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History

It was about 50,000 years ago that people first reached the Pacific islands, arriving in New Guinea from Southeast Asia via Indonesia. These people, now known as Papuans, share ancestry with Australia's first Aborigines. Moving slowly east, the Papuans were halted in the northern Solomon Islands about 25,000 years ago, due to the lack of technology and skills necessary to cross the increasingly wide stretches of open ocean. Subsequent people, collectively known as Austronesians, moved into the area from the west, mingling with the Papuans and eventually becoming the highly diverse group of people we conveniently group together as 'Melanesians'. New Guinea and the Solomons were the only inhabited islands in the Pacific for many thousands of years.

The wider seas from the Solomons to Vanuatu were finally crossed in about 1500 BC. An Austronesian people now known as the Lapita (see the boxed text, below) finally developed the technology and the skills to cross the open seas to New Caledonia. Heading east they quickly expanded through Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, where they developed the culture we now know as Polynesian.

The Melanesians of New Guinea and the Solomons mingled a little with the Lapita and followed them across the Pacific. Melanesians came to dominate New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji.

The Lapitas' Polynesian descendants 'paused' on Samoa and Tonga for a thousand years or so, until more advanced ocean vessels and skills were developed. At some time around 200 BC they crossed the longer ocean stretches to the east to the Society and Marquesas island groups (in modern French Polynesia). From there, voyaging canoes travelled southwest to Rarotonga and the southern Cook Islands, southeast to Rapa Nui (Easter

LAPITA

The ancient race of people known as the Lapita are thought to be responsible for the wide distribution of Polynesian culture and Austronesian languages in the Pacific. Coming from the Bismarck Archipelago in far-north Papua New Guinea (PNG) in around 1500 BC, they were the first to populate the islands from Vanuatu east to New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. It was in Tonga and Samoa that the Lapita developed into the people we now call Polynesians.

The Lapita had an enormous influence over a vast area of the Pacific from 1500 BC to 500 BC, where their influence can been traced through the far-flung dispersal of their unique pottery. Lapita pottery has been found in PNG, New Caledonia, in parts of Micronesia and in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Futuna.

The Lapita were highly skilled sailors and navigators, able to cross hundreds of kilometres of open sea, and trade and settlement were important to their culture. They were also agriculturists and practised husbandry of dogs, pigs and fowls. Regarded as the first cultural complex in the Pacific, they were a highly organised people who traded obsidian (volcanic glass used in tool production) from New Britain (PNG) with people up to 2500km away in Tonga and Samoa.

Today you can see Lapita artefacts in the national museums of Vanuatu (p767) and Fiji (p166), and at Sigatoka (p162), also in Fiji.

TIMELINE

50,000–25,000 years ago
People first settle the Pacific in PNG and the Solomon Islands

1500 BC
Long-distance seafaring begins in earnest in Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji and central Polynesia

Island) in AD 300, north to Hawai'i around AD 400 and southwest past Rarotonga to Aotearoa (New Zealand) in AD 900.

The myriad islands and atolls of Micronesia, north of the Solomons and New Guinea, were populated by several groups of people over an extended period. Western Micronesia was reached by Asians island-hopping through the Philippines in about 1500 BC. Melanesians moved north into central Micronesia in 1000 BC, and eastern Micronesia was settled by Polynesians spreading northwards from their base in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga in the centuries up to AD 500.

We, the Navigators and *The Voyaging Stars – Secrets of the Pacific Island Navigators,* both by meticulous researcher David Lewis, are excellent studies of traditional navigation methods, though they can be difficult books to find outside a library.

Although the predominant direction of human movement was from west to east, population pressure and the occasional religious disagreement prompted constant movement of people across the oceans. Thus there are Polynesians in Melanesia's eastern islands; although largely Melanesian, Fiji is also home to many Polynesians and Micronesians.

The settlement of the Pacific Ocean was the most remarkable feat of ocean sailing up to that time. All but the furthest-flung islands of the massive Pacific were colonised by 200 BC. It's worth comparing that accomplishment with European navigation at the time, which was restricted to coast-hugging journeys only. It was over 1000 years later that the Vikings crossed the (relatively small) Atlantic to make Europe's first cross-ocean settlement.

Melanesians embarked on regular trade routes and some war missions, but Polynesians travelled the broader stretches of open ocean (see the boxed text, opposite). Almost no Pacific islands were cut off entirely from other cultures, and the presence of the *kumara* (sweet potato) in the Pacific islands confirms that at least some journeys were made as far east as South America, probably from the Marquesas. Traditional stories also indicate exploratory journeys into Antarctic waters 'not seen by the sun'.

For further information about ancient Pacific cultures, see Arts (p55) and Religion (p54).

VOYAGING & NAVIGATION

Ancient Pacific islanders' voyages were motivated by war, trade, colonisation and the search for resources, or sometimes merely by curiosity and pride. The Tongans, known as the 'Vikings of the Pacific', ruled Samoa, Niue and eastern Fiji with an iron fist, and raided from Tuvalu to the Solomon Islands, 2700km to the west!

At the time of European contact, prodigious feats of navigation and voyaging still occurred, although not on as grand a scale as previously. The navigator-priest Tupaia, who boarded Cook's *Endeavour* in Tahiti, could name around 100 islands between the Marquesas and Fiji, and he directed Cook's search for islands west of Tahiti. For the entire circuitous journey to Java in Indonesia, Tupaia could always point in the direction of his homeland.

Canoes

The term 'canoe' *(vaka* or *va'a)* is misleading. The same word describes small dugouts used for river navigation, giant war vessels accommodating hundreds of men and 25m-long ocean-voyaging craft. Ocean-voyaging craft, either double canoes or single canoes with outriggers, carried one (or more) masts and sails of woven pandanus. James Cook and contemporary observers estimated that Pacific canoes were capable of speeds greater than their own ships; probably 150km to 250km per day, so that trips of 5000km could be comfortably achieved with available provisions.

Navigation Techniques

Initial exploratory journeys would often follow the migratory flights of birds. Once a new land had been discovered, the method of rediscovery was remembered and communicated mostly by way of which stars to follow. Fine-tuning of these directions was possible by observing the direction from which certain winds blew, the currents, wave fronts reflecting from islands and the flights of land birds.

European Theories

Many European explorers were unable to believe that a Stone-Age culture without a written language or use of the compass could have accomplished such amazing feats of navigation. Some assumed that an earlier, more advanced culture must have existed. They proposed that islanders were the barbaric survivors of this ancient empire, living on the mountain tops of the sunken continent of Mu.

Once the continent of Mu was discounted, a wide range of possible origins for Pacific islanders was considered, including India, Israel and the Americas. Others proposed that the islands had been settled quite accidentally, as fishermen were blown off course and lost at sea.

The majority of evidence, however, points towards mostly deliberate west to east migration. This conclusion rests on linguistic, genetic, anthropological and archaeological studies, vegetation patterns, computer modelling of wind and currents, and a study of oral traditions.

Modern Voyaging

The voyaging skills of today's Pacific islanders may not match that of their ancestors, but the traditional knowledge of navigational methods is still being put to everyday use. Both small inter-island trips and long-distance voyages have been used to test many theories about ocean voyaging.

Probably the most famous such voyage, that of Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki* from South America to the Tuamotus in 1947, was made in an attempt to prove the (now thoroughly discredited) theory that Polynesia was populated from South America.

Modern voyages along traditional routes have refined theories about canoe construction and navigational methods. Among such journeys, the 25m-long outrigger canoe *Tarratai* was sailed from Kiribati 2500km south to Fiji in 1976. That same year the voyage of the 20m *Hokule'a,* which used traditional navigation methods for the 4250km trip from Hawai'i to Tahiti, sparked a resurgence of interest in traditional navigation.

Other voyaging canoes include the 21m *Hawaiki Nui,* which sailed 4000km from Tahiti to Aotearoa in 1985. In 1995 *Te Au o Tonga,* captained by the former prime minister of the Cook Islands, Sir Thomas Davis (Papa Tom), sailed from Rarotonga to Tahiti, on to Hawai'i and back to Rarotonga. Part of the cargo on the last leg was less than traditional: Papa Tom's new 1200cc Harley-Davidson. The *Hokule'a* and *Te Au o Tonga,* among other great *vaka,* continue to make long voyages.

EUROPEAN EXPLORERS

Like Pacific islanders, European explorers came in search of resources (gold and spices initially), and were often driven by curiosity or national pride. However, Europeans were also inspired by one overpowering myth: the search for Terra Australis, the unknown great southern continent.

200 BC
Another wave of settlement: Polynesians spread east to the Society and Marquesas Islands (modern-day French Polynesia)

AD 300–400
The final major wave leaves the Societies and Marquesas: north to Hawai'i, southwest to the Cooks and southeast to Easter Island

1521–1605
Magellan discovers Guam, Mendaña succumbs to malaria in the Solomons, de Quirós suffers mutiny in Vanuatu

1768–79
Captain James Cook 'boldly goes', then gets killed in Hawai'i

Scientific philosophies since the time of Ptolemy predicted the presence of a huge landmass in the southern hemisphere to counter the earth's northern continents. Otherwise, it was believed, the globe would be top-heavy and fall over! Belief in this southern continent was unqualified; explorers were not asked to confirm its existence, but to chart its coasts and parley with its people. In the absence of hard facts, Terra Australis was peopled with strange heathens and magical creatures, and rumoured to be rich in gold. The biblical tale of King Solomon required the presence of vast gold mines in some unknown location. What could be a better spot than Terra Australis?

'In the absence of hard facts, Terra Australis was peopled with strange heathens and magical creatures…'

Spanish

In 1521 the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan led a Spanish expedition that discovered, at the southern tip of the Americas, an entrance to the ocean he named Mar Pacifico – the Pacific Ocean – for the calmness of its seas. With extraordinary bad luck, and lacking the island-finding skills of Pacific islanders, Magellan saw only two small, uninhabited islands until he had sailed northwest across almost the entire ocean to Guam in Micronesia.

On Guam the first contact between Pacific islanders and Europeans followed a pattern that was to become all too familiar. The Micronesian (and Polynesian) attitude was that all property was shared. Guam's islanders helped themselves to one of the expedition's small boats and Magellan retaliated – seven islanders were killed. Magellan himself was killed two months later while in the Philippines, but not before he became the first person to circumnavigate the globe (having previously visited the Philippines from the other direction).

Spaniard Don Alvaro de Mendaña y Neyra sailed west across the Pacific in search of Terra Australis in 1567. On the Solomon Islands, which he named after King Solomon's gold, conflict with the locals arose when islanders were unable to supply the resources Mendaña needed to resupply.

It took Mendaña nearly 30 years to gain approval for his disastrous second voyage during 1595. An estimated 200 islanders were killed in the Marquesas when conflict broke out; there was even more conflict with locals when they reached the Solomons, and fighting also spread to the crew. Mendaña himself died of malaria, and the expedition returned to Peru under the command of the more humane Pedro Fernández de Quirós.

