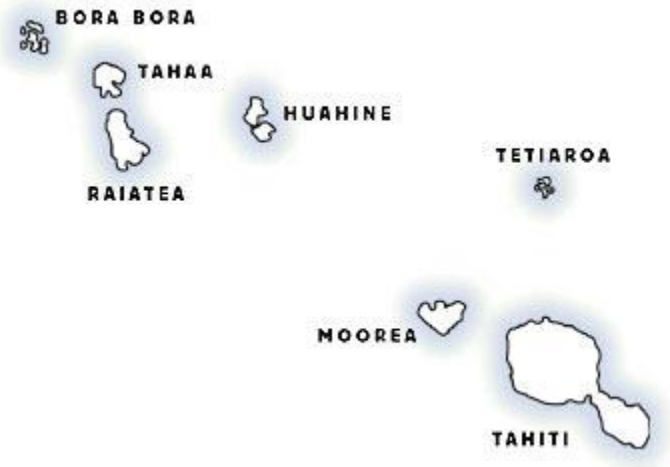
Islands of Tahiti

Overview

The islands of Tahiti are more than a mere tropical paradise, they are home to a culturally rich group of people. Today, this modern Pacific nation is a cosmopolitan blend of Polynesian heritage and French culture. Most of the Tahitians you will meet at the Polynesian Cultural Center have learned English as their third or even fourth language. French is the national language of Tahiti today but many families still speak Tahitian or another island language. Generally, students would learn English as an elective in school. While the overlay of French culture and influence is undeniable, the Tahitians still take great pride in their ancient Polynesian heritage.

Location

Tahiti is located about 2,400 southeast of Hawai'i. It takes about five hours by commercial jetliner to get there from Honolulu, or about eight hours from Los Angeles. Tahiti is situated about halfway between South America and Australia.



Geography

There are five archipelago that make up French Polynesia. These are Marquesas (Matuita), Tuamotu, Gambier (Ma'areva), Society (Totaiete), and Austral (Tuha'a Pae). Tahiti is the largest island located in the Society Islands and is where Papeete, the capital city of French Polynesia, is located.

Population

As of 2017, French Polynesia has a population of 280,000 people, 180,000 of which are located on the island of Tahiti.

History and Discovery

Tahitians had an oral language tradition like all the rest of Polynesia. Their histories are passed down through stories from one generation to the next. It is believed that the first settlers of Tahiti came from the west, from the islands of Samoa. The Tahitians in turn settled all the surrounding islands including Rarotonga or the Cook Islands, Marquesas and eventually even Hawai'i.

The first known European to make contact with Tahiti was British captain Samuel Wallace in 1767. Next was French navigator Louis Bougainville in 1768 and finally British explorer Captain James Cook in 1769. In 1789 British Captain William Bligh and his first mate Fletcher Christian arrived aboard the HMS Bounty. Throughout the next 50 years the British and French engaged in political negotiations for control of the islands in the area, with France emerging as the colonial power in 1842. It was this year that the islands of Marquesas were first annexed to France. In 1847 Queen Pomare of Tahiti accepted the protection of France; however, it wasn't until the hereditary leader, Pomare V, abdicated his throne in 1880 that France came to full power in the region. One by one each island ceded to France over the course of 60 years and in 1957 these South Pacific islands officially became known as French Polynesia.

Languages

French is the national language of French Polynesia but each archipelago has their own native language. In the Society Islands you will hear Tahitian or "Reo Tahiti." Tuamotu's most common language is called "Reo Paumotu" however, they have 7 different dialects. The islands of Marquesas have two languages: "'Eo 'Enana" and "'Eo 'Enata." Ma'areva or Gambier islands are home to the native language "Reo Ma'areva." Finally, the Austral islands or Tuha'a Pae have two languages and five dialects.

Village Life

The houses in the Polynesian Cultural Center's Tahiti Village represent traditional historical architecture, whereas almost all modern Tahitians invariably live in European style houses.

Fare Pote'e - The fare pote'e means a round house and is called so because its round-ended style of architecture was usually reserved for chiefs and nobles. The larger this type of house is, the higher the rank of the owner. The chief's furnishings included many large finely woven mats, the nohora'a or four-legged wooden seats for high ranking individuals, the turu'a or wooden headrest, and an elevated bed. Traditionally, everyone slept on the floor, which was cushioned with aretu grass and covered with mats.

Fare Heiva - Te Tahua Orira'a, the Tahitian "dance platform" originally occupied an important location in the village and was sometimes elevated for better viewing. Ancient Hawaiians had a similar practice of building what are now called "hula mounds," some of which have survived to this day. The Tahitian dance platform at the Polynesian Cultural Center is part of the fare heiva for the convenience of viewing the cultural presentation. The tradition of entertainment in Tahiti once centered on a special guild of traveling performers called the arioi who sailed on great double hulled canoes from bay to bay and island to island, performing dance, pantomime dramas and chants. They usually performed in honor of Oro, their deity of peace, agriculture and fertility.

