



▶ OCEANIA

Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** French Polynesia, a self-governing territory of France, stretches across a wide area of the Pacific Ocean about halfway between California and Australia. Its 118 islands and atolls extend over an area as large as western Europe, but the combined land area (1,413 square miles, or 3,660 square kilometers) is only slightly larger than Rhode Island. The territory includes five archipelagos: the Society Islands, Marquesas Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, Austral Islands, and Gambier Islands. The Society Islands include the *Îles sous le Vent* (Leeward Islands) and *Îles du Vent* (Windward Islands). Tahiti is part of the latter group and is the main inhabited island.

The Society, Marquesas, Austral, and Gambier groups are known for their *high* islands—a blend of volcanic peaks, fertile valleys, lush tropical forests, rushing streams, waterfalls, and white-sand beaches. The Tuamotu Archipelago consists of many *low* islands—small sand-and-coral bars surrounding a lagoon, dotted with shrubs and coconut palms.

French Polynesia's climate is subtropical, tempered by trade winds throughout the year. The hottest months are December through February, with temperatures between 85°F and 90°F (29–32°C). Cyclones and damaging tropical storms are possible during these months. Otherwise, temperatures average between 70°F and 80°F (21–27°C).

**History.** Most of French Polynesia was inhabited initially by Polynesians, although their exact origin is not certain. They began to settle on Pacific islands between 2000 and 1000 B.C and probably reached the Society Islands in the third century A.D. According to legend, these early peoples set out from Raiatea to settle New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands. The islands were ruled by local chiefs until European colonization.

The 16th through the 18th centuries were marked by contact with explorers sailing under various European flags. Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan passed through the Tuamotu Archipelago in 1521. Alvaro de Mendaña of Spain named the Marquesas Islands after reaching them in 1595. Samuel Wallis charted and claimed Tahiti for Britain in 1767. The following year, it was claimed by the French. But it was some time before Europeans actually began to settle on Tahiti. In 1769, Captain James Cook led an expedition to Tahiti, naming the Society Islands for his sponsor, the Royal Society of Britain. When the crew of the *Bounty* mutinied against their commander, Captain William Blich, they escaped to the Society Islands in 1788.

Missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) arrived just before the end of the 18th century; other Christian missions soon followed. After the conversion of Tahitian chief Pomare II, the native people embraced Christianity. The Pomare Dynasty reigned on Tahiti until Queen Pomare IV agreed in 1842 to make Tahiti a French protectorate, in exchange for France's help in bringing neighboring islands under her control. Her son (Pomare V) abdicated in 1880, and the islands became a colony of France. After World War II, France declared the islands an overseas territory, and islanders voted to remain a territory in 1958.

A pro-autonomy movement gained strength when, in 1966, France began a series of nuclear tests at Moruroa Atoll. Statutes in 1977 and 1984 granted French Polynesia greater internal autonomy. The islands gained a reputation as a tranquil tourist destination, but the capital of Papeete was rocked with riots in 1995 when France resumed nuclear tests. The president of the territorial government, Gaston Flosse, represented

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France in signing the 1996 Treaty of Rarotonga, which effectively made the South Pacific a nuclear-free zone. Although the question of independence is an ongoing subject of political debate, French Polynesia is unlikely to break its ties with France in the near future.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** French Polynesia's population of approximately 262,000 is growing at 1.6 percent annually. Papeete is the largest city, with roughly one-third of French Polynesia's residents living in and around it. Polynesians account for 78 percent of the population, but most have a mixed heritage that includes either European or Chinese ancestry. About 12 percent of the people are Chinese, forming primarily a merchant class. They are descendants of laborers imported in the 19th century. Locally born French citizens (6 percent) and native French or other Europeans (4 percent) also live in the territory. Inhabitants of outer islands have migrated to Tahiti to seek opportunities, but with the growth of tourist, black pearl, and other industries on outer islands, migration has slowed somewhat.

**Language.** French and Tahitian are the official languages. French is spoken widely on Tahiti; it is the language of daily communication for the majority of people. One's proficiency in French affects one's economic status. Tahitian was prohibited in schools for more than 20 years; it was introduced in schools as a second language in the 1980s. Older people prefer Tahitian to French. Tahitian is spoken mostly at home or when French is inadequate. The Tahitian alphabet has 13 letters. All syllables end with a vowel. The Chinese community speaks Tahitian, French, or the Hakka variety of Chinese. English is not widely spoken, although it is understood in tourist areas.

Tahitian is spoken throughout the territory, but each outer island group also has its own language: North and South Marquesan, Austral, Paumotu (spoken on the Tuamotu Islands), and Mangarevan (Gambier Islands). Some of these languages are closely related to Tahitian. Many have island-specific, mutually intelligible dialects.