Quirós led another expedition to the Pacific in 1605, discovering the Tuamotu Islands and Vanuatu.

Dutch

Jacques Le Maire and Wilhelm Schouten's 1616 search for Terra Australis introduced Europe to the Tongan islands and Futuna. Jacob Roggeveen spotted Bora Bora in the Society Islands in 1722, and Tutuila and Upolu in Samoa. Abel Tasman became the most famous Dutch explorer after charting Tasmania and the east coast of New Zealand in 1642, then sailing on to make contact with the islands of Tonga and Fiji.

1789
Fletcher Christian famously decides that enough is enough and relieves Captain Bligh of his duties

1841
Pierre Louis Marie Chanel becomes patron saint of the Pacific islands after knocking on one too many doors in Futuna

English

In 1767 Samuel Wallis – *still* searching for Terra Australis – landed on Tahiti and claimed it for England, but the greatest of the English explorers was James Cook (see the boxed text, p44).

Following the most famous of maritime mutinies, Fletcher Christian captained the *Bounty* to discover Rarotonga in the southern Cook Islands in 1789 (see the boxed text, p424).

French

The most famous French explorer, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, came upon Tahiti and claimed it for France in 1768. He went on to the Samoan islands, which he named the Navigator Islands for the skills of the canoeists sailing circles around his ship. He continued on to Vanuatu and discovered Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Bougainville's impact was greater than dots on a map, however; his accounts of the South Pacific sparked massive interest in Europe and created the myth of a southern paradise.

In 1827 Dumont d'Urville sailed the Pacific searching for his lost countryman, the comte de la Pérouse, whose boat had sunk near the Solomon Islands in 1788. D'Urville's writings of this and another journey (10 years later) were to establish the concept of the three great subdivisions of the Pacific: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.

'In 1827 Dumont d'Urville sailed the Pacific searching for his lost countryman, the comte de la Pérouse…'

MISSIONARIES

After a few largely unsuccessful Spanish Catholic forays into Micronesia during the 17th century, the first major attempt to bring Christianity to the Pacific was by English Protestants. Horrified – and inspired – by tales of cannibalism, human sacrifice, promiscuity and infanticide, the newly formed London Missionary Society (LMS) outfitted missionary outposts on Tahiti and Tonga, and in the Marquesas in 1797. These first holy crusades were no roaring success – within two years the Tongan and Marquesan missions were abandoned. The Tahitian mission did survive but its success was limited. For a decade only a handful of islanders were tempted to join the new religion.

Other Protestant groups soon joined the battle. The new players were the Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS), fresh from moderate victory in New Zealand, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), following great success in Christianising Hawai'i. The WMS and ABCFM both failed miserably in the Marquesas, but fared marginally better in Tonga.

In the 1830s French Catholic missions were established in the Marquesas and on Tahiti. Catholic missionaries were often as pleased to convert a Protestant as a heathen, and the fierce rivalry between the different denominations extended to their islander converts. Religious conflicts fitted easily into the already complex political melee of Pacific society, and local chiefs gleefully manipulated the two Christian camps for their own purposes.

Despite the slow start, missionary success grew. By the 1820s missionary influence on Tahiti was enormous. The Bible was translated into Tahitian, a Protestant work ethic was being instilled, tattooing was discouraged,

1860s–90s
'Blackbirders' devastate the populations of Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Easter Island, Vanuatu and the Solomons

1889–94
'Here he lies where he longs to be' – Robert Louis Stevenson abandons the chilly moors of Scotland for the warm delights of Samoa

CAPTAIN JAMES COOK *Tony Horwitz*

If aliens ever visit earth, they may wonder what to make of the countless obelisks, faded plaques and graffiti-covered statues of a stiff, wigged figure gazing out to sea from Alaska to Australia, from New Zealand to North Yorkshire, from Siberia to the South Pacific. James Cook (1728–79) explored more of the earth's surface than anyone in history, and it's impossible to travel the Pacific without encountering the captain's image and his controversial legacy in the lands he opened to the West.

For a man who travelled so widely, and rose to such fame, Cook came from an extremely pinched and provincial background. The son of a day labourer in rural Yorkshire, he was born in a mud cottage, had little schooling and seemed destined for farm work – and for his family's grave plot in a village churchyard. Instead, Cook went to sea as a teenager, worked his way up from coal-ship servant to naval officer, and attracted notice for his exceptional charts of Canada. But Cook remained a little-known second lieutenant until, in 1768, the Royal Navy chose him to command a daring voyage to the South Seas.

In a converted coal ship called the *Endeavour,* Cook sailed to Tahiti, then became the first European to land at New Zealand and the east coast of Australia. Though the ship almost sank after striking the Great Barrier Reef, and 40% of the crew died from disease and accidents, the *Endeavour* limped home in 1771 with eye-opening reports of curiosities including erotic Tahitian dances and, from Australia, a leaping, pouched quadruped so difficult for Europeans to classify that Cook's botanist called it an '80-pound mouse'.

On a return voyage (1772–75), Cook became the first navigator to pierce the Antarctic Circle, circling the globe near its southernmost latitude and demolishing the ancient myth that a vast, populous and fertile continent surrounded the South Pole. Cook also crisscrossed the Pacific from Easter Island to Melanesia, charting dozens of islands between. Though Maori killed and cooked 10 sailors, the captain remained strikingly sympathetic to islanders. 'Notwithstanding they are cannibals', he wrote, 'they are naturally of a good disposition'.

On Cook's final voyage (1776–79), in search of a Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific, he became the first European to visit Hawai'i, and sailed along North America's west coast from Oregon to Alaska. Forced back by Arctic pack ice, Cook returned to Hawai'i, where he was killed during a skirmish with islanders who had initially greeted him as a Polynesian god. In a single decade of discovery, Cook had filled in the map of the Pacific and, as one French navigator put it, 'left his successors with little to do but admire his exploits'.

Cook's legacy extends far beyond his Pacific charts, though some of them were so accurate that they remained in use until the 1990s. His journeys were the first true voyages of scientific discovery, aboard ships filled with trained observers: artists, astronomers, botanists – even poets. Their detailed observations helped lay the foundation for modern disciplines such as anthropology and museum science, and inspired Western writers and artists to romanticise the South Pacific as an innocent paradise. The plant and animal specimens collected by Cook's men revolutionised the West's understanding of nature, seeding the notion of biodiversity and blazing a trail for Charles Darwin's voyage on the *Beagle*.

But Cook's travels also spurred colonisation of the Pacific. Within a few decades of his death, missionaries, whalers, traders and settlers began transforming – and often devastating – island cultures. As a result, many indigenous people now revile Cook as an imperialist villain who introduced disease, dispossession and other ills to the Pacific (hence the frequent vandalising of Cook monuments). However, as islanders revive traditional crafts and practices, from tattooing to *tapa,* they have turned to the art and writing of Cook and his men as a resource for cultural renewal. For good and ill, a Yorkshire farm boy remains the single most significant figure in the shaping of the modern Pacific.

Tony Horwitz is a Pulitzer-winning reporter and nonfiction author. In researching Blue Latitudes *(also published as* Into the Blue*), Tony travelled the Pacific – 'boldly going where Captain Cook has gone before'.*

1890–1903
French postimpressionist Paul Gauguin retreats to Tahiti and the Marquesas to devote his life to art

1918–19
Spanish influenza ravages Tonga, Nauru, Fiji and Samoa

promiscuity was guarded against by nightly 'moral police' and the most 'heathen' practices such as human sacrifice were unknown. From Tahiti, Tonga and Hawai'i, Christianity spread throughout the Pacific.

The missionaries' success was due to three major factors. Clever politics played a part, particularly the conversion of influential Tongan chief Taufa'ahau and the Tahitian Pomare family. Another factor was the perceived link between European wealth and Christianity: missionaries sought to 'civilise' as well as Christianise, and islanders desired European tools and skills. Finally, the message of salvation fell on especially attentive ears because of the massive depopulation occurring through the spread of disease.

For the story of the Pacific islands' most successful missionary (in the next life, if not in this one), read the boxed text on Oceania's very own patron saint, St Pierre Chanel (p812), who copped it sweet in Futuna in 1841.

Two rather remarkable missionaries had enormous influence on the region's Christianisation: the 'plodding and laborious' John Thomas (WMS), who arrived in Tonga in 1826, and the extraordinary John Williams (LMS), who travelled between many islands from 1818 until his death in Vanuatu in 1839. Many Polynesian converts also took up missionary work themselves.

Missionaries changed the Pacific forever. While traditional culture was devastated and customs such as tattooing banned, practices such as human sacrifice and ritual warfare – ancient traditions about which it is harder to be nostalgic – were also curtailed. Missionaries shielded islanders from the excesses of some traders, and it was missionary pressure that finally put an end to the blackbirding trade (see p46). Putting Pacific languages into written form, initially in translations of the Bible, was another major contribution. While many missionaries deliberately destroyed 'heathen' Pacific artefacts and beliefs, others diligently recorded myths and oral traditions that would otherwise have been lost. A substantial portion of our knowledge of Pacific history and traditional culture comes from the work of missionary-historians.

Manoeuvrings by missionaries and islanders alike resulted in substantial political changes. Ruling dynasties in Tonga, Tahiti and Fiji all owed some of their success to missionary backing – just as missionary success owed a lot to those dynasties.

TRADE

Whaling

European whalers enthusiastically hunted in the Pacific from the late 18th century. The trade peaked in the mid-19th century, then declined rapidly as whale products were superseded by other materials. The effect on the Pacific's whale population was catastrophic, but the effect on Pacific islanders was complex. There were opportunities for lucrative trade as ships resupplied, and many Pacific islanders, as always fond of travel, took the opportunity to travel on whaling ships. Some islanders, however, were effectively kidnapped and forced to travel without consent; whalers of the Pacific were not the most gentle of men.

Call me Queequeg: the heavily tattooed harpooner of Melville's *Moby Dick* seems to be a combination of several Pacific cultures, but from the description of his tattoos, he might have hailed from the Marquesas Islands.

Bêches-de-Mer

Also known as *trepang*, sea cucumbers or sea slugs, the *bêche-de-mer* is a marine organism related to starfish and urchins. An Asian delicacy, Pacific *bêches-de-mer* were sought by early-19th-century European traders

1942–45
WWII fighting in the Solomons, PNG and Micronesia; Fijian Corporal Sefania Sukanaivalu is awarded the Victoria Cross

1947
Thor Heyerdahl (rather pointlessly) sails the balsa raft *Kon Tiki* from Peru to the Tuamotus

to exchange for Chinese tea. *Bêches-de-mer* were relatively abundant, and important trading relations were forged with islanders. For the most part the trade was mutually beneficial, with islanders trading eagerly for metal, cloth, tobacco and muskets. The trade in *bêches-de-mer* was largely nonviolent, in contrast with the sandalwood trade.