Ori Tahiti or Tahitian dance includes four different styles of dance including Aparima, Hivinau, Pa'oa and 'Ote'a. The Tahitians at the Polynesian Cultural Center demonstrate their traditional ote'a or drumming dances, which includes the graceful yet energetic hip-shaking ori Tahiti which young and old perform throughout its islands. The women demonstrate remarkable dexterity with their hip movements, which are accented by the "more" (pronounced "More–ay") or fiber skirts. The more skilled-female dancers are able to keep their shoulders relatively still throughout the performance.

The compelling rhythms of the dance are provided by traditional to'ere or horizontal slit-gong wooden drums, and fa'atete or upright wooden drum. As you listen to the drums, notice the intricate rhythms and how they all blend to guide and inspire the dancers. The

pahu or tari parau were the most important of Tahitian percussive instruments: They were covered with sharkskin and played with drumsticks. The ancient pahu rima, which was beaten with the hands, has become a common drum in modern Tahiti. Accompanied by the vivo, or bamboo nose flutes, these instruments were originally used during sacred ceremonies or to entertain royalty. More modern Tahitian dances feature the guitar and ukulele, which have become important since their introduction by European settlers. You will note, however, that the islanders have added their own stylings and strumming to these instruments.

Fare Tautai - A Tahitian family who lived near the sea would most probably have a "fishing hut" made out of bamboo and a roof covered with bundled coconut or sugar cane leaves. The fishing hut would contain minimal furnishings, although sometimes it may have a bed; and certainly, fish traps hanging from special hooks. There would also be a bench or other types of seating, fishing poles, gourds used as containers, nets, ropes and other equipment needed to catch fish efficiently.

Tahitian fish traps were not actually used to trap fish but to store them alive until they were to be eaten. The fish were caught first, whether by line or net, and then placed inside the bamboo trap. The door was then closed and the whole trap placed in the water and kept halfway afloat using floats carved out of purau (balsa or wild hibiscus wood). Each night a fisherman would bring the nets, ropes, traps, and other equipment inside the shed for repair and safekeeping. The next morning, he was ready to start a new day of fishing. From small sheds such as this, fishermen would wait for the right time to go fishing, and while away the hours chatting with a friend, or watching over their pearl oyster crop.

Fishing for pearls and pearl farming — especially Tahitian black pearl farming — has become a very successful enterprise in Tahiti. This is especially true in the warm water lagoons of the Tuamotu archipelago where traditional pearl beds have been revitalized by modern technology and consultation with experts in the overseas pearl business such as

Japan. Pearl shells for buttons also constitutes an important export product for French Polynesia.

Fare Tutu - The "outdoor kitchen" is a partially open structure positioned so its smoke would not interfere with the main house. The fare tutu is built so that the prevailing trade winds blow towards the enclosed back, driving the smoke out the open front. In Tahitian culture, both men and women shared in the cooking chores. Food preparation took place on the table platform in the back area.

A man would typically gather the vegetables, hunt pigs and birds, fish in the deeper waters, and perform the more strenuous cooking chores. Women would help prepare the food and assist the men in making the ahima'a or earth oven. This style of oven is common throughout Polynesia, is called an ahima'a in Tahiti. Tahitians traditionally used an ahima'a once a day to prepare a mid-morning meal.

To make an ahima'a, several dozen volcanic rocks are first heated over a roaring fire set in a hole about a foot or deeper, depending on the amount of food to cook. When the rocks are glowing red, any remaining firewood is removed and the rocks are spread out. A layer of banana stump fibers, which contain a lot of moisture and pounded into a stringy mass, is placed immediately on the hot rocks. Next, food to feed the family for a day is wrapped in a variety of leaves and placed on the banana fibers. Vegetables like breadfruit, taro, umara (sweet potato), ufi (yam) and green bananas are scraped, peeled and placed on the rocks among the other food items. Then specially-woven mats made from the leaves of the wild hibiscus tree or old mats are used to seal in the heat, essentially creating a steam cooker. Very often earth or sand is spaded on top of everything to ensure the best results.

Marae - A marae is a large open area protected by low stone walls all around. This is a sacred place of ceremony where political decisions are made, dignitaries from other districts are welcomed and sacred chiefly ceremonies such as receiving tattoos, adoptions and marriages would take place.

Interesting Facts

French Polynesia’s leading economic market is tourism, after which follows pearls and mother of pearls, vanilla and copra production and fishery respectively.