**Religion.** Slightly more than half of the people are Protestant, most belonging to the (LMS's) Evangelical Church. About 30 percent are Roman Catholic, 6 percent belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and 2 percent are members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A variety of other Christian religions, as well as Judaism and Buddhism, are represented on Tahiti. Wearing white dresses and hats to Sunday services is a tradition with some churches and is more common among older people. The practice has faded somewhat. Tahitians no longer worship the many gods of nature, but some traditional dances, medicines, festivities, and concepts, such as *tupuna* (respect for ancestors and their culture), survive.

**General Attitudes.** French Polynesians value personal relations and are warm, generous, and receptive, although they may seem shy to strangers before they become better acquainted. They enjoy life and try to live as simply and happily as possible. Time is relatively flexible in French Polynesia, as people are considered more important than schedules. Still, Western influences have quickened the pace of life, especially in Papeete. Physical strength (for men) and beauty (for women) are admired characteristics. Education, property, and a sense of humor are valued. Undesirable traits include lack of respect, particularly from children, and dishonesty.

Most people have a multiethnic heritage, which has contributed to a general atmosphere of racial tolerance and harmony. However, some tensions do exist between Polynesians and

French-European inhabitants. Some Polynesians resent how francophone culture has replaced aspects of traditional culture by dominating school instruction, the media, and the economy. Yet other Polynesians are as proud of their ties to France as they are of their own heritage. Some outer-islanders are more wary of Tahitian domination than they are of French rule. All French Polynesians pride themselves on the legendary beauty of their islands, a favorite subject of such artists as Paul Gauguin and such authors as Herman Melville and Robert Louis Stevenson.

**Personal Appearance.** Lightweight informal clothing is worn throughout the year. Clothing is always neat and clean. Although Tahitians are at home in Western-style attire, they continue to wear more traditional clothing made from a simple length of cloth (*pareu*). Men and women might wear a T-shirt with a *pareu* wrapped around the waist. Women also wear the *pareu* as a dress, tied around the neck or chest. The *pareu* is worn generally at home or the beach. Footwear for men and women is usually a pair of flip-flops or sandals without stockings. In the workplace, men commonly wear a short-sleeved shirt with shorts or pants. Women might wear shorts or a muumuu-type dress. They commonly wear flowers behind the ear or in the hair.

Traditional dance costumes may include "grass" skirts made from strips of wild hibiscus bark. Tops are made of cotton fabric or polished coconut shells. Local plants, grasses, and shells are used for headdresses, belts, and necklaces. "Missionary dresses," or *purotu* (meaning "good in appearance"), cover more of the body and are worn by women performing slow hula dances.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Friends and relatives often greet with a kiss on each cheek, accompanied by a hug or pat on the back, especially after a long separation. French Polynesians also shake hands. If one's hand is dirty, one offers a wrist, elbow, or even a shoulder instead. It is impolite not to shake hands with every person in a small gathering (fewer than 30 people); however, it is impolite to attempt to shake everyone's hand when a meeting has already started. One should sit down and acknowledge people with a nod of the head while making quick eye contact, and then shake hands after the meeting. *Ia orana* is a polite greeting. Friends, acquaintances, and passersby might greet with *Ei* or *Ei Iaora* (Hi). This is said when the person being greeted can be seen and heard but is not close enough for a handshake. A waving of the hand may accompany it. French greetings like *Bonjour* (Good day) and *Salut* (Hi) are also common. In the Marquesas, people greet with *Kaoha* (Hi).

Titles such as *Monsieur* (Mr.), *Madame* (Mrs.), or *Mademoiselle* (Miss) are used in professional settings, along with a surname. Friends often call each other by nickname. People may respectfully address elderly women and men as *Mama* and *Papa*.

**Gestures.** French Polynesians often use hand gestures and facial expressions to emphasize or add meaning to conversation. Raising the eyebrows expresses acknowledgment or agreement. People indicate one should listen by pointing and shaking the index finger, forming a *c* with one hand by the ear, or touching the ear with the index finger. They beckon by waving all fingers with the palm down. Pointing with the index finger may be considered rude. Instead, people indicate direction by motioning with the head and eyes. Passing between conversing individuals is rude. Public displays of affection are

generally frowned upon, although this is changing with the younger generation.

**Visiting.** French Polynesians traditionally emphasize the concept of *joie de vivre* (joy of life). They are relaxed and natural and invariably try to make their guests feel comfortable. Islanders try to practice the favorite maxim “If you act like old friends when you first meet, you will soon feel that you are.” Unannounced visits are common and often take place on the patio, where it is cooler. Generally, hosts offer their guests light refreshments (juice or fruit from the garden) or invite them to join the family for a meal. Refusing an offer of food is considered rude if the host has invited the guest for a *tamaaraa* (a traditional feast common at holidays and other special occasions). If one is visiting briefly, one need not feel obligated to eat. It is common for the host to offer food and repeat the offer a few times. If one has already eaten, one should thank the host for the offer, explain that one has eaten, and suggest that a drink would do. This etiquette assures the host that he or she is not failing in hospitality. Offering food is a common courtesy and may be done even if no food is ready. In some cases, accepting may mean the host must get food and prepare a meal. Guests may compliment their hosts on their home or family, but they should avoid singling out any one object in the home. Otherwise, the host may feel obligated to give the object to them. It is customary to remove one’s shoes before entering a home.