Sandalwood

They Came for Sandalwood by Dorothy Shineberg is a riveting account of a dangerous trade. Shineberg travelled widely through the Pacific to research the book.

Nineteenth-century Europeans trading with China found another Pacific resource in fragrant sandalwood, used in China for ornamental carving and cabinet-making, as well as for burning as incense. By the 1820s these traders had stripped the sandalwood forests of Hawai'i, and forests on islands to the south were sought. Extensive sandalwood forests on Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomons and New Caledonia became the focus for traders keen to satisfy the demands of the Chinese market.

On each new island, payment for sandalwood was initially low. A small piece of metal, a goat or a dog was sometimes sufficient to buy a boatload of the aromatic wood. But as the supply of slow-growing sandalwood dwindled, the price rose – islanders demanded guns, ammunition, tobacco or assistance in war as payment.

While the sandalwood trade in Fiji was fairly orderly under the supervision of local chiefs, spheres of chiefly influence in the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia were much smaller and traders had difficultly establishing lasting relationships with islanders. The sandalwood trade was the most violent of any trades in the Pacific, and the Melanesians' savage reputation in Europe was not improved. There were many attacks on ships' crews, sometimes motivated by a greed for plunder, but often these attacks were a response to previous white atrocities. Melanesians assumed that all Europeans belonged to the one kin-group, and thus were accountable for another's crimes.

The sandalwood trade was far from sustainable. Island after island was stripped of its forests, and the trade petered out in the 1860s with the removal of the last accessible stands.

BLACKBIRDING

In the late 19th century cheap labour was sought for various Pacific industries such as mines and plantations. Pacific islanders were also 'recruited' to labour in Australia, Fiji, New Caledonia, Samoa and Peru. Satisfying the demand for labour was a major commercial activity from the 1860s.

In some cases islanders were keen to sign up, seeking to share the benefits of European wealth. Often, though, islanders were tricked into boarding ships, either being deceived about the length of time for which they were contracted, or sometimes enticed aboard by sailors dressed as priests. In many cases no pretence was attempted: islanders were simply herded onto slaving ships at gunpoint.

The populations of many small, barely viable islands were devastated by blackbirders – Tokelau lost almost half its population to Peruvian slaving ships in 1863, while the Tongan island of 'Ata lost 40% of its population, and as a result is today uninhabited. People were also taken as slaves from Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Easter Island, Vanuatu and the Solomons.

1958
'Wash that man right out of my hair' – the dreadfully camp musical *South Pacific* is unleashed upon the world

1962–80
Independence: Western Samoa (1962), Nauru (1968), Fiji (1970), Tuvalu (1975), Solomons (1978), Kiribati (1979), Vanuatu (1980)

Similar recruitment practices – trickery and deceit – were common when Indian labourers were transported to Fiji in the 1870s (see p140).

Blackbirding was finally halted at the end of the 19th century, largely as the result of persistent lobbying by missionaries. Their campaigns in Britain and Australia resulted in the banning of overseas-labour recruitment to Australia (in 1904), Samoa (in 1913) and Fiji (in 1916). Some islanders were restored to their homelands, but many never returned. A sizable Melanesian population remains in Australia's Queensland, and of course there is a huge Indian population in Fiji (see p140).

'Once the people were on board they locked them up and sailed away. Two men escaped and swam back to shore, but the rest were never seen again.' Kelese Simona, from Nukulaelae (p746), recalls his father's eyewitness account of the day in 1863 that blackbirders kidnapped 70% of the island's population.

EPIDEMICS & DEPOPULATION

A population of a certain size is required for a contagious disease to establish itself. For the most part, Pacific islands lacked that population. The larger landmasses of Melanesia had (and still have) malaria, but the smaller islands of Micronesia and Polynesia knew only mild outbreaks of leprosy and filariasis (a form of elephantiasis). The squalid, populous cities of 18th- and 19th-century Europe, on the other hand, bred diseases (and resistant survivors) rather more effectively. The infection-ridden vessels of explorers, missionaries and traders brought diseases to which

HISTORICAL HOTSPOTS IN THE PACIFIC

- National museums are often the best place to find artefacts and information about the country's past. Some of the best can be found in Suva (Fiji; p166), Noumea (New Caledonia; p315), Tahiti (French Polynesia; p597) and Port Vila (Vanuatu; p767).
- Concrete remains of the Pacific's ancient past are rare but impressive. Lean your back on Tonga's massive trilithon (p703), or climb through tangled undergrowth to stone *marae* on Rarotonga (p443) or Aitutaki (p456) in the Cook Islands. But most of all, make sure you see the Pacific's most impressive sites: the ancient city of Nan Madol (p114) in Pohnpei and the famous *moai* (standing statues) of Easter Island (p86).
- The best way to find out about local stories is to spend some quality time around the kava bowl with a local historian; chew the fat in a Vanuatuan *nakamal* (kava house; p761) or track down one of Samoa's *tulafale* (well-named 'talking chiefs'; p480).
- Devotees of European explorers (p41) should visit Umatac (p229), where the Pacific (Guam) first met Europe (Magellan); Point Vénus (p596) is the site of James Cook's first base on Tahiti, and if you make it to Hawai'i, visit Kealakekua, where he met his grisly end.
- Pitcairn Island, with its tales of mutiny and murder, is a source of constant fascination. If you can't get to the island itself (p419), rent one of the myriad movies (p424) inspired by the mutiny.
- WWII history buffs will find plenty to pique their interest: divers can swim through WWII wrecks in Vanuatu (p793), the Solomons (p560) and Chuuk (Federated States of Micronesia; p124). Above the waves, see the memorials and carefully restored gun emplacements of Guam (p227) or the rusting WWII remains of Tuvalu's Nanumea Atoll (p746).
- A rather grim itinerary can be followed by tracing the Pacific's involvements in the nuclear arms race. The 1945 bombing raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were launched from Tinian (p384) in the Northern Marianas, and nuclear testing has most famously been carried out on Bikini (p281) and Moruroa (p584).

1971
Establishment of the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum)

1979–94
The US Trust Territory is dismantled; Micronesian nations sign Compacts of Free Association with the US

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the peoples of the Pacific had little or no resistance: cholera, measles, smallpox, influenza, pneumonia, scarlet fever, chickenpox, whooping cough, dysentery, venereal diseases and even the common cold all took a terrible toll on islanders.

Almost all Polynesian populations fell by at least half, while Micronesia and Melanesia's populations suffered even more. Some Micronesian islands were reduced to 10% of their previous population level, and some islands of Vanuatu dropped to just 5%. More recently, the post-WWI influenza epidemic of 1918–19 devastated Tonga (killing 8% of the population), Fiji (5%), Nauru (16%) and Samoa (where 22% of the population died within a few months).

EUROPEAN COLONIALISM

Once European traders were established in the Pacific, many began agitating for their home countries to intervene and protect their interests. Some missionaries also lobbied for colonial takeover, hoping that European law would protect islanders from the lawless traders! Gradually, and sometimes reluctantly, European powers acted by declaring protectorates and then by annexing Pacific states.

Germany was perhaps the one country that was *not* reluctant. Between 1878 and 1899 it annexed the Marshall Islands, northern Solomons, Nauru, the Marianas, Palau, the Carolines (now in the Federated States of Micronesia) and Samoa. The latter treaty ceded American Samoa to the US, joining the Phoenix Islands (now in Kiribati), which the US and Britain had claimed in 1836. After annexing French Polynesia (1840s) and New Caledonia (1853), the French lost interest for a while before claiming Wallis & Futuna (1880s) and going into partnership with Britain in Vanuatu in 1906.

Perhaps the best of the books written by British colonial servants in the Pacific is *Pattern of Islands* (1954) by the wonderful Arthur Grimble, who describes the British Empire as the 'cult of the great god Jingo' and himself as its 'pinkish' representative.

Contrary to popular opinion, Britain was a reluctant Pacific-empire builder. However, it ended up with the largest of all Pacific empires, after being forced by various lobby groups to assume responsibilities for the Phoenix Islands in 1836, then Fiji, Tokelau, the Cooks, the Gilbert & Ellice Islands (modern Kiribati and Tuvalu), the southern Solomons and Niue between 1874 and 1900, and finally Vanuatu in 1906. Between 1900 and 1925, Britain happily offloaded the Cooks, Niue and Tokelau to eager New Zealand.

WWI & WWII

WWI had little effect in the Pacific, except to exchange German colonial rulers in Micronesia, Samoa and Nauru for Japanese, New Zealand, Australian and British rule. Germany, slightly preoccupied with events in Europe at the time, didn't resist these Pacific takeovers. When the US joined the war, the German gunboat *Cormoran* was scuttled by its crew in Guam's harbour to avoid capture.

In contrast, the Pacific was a major arena of conflict during WWII. The war with Japan was fought through the Micronesian territories Japan had won from Germany in WWI, in PNG and in the Solomon Islands.

Initially Japan expanded south and southwest from its Micronesian territories almost unhindered until 1942, when they were turned back from PNG at the Battle of the Coral Sea and in the north Pacific at the

1987
The Fijian coups: Rabuka takes over government; Fiji is declared a republic and dismissed from the Commonwealth

1996
The end of nuclear testing in the Pacific: last bombs detonated at Moruroa Atoll

Battle of Midway. From 1944 the US pushed the stubbornly defending Japanese back, island by island. US bombers based in the Marianas punished Japanese cities for 10 months until 6 August 1945, when the *Enola Gay* took off from Tinian (Northern Marianas) to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Days later another was dropped on Nagasaki, and the Pacific war was over.

Sobering reminders of WWII in the Pacific include diveable shipwrecks in Vanuatu (p793) and the FSM (p124), aircraft wrecks on Tuvalu's Nanumea Atoll (p746) and Guam's memorial parks (p227).

The suffering of islanders during the Pacific war was immense: Japanese forces in Micronesia forced the transport of large numbers of islanders between various islands, seemingly without motive. People were concentrated in areas without adequate food, thousands died from hunger and thousands more were executed by the Japanese as an Allied victory became apparent. It is difficult to establish the frequency of rape of islanders by both Japanese and Allied forces, but it is undeniable that it happened.

Many Pacific islanders fought in the war, seeing action in the Pacific, Africa and Europe. Soldiers from Fiji, the Solomons, Samoa, Tonga, Palau, Pohnpei, French Polynesia and New Caledonia served in the armed forces. Their valour cemented relations with white allies.

WWII had a lasting effect on the region. Most obviously, Japan's Micronesian colonies were taken over by the US, becoming the Trust Territory of the Pacific islands. However, the war also left a legacy of more widespread and subtle effects. There was a huge improvement in roads and other infrastructure on many islands. There was also an input of money, food and other supplies that contributed towards the development of so-called 'cargo cults', whose devotees believed the goods were gifts from ancestral spirits.

