 689-4077-2769. <http://www.tahitisurfschool.info>.

NIGHTLIFE

Papeete is one of few places in French Polynesia where things remain lively well into the night. Try to visit at least one of the clubs or discos opposite the ferry terminal downtown to watch the locals cut loose on the dance floor.

BARS, TAVERNS & PUBS

Le Chaplin's

Located right across from the ferry to Moorea, this Charlie Chaplin-inspired bar has an extensive drink list and plenty of outdoor seating. Daily 10 pm-1 am. Main Street, Papeete. Phone 689-4042-7305.

<https://www.facebook.com/Chaplins.Tahiti>.

DANCE & NIGHTCLUBS

Le Paradise

This club plays Afro-French music and hosts a regular karaoke night. Daily 10 pm-3 am. BP 1001, Papeete. Phone 689-432-115. <http://www.paradisenight.pf>.

SHOPPING

Start with a walk along the harbor. Just a few blocks inland is the Papeete Market, which is a must-see. Catering to both tourists and residents, it includes handicrafts, flowers and fresh-food items. There's lots of local color—people sitting on the floor making flower leis, tables full of brilliantly colored fish, and locals drinking Hinano beer in the upstairs bar and restaurant. The crafts are largely souvenir grade, but it's a good place to pick up small knickknacks and woven-pandanus items.

For pricier fare, you'll find galleries, pearl shops and designer-clothing stores on nearby blocks, especially near Vaima Centre.

MARKETS

Papeete Municipal Market

In the heart of town, the city's bustling market is especially busy 5-7 am on Sunday when locals stock up for their big midday meals. Fresh produce vendors occupy downstairs, while handicraft stalls populate the second floor. Monday-Saturday 7 am-6 pm, Sunday 7-9 am. BP 4588, Papeete.

OTHER OPTIONS

Mana'o Tattoo Studio

This reputable studio specializes in traditional Polynesian, Marquesan and Maori tattoos. Walk-ins welcome. Monday-Saturday 9:30 am-5:30 pm. 43 Rue Albert Leboucher, Papeete. Phone 689-4042-4500. <http://www.manaotattoo.com>.

DINING OVERVIEW

Most Papeete restaurants can be classified as either Asian, French or Italian, while the city's pubs and cafes serve mostly French dishes. To sample traditional Polynesian cuisine, you should attend an island night at a large resort where a buffet dominated by seafood, pork and local vegetables comes with Tahitian dancing. Similar fare on a more modest scale is obtained by ordering *maa'a Tahiti* at the restaurant upstairs in the market or on a nearby street.

LOCAL & REGIONAL

Les 3 Brasseurs

Just across Boulevard Pomare from Tahua Vaiete, young professionals crowd the sidewalk tables outside this charming restaurant. Styled after the microbreweries of northeastern France, this lively pub specializes in the many varieties of a pizzalike dish called *flammekeuche* that pairs marvelously with the house beer. Front de Mer, BP 4489, Papeete. Phone 689-506-025. .

Address

Front de Mer, BP 4489
Papeete, Society Islands, French
Polynesia

Phone

689-506-025

Transportation

Papeete's Faa'a Airport—4 mi/6 km west of Papeete—handles all international flights and most interisland planes. Many of the cruise and freighter excursions begin at Papeete's harbor.

Tahiti has one big advantage over other islands as far as visitors are concerned. It has a frequent, reliable and inexpensive form of public transit. Modern buses have now completely replaced the more interesting, old-style wooden Le Truck of former years. They follow set routes and can transport you short distances in and around Papeete, including to and from the airport. Several routes extend halfway around the island, although bus tours and rental cars work better there as the public buses don't connect at Taravao on the narrow waist between Tahiti Nui and Tahiti Iti.

Half a dozen car rental companies have offices at the airport and downtown. While not cheap, the vehicles do usually come with unlimited mileage, which makes driving around the island more practical. Some companies will rent to drivers ages 18-24 provided they have a major credit card, but the compulsory insurance charge and deductible will be higher in that case. To be sure of getting the car you want at a price you're willing to pay, it's not a bad idea to book ahead through an international chain such as Avis, Europcar or Hertz, all of which are well represented on Tahiti.

Calendar

During July is the three-week-long Heiva or Tiurai festival, which combines Bastille Day festivities with competitions in traditional dance and music. It's a popular time to travel to Tahiti, so book early.