**Eating.** French Polynesians eat the main meal at midday. Seafood, vegetables, rice, and French bread comprise a typical menu. A light breakfast consists of bread and a hot drink. Supper in the evening is also light. Families generally eat the morning and evening meal together, with the father seated at the head of the table and the mother seated at his side. When guests are present, children may eat at a separate table, outside, or at a different time. Etiquette varies depending on the food and the family. Traditional Tahitian foods are eaten with the fingers, while Chinese food is eaten with chopsticks. Western utensils are used in the continental fashion, with the fork in the left hand and the knife remaining in the right.

Politeness does not require a person to eat everything on the plate. Leaving a little extra will ensure that a second (or third) helping is not served and will satisfy the host that the guest has been well fed. Sometimes guests are offered a meal, and the host family will not join in eating. Guests are expected to accept the invitation and not mind if the family watches, though most hosts will join the guests, nibble some food, or cook more while making conversation. In restaurants, tipping is not customary because it violates the tradition of Tahitian hospitality.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Traditionally, families were large, usually with many children and several generations living under the same roof. It is still common for young couples to live with the husband’s or wife’s parents for a time, but increased contact with Western culture is leading to more nuclear families. Family ties still remain strong; respect for elders is especially important. At family gatherings and events, older people are invited to say a few words to those present.

The father typically is the breadwinner, while the mother has responsibility for the children and the home. However, due to the high cost of living, more women are working outside the home. Parents generally do not openly show affection to their children. They work hard to give them opportunities, and chil-

dren are expected to work hard at home and school. Daughters help with housework, while sons clean the yard and help the father in the family garden (*faapu*). In Polynesian cultures, children are precious, and their upbringing is often shared by grandparents or other sets of adoptive parents (*faamu*). This type of informal adoption is still practiced today, making family relations somewhat complex.

Houses typically are made of wood or brick and are brightly painted. They usually are surrounded by tropical fruit trees, flowers, and plants. Shells often adorn the interior.

**Dating and Marriage.** Western-style dating generally is not practiced in French Polynesia, except among the French youth and perhaps in Papeete. Instead, young people gather in groups to dance, sing, talk, or participate in sports. Girls are more closely supervised than boys. Marriages traditionally were influenced by the families, but youth now have greater freedom in choosing spouses.

A civil wedding ceremony is often followed by a religious ceremony. The reception may include a *tamaaraa*, a ball, and a display of traditional dances, with a slow hula (*aparima*) performed by the bride for the groom. The couple wears leis of white flowers (*tiares*). In the Austral Islands, the mothers envelop the dancing newlyweds in a Tahitian quilt sewn for the occasion.

**Diet.** French Polynesians enjoy French and Chinese cuisine in addition to traditional native foods. Western dishes are also readily available. In the Tuamotus, fish and coconut products are common. The Australs enjoy a cooler climate favorable to staples such as taro and sweet potatoes. Marquesans eat breadfruit cooked in coconut milk as an accompaniment to *poisson cru* (raw fish marinated in lime juice). Chinese food is popular in the Society Islands.

Other common foods include papayas, pineapples, mangoes, bananas, *fafa* (a type of spinach), chicken, and pork. Fish is often marinated before being baked or grilled. *Fafaru*, or “smelly fish,” is fermented in seawater for several days. Fruit puddings (*poe*) made with coconut milk are popular as desserts. At a *tamaaraa*, the food is wrapped in banana leaves and cooked in an *umu* or *ahimaa* (ground oven).

**Recreation.** People often spend their leisure time playing sports, watching television and movies, or attending dances, which feature both ballroom and traditional styles. Women also enjoy sunbathing and making traditional crafts such as *tifaifai* (a two-layer patchwork quilt). Soccer is the national sport. Boxing, volleyball, basketball, and cycling are enjoyed. Windsurfing, swimming, fishing, and diving top a long list of popular water sports. Surfing is the favorite water sport of the youth. Many Tahitians have gone on to become international surfing champions. Canoeing in traditional outrigger canoes (*pirogues*) is also popular. On weekends, friends may gather for a *bringue*, a singing and drinking party that lasts until early morning.

**The Arts.** Contemporary French Polynesian music is a fusion of traditional styles and international influences. Musicians compose lyrics about the islands’ floral life and ocean scenery. Guitars commonly provide accompaniment, and the use of indigenous instruments such as the wooden *toere* and *pahu* drums has become more prevalent lately. The *tamure* style of dance incorporates rapid hip and leg movements. Large groups of dancers compete during *tamure* festivals.