The Pacific Island Report (http://pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport) is an invaluable tool for keeping up with what's happening in the Pacific islands today.

WWII also hastened the end of traditional colonialism in the Pacific, the relative equality between white and black US soldiers prompting islanders to question why they were still subservient to the British and the French. Many independence leaders were influenced at this time.

POSTWAR PACIFIC

From Samoa in 1962 through to Vanuatu in 1980, most of the Pacific island states gained independence (or partial independence) from their former colonial rulers. This was a relatively bloodless transition, with colonial masters as keen to ditch their expensive responsibilities as islanders were to gain independence. It took longer for the US to dismantle its Trust Territory of Micronesia, slowed by their desire to maintain a military presence in the region. Between 1975 and 1990, however, each of those Micronesian states (except Guam) achieved some level of independence. At the beginning of the 21st century only a handful of Pacific territories are still in the hands of the US, France, Chile and New Zealand. The UN is working with most of these to further increase their independence.

2000
Lonely Planet publishes *South Pacific* for the first time; Fiji suffers another coup

2001–05
Australia negotiates its 'Pacific Solution', imprisoning asylum seekers in PNG and Nauru

© Lonely Planet Publications

The Culture

There are as many Pacific cultures as there are islands scattered from Palau to Easter Island, each isolated enough from the other to have evolved a distinctive way of life. With so much diversity, every generalisation is paired with its own exception, and the more you try to define the Pacific, the more it wants to invite you to the kava bowl and tell you to take it easy.

The area breaks down into Polynesia (Greek for 'many islands'), the un-PC-named Melanesia ('black islands') and the oft-forgotten Micronesia ('small islands'). Many of the people of the Pacific share a common ancestry in the Lapita people (see the boxed text, p39), though from this shared history each nation has developed a unique culture.

THE PACIFIC PSYCHE

Ever since Europeans have been journeying to the Pacific, they've been describing its islands as paradise on earth. The 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau fantasised that the islands were a return to the innocence of Eden, populated by angelic beings who knew no guilt, ambition or social strictures. He dubbed these people 'noble savages' and believed their lifestyle was a panacea to the Industrial Revolution which was infecting Europe at the time. When almost a century later Rousseau's countryman Paul Gauguin returned from Tahiti and the Marquesas with images of idyllic islands and angelic women, the islands were confirmed an earthly paradise.

> 'The Pacific is a huge ocean, and the capacity of Pasifikas to do well comes from the acknowledgement that we are not from small islands; we are from the largest ocean.' Samoan poet Rev Mua Strickson-Pua, quoted in *Children of the Migration* (2004).

Ironically for people believed to be living in heaven on earth, islanders converted to Christianity in great numbers (see p54). While every other tourist brochure will tell you that the Pacific is a paradise, its denizens are far more diverse than Rousseau's escapist fantasies suggested, and more complex than the simple faces Gauguin depicted. For a look at the individual societies read the Culture section for each country.

Contrary to Rousseau's idea of a simple life free from rules, most Pacific islands share the common notion of *tapu* (or taboo, as it became pronounced in English), which holds certain objects or practices as sacred. It remains one of the common beliefs passed on by the Lapita people who originally settled the islands, though it is interpreted differently from country to country. You only need to see how seriously some islanders observe the Sabbath to lose your ideas about a carefree people.

Melanesian communities were generally small – less than a few hundred people – with a 'bigman' as ruler. Hereditary factors were important in selecting a Melanesian bigman, but the individual's ambition and skills in politics and war were equally important. Power was hereditary on the male side only in some Polynesian societies, with the most senior male serving as *ariki, ari'i* or *ali'i* (chief) and with subchiefs and commoners beneath them, and it was strictly hierarchical in the islands of Hawai'i, Tonga and Tahiti. Unsurprisingly, after the arrival of Europeans these societies became single-ruler 'countries', which soon resembled traditional monarchies. In egalitarian Samoa, *matai* (chiefs) were selected on the grounds of political nous and ability rather than lines of descent. The power of chiefs and monarchies have now waned, but Tonga retains its royal lineage and Samoa's chiefs are exclusively eligible for election to parliament.

TOP WEBSITES

- www.abc.net.au/arts/artok – an excellent backgrounder in Pacific art and culture, though the site suffers from not being updated on a regular basis
- www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/world/pacific/islands/islands.html – this excellent site has heaps of art objects and a searchable database
- www.tautaipacific.com – a NZ-based trust that supports modern Pacific artists, founded by Samoan Fatu Feu'u

The central role of reciprocity in Melanesian culture has created a reputation for generosity and friendliness. In the past, aid in the form of food or labour would be given out of a sense of duty and with the expectation of the favour being returned in the future. Trade was a basis of the culture and the relationships involved in exchange rituals, whether between individuals or clans, were very complex. Today most Melanesians continue to operate on this loose sense of karma, though the methods of exchange have been made more simple by the introduction of currency.

Family is key to islanders' perceptions of themselves, even when migrating to other countries. In some parts of Melanesia languages evolved around family groups, with common languages being spoken by a larger group. Ancestor worship took this reverence of kin to a spiritual level and many Pacific islanders still believe strongly in the family unit, often sending money or gifts home to older parents when they migrate.

Similarly, Polynesians have a strong respect for the family. Their tribal groups were based on extended family and the introduction of Christianity the importance of these ties for many Polynesians. Today many small businesses are run by families with extended families serving as additional employees or affiliates; don't be surprised if a guesthouse owner's cousin offers tours or other complementary services.

Another common conception of the Pacific is that it is home to a peaceful agrarian life of subsistence farming. In many countries this seems true, with almost 87% of Solomon Islanders leading rural lives, but in Fiji just over half of its citizens live in rural areas, with the larger urban areas attracting people from outer islands. Add to the mix nations like Nauru and Tuvalu, where environmental conditions are making farming increasingly difficult, and the rural image is less than universal. While many Melanesians continue to use traditional methods of fishing or agriculture, some islands are striking it rich; for example, Tuvalu by selling its .tv Internet domain name and Vanuatu by continuing to be one the world's sunnier tax havens.

> The days of receiving Cook Islands postcards from your accountant may be history thanks to the newly established Pacific Anti-Money Laundering Program (PALP). The US Government has thrown in US$1.5 million to the organisation to clean up money laundering in the Pacific that is costing Americans billions.

LIFESTYLE

The family is a vital element of islander society, reflecting the traditional clan basis of many Pacific communities. You can expect to be asked about your own family on numerous occasions, and some visiting couples become annoyed by the ubiquitous question: 'When are you going to have children?' Raising children is a shared activity in many countries, with children often invited to join in communal activities, and disciplining by other parents is not uncommon.

Many islanders are seeing their traditions challenged by globalisation as they become more urbanised. The struggle between *kastom* (custom) and capitalism continues in places like Guam where textile sweatshops have been introduced at the cost of agriculture. Pacific islanders have a troubled relationship with the minimum wage as many fear that increases in the weekly pay packet will scare off business and result in

more unemployment. In 2005 the minimum wage of tuna workers in American Samoa, for example, was increased to US$3.70 per hour, creating fears that tuna canneries would relocate to Mexico. Other professions in American Samoa have a significantly lower minimum wage, and in some Pacific nations the minimum wage is as low as US$2 (Marshall Islands). In contrast the US minimum wage is US$5.15 per hour, while in Australia it's over US$9.

The position of women in the Pacific is improving, though it can still be disturbing to female travellers. Female visitors may encounter everyday sexism such as being leered at while swimming, but for Pacific women the effects are more far-reaching. They are less likely to be employed and are typically poorer paid; in fact, some studies estimate that less than a third of the female populations of Fiji, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu work outside of the home.

Not all power in the Pacific belongs to men. In the Marshall Islands tribe structures are matrilineal (based on who your mother is) and land has always been communally owned. Disappointingly, in February 2006 laws were debated to make land ownership tied to men only.

A darker side of gender relations is that Melanesia is plagued by domestic violence. Recent studies in Fiji reported that four out of five women were abused in their own home, but less than three-quarters of these women went to the police. A pan-Pacific effort to reduce domestic violence has been led by various NGOs and there are some local success stories, with the Fijian government discussing the introduction of the Domestic Violence Act in 2005 to create tougher penalties and make the reporting of violence easier.

Attitudes to homosexuality in the Pacific vary considerably, and in some parts of the region the practice is technically illegal (see the Directory, p829). In more conservative areas religious leaders work themselves into a lather about it, as witnessed in Fiji when 3000 Methodists took to the streets protesting 'ungodly acts' in 2005.

Elsewhere attitudes are more enlightened. Tahitian *mahu* (men who act like women; see the boxed text, p585), for example, are respected within their culture and are openly gay. Similarly, in Tonga the 'third-gendered' *fakaleiti* can be bisexual and their cross-dressing skills are celebrated in the Miss Galaxy Pageant (see p690). Their equivalent in Samoa are called *fa'afafine*.

POPULATION

The population of the South Pacific islands is around 1.9 million (1.4 million people in Melanesia and 500,000 in Polynesia). Increasingly, populations are becoming coastal, urbanised and often focused on a main island.

The Pacific islands have always experienced diaspora, with more than 15% of Pacific islanders living in other countries around the Pacific rim, particularly New Zealand (NZ) (210,000), mainland US (154,000) and Australia (65,000). During the 1960s NZ became such a heavenly place to migrate to that it was known as Godzone and today one in 16 Kiwis is actually an islander.

Islanders living abroad maintain their community, culture and language, particularly by making waves in the arts (see p55).

SPORT

Sport vies with religion for importance throughout the Pacific islands, and on islands such as Fiji and Samoa prowess on the rugby field often translates into status or political power. Football of several varieties is played throughout the islands during winter but it is rugby union that is most popular, with teams from Tonga, Fiji and Samoa competing in the fiercely competitive Pacific Tri-Nations. In 2005 this competition determined which team would play in the Rugby World Cup, with the lowest of the three playing against the Pacific's other rugby-obsessed countries: Vanuatu, Tahiti, Niue and the Cook and Solomon Islands.

TIPS ON MEETING LOCALS

Want to get chatting with the locals? A good conversation starter is often sports such as rugby or netball: 'Can Fiji/Samoa/Tonga knock over the Kiwis at the next Commonwealth Games?' You should avoid politics or world affairs as attitudes can vary from place to place. Given that many islanders travel around the world, they may want to talk about where you're from and they're almost guaranteed to have a relative who moved to Auckland, Sydney or Wisconsin.

Observe these simple rules when visiting traditional villages:

- Remove your shoes when entering a home
- Sit cross-legged on the floor, rather than with your feet pointing out
- Avoid entering a house during prayers
- Avoid walking between two people in conversation
- Try to remain on a lower level than a chief to show respect

For more information on responsible travel, see p32.

American football holds sway in American Samoa, with players like Tui Alailefaleula, Toniu Fonoti and Joe Salave'a all playing in the US-based National Football League (NFL). More obscure is the popularity of Australian Rules football in Nauru, where it has been played since the 1930s; today the Chiefs, the national team, can hold their own in the International Cup.

In villages across the Pacific, Saturday is the day for inter-village (and sometimes inter-island) netball, with games focused in the winter season, though they can be played year-round. There's strong grass-roots support in Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga, Niue and the Solomon and Cook Islands, and the countries often fight it out in Olympic or Commonwealth Games. Traditional rivals Fiji and Samoa are rated among the top 10 teams in the world, with Fiji slated to host the 2007 World Netball Championships. While netball provides an important way for women to keep up contact with other villages, it is also becoming popular among men, even in macho Samoa.

The tiny nation of Fiji has 80,000 registered rugby players from its total population of 950,000 – almost 12%.

One of the region's many colonial legacies is a summer game of cricket; it's most popular in Fiji and the Cook Islands, though you'll also hear the cracking of willow in Tonga. In Samoa there's a pitch in almost every village but it's usually used for the local game, *kirikiti,* which has a lot in common with cricket but throws in an extra bowler and commonly features singing and dancing from the batting team; see the boxed text, p481. Tokelau's brand of cricket, *kilikiti,* uses a three-sided bat and has teams that include most of the village. In Tonga, *lanita* (a bat and ball game) is another variation on traditional cricket.

Not surprisingly, given the islands' shared maritime history, canoeing is another sport common to most Pacific nations. The sport is a great source of national pride at events such as the annual Hawaiki Nui va'a (canoe) race in French Polynesia and the South Pacific Games. Set to be held in Samoa in 2007 and New Caledonia in 2011, the South Pacific Games is a multisport event that showcases the region's best athletes. On a smaller scale, the Micronesian Games (last held in the Northern Marianas in 2006) bring out the competitive streak in the smaller islands.

RELIGION

Before the Europeans arrived, ancestor worship and magic were common beliefs in Melanesia, while in Polynesia a variety of gods were worshipped.

Southwestern Melanesia left the Christian fold to join cargo cults when US troops introduced material goods during WWII. The Melanesians believed that the goods were gifts from ancestral spirits.

Melanesia's ancestor worship and sorcery were essential to every aspect of daily life, with spells cast for success in war, fishing and health. Head-hunting and cannibalism were practised as sacred rituals as late as the 1950s, and in the Solomons and Vanuatu *kastom* continues to preserve the sacredness of traditions which have remained the same for centuries and which it is forbidden to question.

Across Polynesia, religious beliefs were remarkably similar because of the islands' common ancestry. The Polynesian pantheon was ruled by Tangaroa (Tangaloa or Ta'aroa) and included several lesser gods who divvied up the duties for the seas, forests, war, crops and other important aspects of life. While there were many commonalities within Polynesia, each myth had a different interpretation or elaboration (see the boxed text, below).

Existing as a separate class alongside Polynesian chiefs, and often sharing their power, the priests known as *tohunga (tohu'a* or *kahuna)* were the keepers of Polynesian religion. As well as having divine knowledge such as creation myths or rituals, these priests were also interpreters of the gods' wills for the village. They could act as vital checks to ambitious chiefs or form an alliance of considerable political power by joining with them.

Christianity arrived in various forms in the early 19th century, and the race to convert the Pacific was on. Catholics began their proselytising in the Marianas while Protestants converted the Marshalls, with the two faiths meeting somewhere near Chuuk and Nauru; much of Micronesia is influenced by these two religions. Elsewhere in the Pacific, the Mormon Church met with a degree of success due to the stress placed on family values, including the ability to baptise ancestors retrospectively.

Traditional beliefs were incorporated, but overall Christianity has come to dominate spiritual life in the Pacific today. The popularity of church singing in both Micronesia and Polynesia is testament to the missionaries' early efforts. Only Fiji, with its large Hindu and Muslim Indo-Fijian population, has significant numbers of non-Christians, though there is some tension between the two groups (see p140).

MAUI'S FISH *Errol Hunt*

A legend common to many Pacific cultures features the demigod Maui – a trickster, fool, hero, Polynesian Prometheus and first-rate fisherman. In this traditional tale, Maui is said to have fished one or more of the islands in the group up out of the ocean depths, but each island has its variations on the story.

In Tokelau Maui hauled up each of the three coral atolls in that group; while fishing up Rakahanga in the Cooks he baited his hook with coconuts and leaves; he used a fish-hook fashioned from the jawbone of his grandmother in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and baited it with blood from his own nose; and on various islands of French Polynesia his bait was either his own ear or sacred crimson feathers. However the hook was baited, it caught onto the largest fish ever seen.

Maui's struggles to land his leviathan were aided by various magical chants and spells – and his prize was a fish so large that it formed the island of Rakahanga or Tongatapu, or whichever island is appropriate to the teller of the tale.

Maui's other contributions to humanity included stealing fire from the gods, slowing the path of the sun and creating the first dog. One of his major appeals to Polynesian society seems to be the use of trickery to defeat force. No Hollywood-style hero, Maui is fondly remembered as being particularly ugly.

ARTS

Architecture

Traditional architecture throughout the Pacific had to adapt to very different conditions and would often need to be rebuilt after storms or war. Traditional Samoan *fale* (houses) are constructed without walls, but with woven blinds that can be lowered for harsher weather, while Fijian *bure* have walls and roofs of reeds or woven palms. Modern building materials are used today, with only large ceremonial buildings being constructed in the traditional fashion.

In Polynesia the *marae* (or *malae*) was the village meeting point and was open to both men and women. Villages may have several *marae* dedicated to different gods or religious practices. In western Polynesia, *marae* were simply village greens, possibly walled off with matting, while in the east they became elaborate structures. In Easter Island, the Societies, Australs and Marquesas *marae* were impressive open-air, paved temples with altars, carved-stone seating, platforms and walls, though only ruins and petroglyphs remain. In the Marquesas the *me'ae* were constructed from basalt blocks and were venues for religious acts of sacrifice and cannibalism.

Men's houses are still widespread throughout Melanesia and are often a village's dominant building. Their design symbolises the female and fecundity, with intricate carvings, towering facades and detailed interiors. They often employ complex joinery to create sturdy structures without the benefit of a single nail or screw. Throughout Melanesia secret councils of men continue to convene in these houses to practise rituals and produce traditional crafts.

'Throughout Melanesia secret councils of men continue to convene…to practise rituals and produce traditional crafts'

In terms of modern architecture one of the highlights is undeniably New Caledonia's Tjibaou Culture Centre (see p315), which draws on traditional village architecture and mythology. Despite being designed by an Italian architect, this truly distinctive building uses timbers and styles which look to the region's past. Another thoroughly modern architectural feat is reputedly the largest K-mart in the world in Guam, a nod to the new lifestyle many Pacific islanders are embracing.

Cinema & TV

The Pacific has always fascinated film-makers, though many from the mainstream see it as an attractive backdrop and only superficially explore its culture. Hollywood's take on James Michener's novels *Return to Paradise* (1953) and *South Pacific* (1958) have plenty of postcard images, even if the former was shot in Samoa while the latter was filmed in Hawai'i, Malaysia and, ahem, Spain. The original *Blue Lagoon* (1979) and the Brooke Shields remake both feature the Yasawa Islands, while the Tom Hanks vehicle *Cast Away* (2001) was shot on location in Fiji.

But some directors have probed beneath the postcard veneer and shown the world the real Pacific. The pioneering director Dennis O'Rourke filmed political documentaries such as *Yap – How Did You Know We Would Like TV* (1980), which records the arrival of television on the small island, and *Half Life* (1985), a testimony to the nuclear chill that the Cold War cast over the Pacific. Continuing this tradition is the Annual International Oceania Documentary Film Festival, held annually in Pape'ete's cultural centre, which features several films made by Pacific islanders. In 2005 films included *The New Oceania* (2005), retelling the life of Samoan writer Albert Wendt, and *The Disappearing Tuvalu* (2005), documenting the impact of global warming on the small island nation. For a range of must-see movies with a Pacific island theme, see p31.

The resurgence of Pacific islander actors who are making names for themselves in NZ has led to the phenomenon of Polywood. The current pinnacle of this success would have to be the animated TV series *Bro'town,* a politically incorrect look at the life of Samoan boys growing up in South Auckland. Made by a troupe of Samoans and Nuieans calling themselves the Naked Samoans, the series has enjoyed considerable success in NZ and Fiji, with pirate DVDs doing a roaring trade elsewhere in the Pacific. Several of the Naked Samoans appear in the feature film *Sione's Wedding* (2006) and in *Children of the Migration* (2004), which have different takes on Pacific islanders in NZ. In the US, Fijian Vilsoni Hereniko attempted to show the real Pacific to Hollywood with his feature *Pear Ta Ma 'on Maf* (*The Land Has Eyes*; 2005).

French reality-TV show *Koh Lanta* (2004) famously shot a series on New Caledonia's Île des Pins, with the main object not to 'survive' but to work together to find a winner.

But for many visitors the Pacific is the land of the *Survivor* TV series, which has seen several series made in the region: *Survivor Marquesas* (2002), *Survivor Vanuatu – Islands of Fire* (2004) and *Survivor Palau* (2005). While it may not be encouraging greater understanding of the Pacific, the show was recently responsible for a 40% increase in tourists to Palau after New York Fire Department Lieutenant Tom Westman won the reality-TV show.

Literature

The distinctive writing culture of the Pacific remains healthy despite problems of distance and lack of publisher interest. Writers such as the influential Samoan Albert Wendt have found success in NZ and based themselves there. Other Pacific writers were born in NZ but have drawn on their Pacific heritage in their work. Tusiata Avia's first book of poetry, *Wild Dog Under My Skirt*, takes a humorous look at her Samoan roots, while the Samoan novelist Sia Fiegel received such praise for her debut title *Where We Once Belonged* that she has become the first lady of Pacific literature and regularly tours her work throughout Australia, Europe and the US.

Much like NZ, Hawai'i is another powerhouse of Pacific literature, with small presses like Tin Fish Press (www.tinfishpress.com) publishing and championing Pacific writers. One international success story is Fijian Vilsoni Hereniko, a playwright who immigrated to Hawai'i and has begun making feature films about the Pacific, including *Pear Ta Ma 'on Maf (The Land Has Eyes)*. The University of Hawai'i Press has always been an excellent supporter of Pacific writers.

Of course, Europeans have been scribbling about the Pacific for centuries, from Jack London to James Michener and Paul Theroux. Some authors settled in the Pacific paradise: Robert Louis Stevenson relocated to Samoa, while Herman Melville based his *Typee* on four months' desertion from a whaling boat on the Marquesas Islands. Other authors just breezed though, including Joseph Conrad who used his merchant naval career as research for *Victory*.