**Holidays.** Holidays include New Year’s Day, *Arrivée de l’Evangile* (Missionary Day, 5 March), Easter Monday, Labor Day (1 May), Ascension, Pentecost Monday, *Autonomie*

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*Interne* (Autonomy Day, celebrating Tahitian self-rule, on 29 June), National Bastille Day (14 July), Assumption of Virgin Mary (15 Aug.), *Toussaint* (All Saints' Day on 1 November), Veterans' Day (11 Nov.), and Christmas. A cultural parade on 29 June kicks off *Tiurai* (meaning "July") festivities. The Bastille Day parade is a parade of the French Armed Forces. Related *Tiurai* festivities from June until August include athletic competitions, dancing, pageantry, and cultural events. The festivities do not necessarily honor the French but commemorate Polynesian warriors and culture. Dance and song competitions are popular, especially during *Heiva Taupiti*, the season of celebrations that culminates with *Tiurai*.

**Commerce.** Most stores open from 7:30 to 11:30 a.m. and from 2 to 5:30 p.m. Larger stores may stay open all day until 10 p.m. Chinese shops are often open from 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week. Smaller stores generally are closed on Sunday, although Sunday morning is the most important day at the Papeete market, which features food, crafts, and flowers. In the Tuamotus, each atoll group has a "village atoll," where people can buy basic supplies.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** French Polynesia is a territory of France and is governed by French authorities. The chief of state is France's president (currently Jacques Chirac). He is represented in French Polynesia by a French high commissioner (currently Michel Mathieu). The territory has two representatives in France's National Assembly and one in France's Senate. A locally elected 49-seat Territorial Assembly chooses a president to be head of the territorial government (currently Gaston Flosse). The voting age is 18. Territorial elections are held every five years. French Polynesians also vote in France's presidential elections.

**Economy.** The economy of French Polynesia is strongly linked to tourism, a crucial source of foreign-exchange earnings. Agriculture is important, producing copra (dried coconut meat), coconut oil, and vanilla for export and various foods for domestic consumption. Mother-of-pearl shell and shark meat are also major exports. The cultivation of black (South Sea) pearls is a growing industry, particularly in the Tuamotu Archipelago. The pearl industry accounts for 40 percent of all export earnings. The economy, once reliant on subsistence agriculture, now provides most people with a decent standard of living, although outer-islanders are more likely to be poor. Subsistence farming and fishing remain important on outer islands. The currency is the *Comptoirs Français du Pacifique franc* (XPF).

**Transportation and Communications.** Tahiti is linked to other countries by a number of airlines, and small commuter airlines provide efficient domestic service. Motorbikes and cars are the most common form of private transportation. Buses are numerous and keep fairly regular schedules. *Le truck* (a truck converted into a bus) is a popular form of local transportation on Tahiti. A strong tradition of hospitality makes tipping taxi drivers or service personnel unacceptable. Ferry services operate between some islands. Telecommunications systems are adequate for interisland and international communication. Several radio and television stations, and two

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	NA
Adjusted for women	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$5,000
Adult literacy rate	98 percent (male); 98 (female)
Infant mortality rate	9 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	73 (male); 78 (female)

daily newspapers, serve the territory.

**Education.** The French government has established primary, secondary, and vocational schools on islands that comply with French educational standards. School is compulsory and free from ages six to fourteen. Primary education lasts until age 11 and secondary until age 18. At age 14, students enter a vocational or academic track, depending on their aptitude and interests. Private schools are heavily subsidized by the government and follow a public school curriculum. Adult education programs are popular. Students from outer islands may move to Tahiti for secondary and higher education. The University of the South Pacific offers degree programs, but many students travel to France or other countries for higher education.

**Health.** The public healthcare system is heavily subsidized by France. Medical services are adequate for most needs. Two major hospitals and several private clinics are located on Tahiti, but facilities are limited on other islands. Still, throughout the territory, health conditions are generally good and improving.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- The Territorial Assembly passed legislation in 2003 that gave French Polynesia greater autonomy from France, but members of the Assembly's pro-independence opposition criticized the measures for leaving too much control of the territory in the hands of the French.
- French President Jacques Chirac visited French Polynesia in July 2003 to hold a meeting with national leaders from the region. During President Chirac's three-day stay, pro-independence protestors marched in Papeete to voice their desire to establish a sovereign federal republic, and an association of veterans marched to demand health care compensation for workers exposed to radiation at French nuclear test sites.
- French Polynesia's ruling party, *Tahoeraa Huiraatira*, maintained its majority in the Territorial Assembly following 2001 elections. President Flosse, the party's leader, was reelected to his fifth term.

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