Music & Dance

Diversity is the byword for Pacific music, with enough variety to put the wind up any stereotyped grass-skirt preconceptions you might have had. Group dancing is a part of many rituals across the islands, and with the arrival of Christianity, church singing became popular with many islanders.

Siva, the traditional Samoan dance, has a Hawaiian feel with slow hand movements which often relate a narrative. Fijian *meke* act as melodic oral histories, telling the stories of battle, appointments of chiefs or gossip, with spears and fans as props. On the tiny Micronesian island of Yap, stick dancing uses bamboo poles to beat a rhythm in a dynamic display, though the Yapese have equally impressive sitting dances. In the Cook Islands the rhythmic *hura* dance resembles the Hawaiian hula and is rivalled only by the Tahitian *tamure* as the most seductive dance of the Pacific.

Contemporary music often draws on traditional sound, as you can hear in the tunes of the Tokelauan band Te Vaka or Fiji's acoustic guitar group Somai Serenaders, who play *sigi drigi* (sitting and drinking) usually surrounding a kava bowl. Chuukese musician Dano Benian records traditional and original music in his tiny Pohnpei studio (www.unisound.fm).

Last Voices from Heaven (www.sivapacifica.com) was a project to record the unique music of Melanesia, taking in Vanuatu and the Solomons. The resulting two albums can be sampled at this website that has an eye for people and traditions and an ear for distinctive music.

Other musicians have moved away from their homelands to find success in NZ, including NZ *Idol* winners Rosita Vai (born in Samoa) and Tongan Ben Lummis. The NZ music scene has benefited from Pacific migration to such a degree that NZ-based band Nesian Mystic coined the term Polysaturated as an album title that could describe NZ's recording industry. Many of NZ's top hip-hop artists, including Che Fu and Scribe, have Samoan heritage, while others such as NZ-based Samoan King Kapisi have enjoyed worldwide success. In the US Samoan-descended Boo-Yaa TRIBE continues to release island-inspired music like 2006's *Angry Samoans*.

TOP READS

- *Where We Once Belonged* (Sia Fiegel) – scoring the Commonwealth Prize for Best Novel, this rich evocation of a Samoan girl's rite of passage expertly meanders through several stories.
- *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (Albert Wendt) – by another Samoan writer, this three-generation epic is an insight into the *'aiga* (family).
- *Tales of the Tikongs* (Epeli Hau'Ofa) – a cheeky romp on a fictional island that pokes fun at politics and love, and has been hailed as the South Pacific *Under Milkwood*.
- *Treasure Islands* (Pamela Stephenson) – to get over her midlife crisis the gifted comedian-turned-psychologist buys a 112ft clipper and decides to retrace Fanny and Robert Louis Stevenson's trip through the Pacific.
- *My Samoan Chief* (Fay G Calkins) – an American woman marries a Samoan exchange student and returns to live with him in the Pacific in a classic cross-cultural romance.

For other Pacific-oriented titles, see p30.

Tapa

No art form is as characteristic of the Pacific as the beating of mulberry bark to create the fibrous cloth tapa. Whether it's called *siapo* in Samoa, *mahute* on Easter Island or *masi* in Fiji, this is much more than an everyday fabric used to make clothing, baskets or mats. Fijian *masi* is essential to almost every stage of life: newborn babies are swaddled in it, coffins are covered with it and brides' mothers covet top pieces for their girls' wedding garb. In Tahiti it was made in huge sheets 3m wide and hundreds of metres in length, and signified the power of a chief. Great storehouses were built for a chief's tapa, and even in death tapa would be wrapped around a chief's mausoleum to signify his power in the next life. Tonga's Queen Salote honoured the making of tapa so highly that she once observed 'Our history is written in our mats'.

When making tapa the custom was to strip the bark from the mulberry (or sometimes the breadfruit) tree then beat it into sheets on a specialised anvil. The thin sheets would then be glued together using a natural

substance such as manioc root. In some communities it was believed that tapa was devalued if patterns were applied, and the more culturally valued forms were fine, simple and undecorated. In Fiji the cloth was smoked over a sugar-cane fire to produce a tan colour.

The real value of tapa was based on the ritual surrounding its creation and the community that produced it, for tapa was more than an object. It was exclusively produced by women in a communal ritual that revealed the strength of a tribe more powerfully than battle. Throughout Melanesia and Polynesia it served as a diplomatic tool; when given to another tribal group it placed the group in debt to the giver, and the receiver would have to honour this debt. Far from being a simple financial exchange, the giving of tapa established an inviolable moral agreement that was sealed by ancestral spirits and gods. To break the relationship of receiving tapa meant that ancestors would be defiled and gods could become vengeful. Some tapa objects were given more value than others in these exchanges, with baskets and mats holding particular significance.

Used in tapa across the Pacific, paper mulberry trees *(Broussonetia papyrifera)* were one of the first imports into the region, and are believed to have been brought from China as early as 600 BC .

In the 19th century European visitors to the Pacific collected little tapa, perhaps dismissing it as 'women's craft' and failing to appreciate its simplicity. With the arrival of calico and accompanying European values, the making of tapa declined. Tapa's legacy remains on several islands, though it is not made in the great quantities it once was. In Fiji the island of Vatuelele is still renowned for its *masi,* while modern designers are inspired by the traditional art form; for example, former Miss Cook Islands Ellena Tavioni uses block-printing patterns that are inspired by tapa decoration on her swimwear and clothing which is exported to the US, UK and Europe.

Tattoos

The journals of European explorers such as Joseph Banks and Captain Cook are full of references to tattoos *(tatau)*. Pacific islanders of both sexes were tattooed from the age of 14 to mark the onset of puberty and arrival into adulthood, and later to signify status within their tribal groups.

The apotheosis of the art was on the flesh of Marquesan warriors who 'wore' a full-body armour of toughened tattoos, including on their eyelids and tongues. In Tahiti, Samoa and Tonga tattoos were elaborate designs worn on the buttocks and hips, the natural pigments burrowed under the skin with tools of bone or shell. In Melanesia scarring of the body was a popular alternative to tattooing, although tattoos also bestowed status.

While tattoos became popular with passing European seamen in the 19th century (even Joseph Banks came home with one as a souvenir), Christian missionaries began to discourage tattooing as they believed it had satanic associations. Fijian tattooing (with its strong links to sexuality) became virtually extinct, and in more remote areas like Palau it survived until the Japanese invasion.

Samoan *tofuga* (tattooists) remain strongly traditional (see the boxed text, p483) and in Tahiti tattoos are a powerful link to precolonial cultures. The tattoo revival has seen full arm and leg designs becoming popular and even the full-body patterns are en vogue, particularly amongst Tahiti's traditional dancers. Tongans' tatatau (tattoos) were thought to be almost extinct, until a revival in 2003 by Samoan artist Su'a Sulu'ape Petelo.

Sculpture & Carving

Whether in wood, stone, coral or bone, sculpture is a universal form of expression across the Pacific. Given the abundance of ocean and the isolation of several atolls, the carving of war canoes was easily the most

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common form of sculpture. A canoe's prow acted as an ambassador for many journeying islanders, the stylised front of the vessel clearly revealing the passengers' spiritual beliefs to those on land. On war canoes the depiction of gods of battle and death would have explicitly declared the intentions of visitors, giving them the psychological advantage of fear. In the Marquesas wooden carvings on the prow of a *tiki vaka* (canoe) depicted ancestors to protect against the dangers of the sea. Other objects, such as bailers, paddles and splash guards, were inlaid with symbolic motifs to act as protection or to bring prosperity in fishing or conflict.

Tattoos became de rigueur among European aristocracy in the 18th and 19th centuries. English and Norwegian kings, Russian Tsars and Bourbons of France wore Pacific-inspired tattoos under their regal robes.

Weapons and objects of war were crafted not only as martial tools but with considerable aesthetic and cultural value. Marquesan *u'u* (war clubs) are still prized by collectors for the fine-relief carvings of war gods that are depicted on two sides of the hardwood weapons. Kiribati warriors were notoriously well armoured with full-body suits woven from vegetable fibres and human hair, while wielding swords of sharks' teeth. In Polynesia woven or wooden shields often depicted protection deities, though Tongan nobles fought with whalebone shields that offered excellent protection.

One of the more popular and most misunderstood artworks were the masks and headgear that were made across the region. Most masks were never meant to be worn but were portrait-like depictions of a human face. Sometimes they were created to be destroyed in funeral pyres, or were preserved for hundreds of years and used in ongoing rituals. Other effigies and masks were built for long-dead ancestors to inhabit and watch over the clan, being given pride of place in a home or temple with much *tapu* associated with them.

In the Solomons headhunting created other ritual artefacts, with skulls used in consecration ceremonies or to mourn a chief's passing. Vanuatu was famous for its over-modelling of skulls, with clay, fibres or other materials being added to the bones to create elaborate effigies with eyes, teeth and hair, sometimes including earrings or other ornamentation. The crafting of these kinds of artefacts was the secret business of men's councils, particularly in Melanesia.

The most recognisable icons of Pacific art are the enormous *moai* which look stoically over Easter Island (see the boxed text, p86). *Moai* are similar to other eastern Polynesian statues, particularly the large stone *tiki* of the Marquesas and Tuamotu Islands. Tongans and Fijians crafted their figures from the bones and teeth of whales, which have a deep orange colour if well maintained. Tongan noblewomen wore small necklaces of whale ivory with designs that resemble Maori *tiki*.

Many wooden sculptures of the Pacific did not survive, either being burnt by missionaries as idols or looted by souvenir-hunting Europeans. Many examples of the Pacific's most impressive artworks are held in North American or European museums, such as the Marquesas collection at New York's Museum of Metropolitan Art or the pan-Pacific holdings of the British Museum.

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Environment

THE LAND

The French explorer Dumont d'Urville conveniently divided the Pacific into three major subdivisions, largely along racial and cultural grounds: Melanesia (Greek for the 'black islands'), composed of New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji; Micronesia (the 'small islands'), the atolls and small islands north and northeast of New Guinea and the Solomons; and Polynesia ('many islands'), the huge triangle of islands bounded by Hawai'i, Easter Island and New Zealand (NZ). Although d'Urville's divisions were somewhat artificial, they continue to form a useful partitioning of the Pacific today.

Three main island types occur in the Pacific: continental, high and low. Large continental islands exist only in Melanesia (and NZ). Of the smaller islands, the 'high' ones are usually the peaks of volcanoes, whether extinct or active, while 'low' islands are generally formed by coral growth on sinking submarine volcanoes (see p734 and the boxed text, p63).

Geology

An understanding of Pacific geography is helped by some basic theory, so put your pencils down and pay attention please; there will be a test at the end.

The earth's surface is composed of seven large tectonic plates and several smaller ones, all of which 'float' on the planet's molten mantle. The floor of the Pacific Ocean is largely composed of one enormous plate (helpfully called the Pacific plate). The much smaller Nazca plate forms the Pacific's southeastern corner.

At 165.3 million sq km, the Pacific Ocean covers a third of the world's total surface. The thousands of islands of the Pacific, however, have a total land area of less than 1.3 million sq km – 85% of which is in the relatively large islands of New Guinea, New Zealand and Hawai'i.

The boundary between these two plates is an 8000km line of submarine volcanoes called a 'constructive fault', running roughly north–south at the longitude of Easter Island. Basalt ejected from these volcanoes adds to the two plates and pushes them apart at a leisurely 17cm per year. The Pacific plate moves northwest, while the Nazca plate moves southeast.

Where the Pacific's plates meet neighbouring plates, a 'destructive fault' forms: the oceanic plates are forced hundreds of kilometres down into the earth's molten magma and deep trenches are formed along the seams. (The world's deepest is the Mariana Trench in Micronesia.) Molten, mineral-rich material is released from the diving plate and rises to form lines of volcanoes such as the Mariana archipelago, or the long island chain that stretches from NZ to Tonga and Samoa, then northwest through Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomons.

A glance at a map of the Pacific reveals several parallel island chains. These are 'hot spot' volcano chains. The volcanoes form where hot spots exist in the earth's mantle; then, as the ocean floor moves away to the northwest (at 17cm per year, remember), the volcanoes become extinct, often sinking beneath the sea. In the Pacific's hot-spot island chains, the youngest, still-active volcanoes are always in the southeast and the older, extinct submarine mountains or coral atolls are in the northwest. The Australs in French Polynesia are classic examples of hot-spot island chains.

The seismic activity of the area is also manifested in earthquakes, such as the one that hit Guam in 1993, and tsunamis, huge walls of water propelled by underwater earthquakes. Tsunamis can do massive damage to low-lying islands and coastal towns: 3000 people were killed by the tsunami that hit Aitape, Papua New Guinea (PNG), in 1998.

CLIMATE

The tropical Pacific islands are generally humid, with warm and uniform air temperatures throughout the year (21°C to 28°C); see p28 for more information on climate and the division of the year into dry and wet seasons.

Most Pacific islands are well watered, but some drier regions can experience long droughts. Coral atolls lack rivers or streams and have little ground water, and so are particularly vulnerable to droughts.

Outside of Hawai'i, the Pacific's most accessible active volcano can be seen in Vanuatu: Mt Yasur (p781). You'll also see evidence of recent eruptions in the lava flows of Savai'i, Samoa (p506).

In the tropics, air flowing towards the equator is deflected west by the earth's rotation. Called the trade winds, these winds blow from the southeast in the southern hemisphere and from the northeast in the northern hemisphere. The climate of the islands that face these cool, rain-carrying trade winds changes from one side of the island to the other: compare the incessant rains of Suva with the relatively arid Nadi. About Christmas time each year the prevailing easterlies of the trade winds weaken, then reverse for a time and blow from the west.

Tropical Cyclones

Tropical cyclones are massive systems of winds rotating around a centre of low atmospheric pressure. The resulting torrential rains, high waves and winds, which can reach as high as 200km/h, present a hazard to shipping and can cause extensive damage to crops and buildings.

Cyclones can occur at any time but are most common during the wet season. In general, only the west Pacific experiences cyclones; however, patterns change with El Niño and La Niña events, and may be affected by global warming.

El Niño

The prevailing easterly trade winds tend to send warmer surface water towards the western Pacific, resulting in more rainfall in that region (Melanesia, Australia and NZ) than in the east.

A matter of terminology: cyclones are called hurricanes in the Atlantic and typhoons in the western Pacific.

An El Niño (more correctly 'El Niño Southern Oscillation', or ENSO) event occurs when the annual Christmas-period reversal in wind direction combines with high air pressure in the western Pacific and low air pressure in the east. The warm surface water is then blown back towards the eastern Pacific, carrying rain along with it: western Pacific countries experience droughts at this time, while eastern islands suffer unusually heavy rains or cyclones.

Although El Niño ('the Boy' or 'the Christ Child') develops in the Pacific, its effects on weather are felt worldwide. An El Niño usually lasts for about a year, and recurs irregularly every four or five years. Although only recently understood, El Niño is no recent development. Evidence shows that El Niños have occurred for at least hundreds, and probably thousands, of years. El Niños are often followed by a weaker related event called La Niña ('the Girl'), which reverses El Niño – bringing storms to the western Pacific and droughts to the east.

WILDLIFE

The Pacific is relatively spartan in its wildlife. The higher islands (Samoa and Melanesia) have the greatest diversity in flora and fauna, while smaller coral atolls and low islands can be almost desolate. Over the millennia most species moved across the ocean from west to east; thus, western islands such as the Solomons are far more diverse in flora and fauna than the eastern Societies. The spread of flora across the Pacific was in part a natural process, with seeds and fruits borne across the sea

by winds, in bird droppings and by ocean currents. Plants such as kava, coconut, breadfruit and taro, as well as some livestock, were deliberately introduced by early Pacific settlers.

Animals

Apart from possums in the Solomons, the flying fox, or fruit bat, is the only land mammal to have made its own way to the Pacific islands. Stowaways on voyaging canoes included the Polynesian rat and the geckos (small lizards) that are now ubiquitous in the region – that flicker of movement on the bedroom wall may not be a trick of the kava, it may be a lizard keeping the mosquito population under control. Apart from the geckos, land reptiles are confined to a few snakes and monitor lizards in western Melanesia and Micronesia. Palau and the Solomons also have saltwater and freshwater crocodiles. (Adult saltwater crocs can exceed 4m in length and have been known to supplement their fish diet with humans.)

Birdlife is dominated by migratory seabirds. One of the more interesting bird types is the megapode; see the boxed text, p558.

DOMESTIC ANIMALS

Settlers moving into the Pacific brought domesticated dogs, chickens and pigs along with them. As ready sources of protein, some of these animals probably did not survive the voyage, but enough arrived to spread the three species across the Pacific. Wild chickens still roam and forage throughout the Pacific islands, and the pig still holds an important role in many Melanesian rituals (see p760) The Pacific dog, however, was wiped out by interbreeding and competition from European dog species. Since European contact other introduced animals have included cattle, horses, sheep and goats.

'Coral reefs are made up of millions of coral skeletons'

The introduction of dogs and rats, as well as humans, had a major environmental impact on isolated islands. Birds that previously had no natural predators now had to contend with several, and in many cases extinction was the result. The later introduction of cats, very efficient killing machines, caused even more extinctions.

MARINE LIFE & CORAL

Many thousands of species of fish live in the Pacific Ocean. It's impossible to describe every species you might encounter, so see the boxed text, p851 for information about a few fish you might want to avoid.

Although coral looks and behaves like a plant, it's actually a minuscule primitive carnivorous animal. Coral draws calcium from the water, then excretes it to form a hardened shell to protect its soft body. As the coral polyps reproduce and die, new polyps attach themselves in successive layers to the empty skeletons which have formed tiny rock-like limestone structures. Coral reefs are made up of millions of the coral skeletons, and in this way a coral reef grows by about 15cm per year. Only the outer layer of coral is alive; algae lives in a symbiotic relationship within the coral's tissue and gives it colour. Not only is it environmental vandalism to pluck vivid coral from the ocean, it's futile because it loses its colour when dead.

Coral is a fussy wee beast. It requires a water temperature of between 21°C and 28°C, and as the algae needs abundant sunlight the water must be mud-free and relatively shallow (less than 40m). Coral reefs form in three ways: as a fringing reef close to the land, as a barrier reef separated from the land by a stretch of water, and as a coral atoll. Coral reefs support throngs of fish and other marine life, and are one of the most biodiverse habitats found on earth. Thus, of course, they make excellent fishing grounds.

Corals catch their prey by means of stinging nematocysts (a specialised type of cell), and some varieties can give humans a painful sting when touched. Despite their seemingly robust nature, all corals are fragile and can be damaged by the gentlest touch. Take care to stay well back from coral growths when diving or snorkelling on the reefs (see the boxed text, p69), and avoid reef walking.

CORAL ATOLLS

Submarine volcanoes are common on the ocean floor, and some of them grow above the sea's surface to become islands. Once an island exists, coral begins to grow around its coast. If subsequent plate movement causes the volcano to sink, the coral continues to grow in order to stay close to the sea's surface (coral requires sunlight and cannot live in water deeper than 40m). As the central island sinks, a fringing lagoon forms between the island and the reef. A coral atoll is formed when the island finally sinks completely, leaving a ring of coral encircling an empty lagoon. The first person to recognise that atolls are made from coral growth built up around the edges of submerged volcanic mountain peaks was Charles Darwin (see the boxed text, p734).

The long conversion of these coral islets to inhabitable islands begins when coral sitting above the sea's surface is broken up by waves, eventually forming a coarse, infertile soil. Seeds blown along by the wind, carried by the sea or redistributed in bird droppings can then take root. Initially, only the most hardy of plants, such as coconut palms, can survive in this hostile, barren environment. Once the pioneering coconuts have established a foothold, rotting vegetative matter forms a more hospitable soil for other plants.

The people of the Pacific islands have learned how to eke out an existence from even the smallest of coral atolls. Vegetables brought from other islands, such as taro and *kumara,* supplement what grows naturally, and fish from the sea and the lagoon provide protein. However, atoll populations live a precarious existence, as resources are scarce and the atolls are vulnerable to droughts, storms and tsunamis.

A coral atoll lifted entirely above the water's surface by geological activity is known as a *makatea,* after one such island in French Polynesia.

MAMMALS

Whales were plentiful in the Pacific until the arrival of whaling fleets in the 18th century. Their numbers are recovering, although this has been slowed by the continuing Japanese and Norwegian whaling industries. Attempts to establish a South Pacific whale sanctuary are continuing, the aim being to protect whales as they migrate through Pacific waters to mate and rear their young. However, there's strong opposition to a sanctuary, and not only from the whaling nations. Pacific island countries such as the Solomon Islands are wary as it would cut off whaling licences as a prospective source of income. In many Pacific countries, whale-watching tours offer a viable alternative (see the boxed text, p718).

In many Pacific countries, whale-watching tours are a win-win alternative to whaling. See the ones that got away in Tonga (p718), Rarotonga (p446), French Polynesia (p663), American Samoa (p529), Niue (p362), New Caledonia (p349) and Fiji (p190).

Dolphins abound, and follow ships in the Pacific with the same enthusiasm they show elsewhere in the world. The dugong or sea cow, the source of the mermaid myth (those sea journeys must have been long indeed), thrives in the western Pacific.

REPTILES

Endangered sea turtles including hawksbills, green turtles and leatherbacks inhabit Pacific waters. They've been an important native food for centuries, and both turtles and their eggs are still occasionally eaten, particularly on more remote islands.

FLORA & FAUNA OF THE PACIFIC

The following books are useful for travellers who want to learn a little more about Pacific wildlife:

- Now out of print, but worth hunting for, Dick Watling's excellent *Birds of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa* includes lavish colour illustrations of the central Pacific's bird life.
- Chris Doughty's *Field Guide to the Birds of the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia* is methodically researched and very useable in the field (if Melanesia brings out the twitcher in you).
- Worth reading before you go under, Ewald Lieske and Robert Myers' *Coral Reef Fishes* is a guide to shallow-water marine life of the Indo-Pacific and Caribbean.
- Peter Goadby's *Big Fish and Blue Water – Gamefishing in the Pacific* is an enthusiastic guide to the pleasures of killing big fish for fun.

Colourful sea snakes, highly venomous but nonaggressive, are common throughout the Pacific.

Plants

Taro is the most important crop of many islands in the Pacific, and both its spinach-like leaves and starchy corns are used as staple foods. The plantain also features in the diet of many Pacific islanders – the bananas are picked when green and cooked as a vegetable.

Pacific yellow-bellied sea snakes gather in swarms at breeding season. Large swarms can be over 100km in length!

COCONUT

If there is a symbol of the Pacific islands, it is the coconut palm. The coconut *(Cocos nucifera)* originated in Southeast Asia and its migration across the Pacific was probably a mixture of natural processes and deliberate introduction by ancient settlers.

Without the coconut palm many small Pacific atolls and islands would never have become inhabitable. Coconuts are tolerant of sandy soils and are the only large tree that will grow on a sandy atoll islet without human assistance. The plant broke the ground for later vegetation on many small coral atolls.

Coconuts historically provided drinking water for long ocean voyages, and the tree's wood was the main building material used for voyaging canoes. On land they were vital for house and roofing materials, and the fibres were used for rope, weaving and making fire. The coconut is still economically important to many Pacific countries, providing income from sales of crude oil, coconut cream and copra.

According to legend, the coconut was born when Tuna, the lover of Hina, was killed by a jealous suitor. Tuna's face is represented by the three dark depressions at the top of a coconut's shell. Push your straw through Tuna's mouth, the only depression that pierces the shell.

KUMARA

While most Pacific vegetables and trees originated in the west and migrated east, the *kumara (kumala* or *'umala)* or sweet potato originated in South America – it is known as *kumar* in Peru.

The east-to-west movement of the *kumara* was a foundation of Thor Heyerdahl's alternative theory that the Pacific was settled from the Americas. That theory quickly fell into disfavour as the bulk of other evidence mounted towards the west-to-east migration (see the boxed text, p40). It's now believed that the *kumara* was introduced to the Pacific by Polynesians, probably Marquesans, voyaging to South America. From the Marquesas it was carried westwards, reaching western Polynesia fairly quickly and Melanesia by the 16th century.

The *kumara*'s revolutionary effect on Pacific communities was widespread, as it is easy to grow in tropical climates and to transport by canoe.

NATIONAL PARKS

Parks and reserves are listed under individual country chapters. There are three Unesco-listed World Heritage sites in the South Pacific: East Rennell Island in the Solomons (p567), Henderson Island near Pitcairn (p427) and the Parque Nacional Rapa Nui on Easter Island (p90). As Rennell Island was one of the stepping stones in the Lapita people's settlement of the Pacific, and Henderson and Easter were among the last islands to be settled, these sites have important anthropological as well as ecological significance.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The most severe ecological danger to the nations of the Pacific is attributed to the developed world. Waste management of litter, from both the islands themselves and from rubbish drifting ashore, is another major concern. See p32 for information on responsible travel in the region.

Fishing

Commercial fishing fleets in the Pacific catch around half of the world's annual 100 million tonnes of fish. While the ocean's vast size lulls many people into believing it is an infinite resource, others claim this catch is unsustainable. Critics point out that despite the ever-increasing number of vessels in the world's fishing fleets, their annual catch is decreasing. A UN study found that most commercially exploited fisheries were being fished beyond their capacity to recover, stating that the industry is 'globally nonsustainable' and that 'major ecological and economic damage is already visible'.

Avoid the following overfished species when dining out in the Pacific: swordfish, marlin, southern blue-fin tuna (albacore tuna is OK) and gemfish.

It is not only fish caught for consumption that are endangered; fishing fleets worldwide claim a 'bycatch' of almost 30 million tonnes per year. These are unwanted species such as dolphins, sharks and turtles that are pulled up along with the target species and then dumped. The infamous drift nets, which are legally limited to 2.5km in length but are often much longer, claim a huge bycatch.

Remnants of drift nets are often found wrapped around dead whales that wash ashore. Nets and lines that have broken loose continue to drift through the oceans, catching and killing as they go. Longlines drifting loose on the surface of the South Pacific have decimated albatross populations, bringing some species near to extinction. Closer to the coast, blast fishing and cyanide fishing – both illegal – kill everything nearby rather than just their target species.

To resource-poor Pacific islands, selling licences to fish their relatively large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) is one of their few economic options.

Deforestation

Easter Island (Rapa Nui) led the world in its deforestation efforts a thousand years before Magellan sailed into the Pacific. The resources put into constructing the famous *moai* statues of Easter Island turned the island into a desolate wasteland.

In modern times, many South Pacific governments with few other economic options have embraced logging as a necessary evil. Such logging is often undertaken by offshore companies with few long-term interests in

CLIMATE CHANGE & GLOBAL WARMING *Saufatu Sopoanga*

Tuvalu began to voice its concern about climate change internationally in the late 1980s. Our key concern then, and now, is sea-level rise, which has the potential to submerge the islands we call home. Successive elected governments in Tuvalu have amplified warnings of this threat.

More than 30 years ago, scientists first hinted at the possibility that manmade emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases were raising the earth's atmospheric temperature, causing glaciers and polar ice to melt and sea levels to rise. Since then an impressive canon of scientific research has been published.

Thirty years later, is the sea rising? We think it is, and this view is supported by a broad scientific consensus. Estimates of sea-level rise in the southwest Pacific range between 1 and 2mm per year, confirming what we fear most. This is what science tells us and anecdotal evidence here in Tuvalu – just south of the equator, and west of the international dateline – suggests the same.

What we see in Tuvalu is marginally higher (peak) sea levels when tides are highest. This means annual high tides are creeping further and further ashore. There is crop damage from previously unseen levels of saltwater intrusion, and a higher incidence of wave washover during storms or periods of strong tidal activity.

Some commentators, journalists and scientists alike, have attributed these phenomena to construction too close to fragile lagoon foreshores or ocean fronts, or to the loss of natural coastal protection (allegedly from cutting down too many shoreline trees, shoreline mining and so forth). Whether or not this picture is accurate, this line of reasoning confuses the issue of recent material gains – principally the present level of development in Tuvalu – with sea-level rise. If the sea is rising, as local evidence suggests and scientists suspect, no amount of natural or artificial coastal protection that is not prohibitively expensive will fend it off. So-called 'adaptation' measures are a short-term fix which, however beneficial, merely delay the inevitable. Unless, of course, the worldwide volume of greenhouse gas production is cut drastically, and cut fast.

Tuvalu's nine small atolls and reef islands are geographically flat, rising no more than 4m above sea level. At any time, we are naturally concerned with the state of the sea, just as a desert nomad is with the health of an oasis. We cannot move away from our coastlines, as all the land we inhabit is coastline, right where the threat of rising sea levels is greatest. We have no continental interior where we can relocate; no high interior, as is found on a volcanic island.

Confronting the issues

Successive elected governments in Tuvalu have adopted the concept of sustainable development, and we confront its issues almost daily. But however much we try to put this concept into action locally, we also know it will not solve the problem of rising sea levels. So what else can we do?

As much as we try to meet the expectations of the international community, which demands that we include sustainable development in our national policy, our efforts on the ground have been mostly unsuccessful. (Other developing countries around the world share the same experience.)

In the context of climate change, it has become obvious to us that sustainable development – which can offer solutions to many of the issues we confront as a nation still in the early stages of growth – is clearly not a defence against sea-level rise, no matter how hard the international debate tries to connect the two. As the former chairman of the Association of Small Island States, Tuiloma Neroni Slade, recently said: 'It may be that we manage to get our sustainable development polices right. Yet we will still face the risk that all will be undermined by climate change.' This reality is an undeniably accurate view of the situation we face in the Pacific. Manmade climate change is not a Pacific invention, nor are rising sea levels our problem to fix. There is only this: Tuvalu and other Pacific island countries will be among the first to suffer the catastrophic consequences of sea-level rise.

The only international mechanism to combat climate change is the Kyoto Protocol. In the absence of potentially better alternatives – if and when they might ever appear – we have appealed to the international community: support the provisions set out in Kyoto without reservation, and achieve its stated greenhouse gas emission targets. But that's not all. What we fear is that whether or not countries ratify Kyoto, greenhouse gas emissions will continue to grow, unless there is drastic change; for example, in how industrial countries, by far the largest emitters of greenhouse gases, use energy. Yet fossil fuel consumption continues to grow.

Not enough is being done

Policy measures and nontechnological fixes are important tools in the battle to lower greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. Examples of these measures include energy conservation, the creation of vast new carbon sinks and emissions trading. But these efforts will not stop the sea from rising unless there is widespread replacement of existing energy technology that uses carbon-based fuel to power the steam turbine and internal combustion engine. Sadly, this prospect seems highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Since as far back as independence in 1978, Tuvalu has consistently advocated the use of renewable energy. We have had some success with solar power, using a technology (solar photovoltaic) that is obviously compatible with sustainable development. But Tuvalu still relies predominantly on imported petroleum to meet its energy needs. To curtail this dependence in any meaningful way will require public or private investment from the international community to finance a large-scale shift to solar energy.

From where we stand, this type of large-scale renewable investment and commitment has not been forthcoming. Make no mistake, Tuvalu stands ready to enter into partnership with any industrial country or manufacturer of solar energy equipment to transform its energy sector – and to play our part, however small, in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We cannot do it alone, however. Scientists sounded the alarm on climate change and atmospheric warming decades ago, and scientific research and debate have informed the majority of international public opinion. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – in thousands of pages of research documentation – has explained in detail the threat posed by manmade atmospheric warming, yet the concentration of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is growing.

Paying the price

The effects of global warming are being felt not just in Tuvalu but everywhere. The reason why powerful decision-makers in countries who can make a difference continue to downplay the threat posed by global warming is beyond our understanding. Isn't humankind's future at risk? The biggest emitters of manmade greenhouse gases are the world's largest countries, in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia – which comes as no surprise. Two countries, which are also the world's two most populous, China and India, represent the world's biggest future greenhouse gas emissions threat. By comparison, Tuvalu's greenhouse gas emissions are next to zero.

It is likely that in the next 50 to 100 years, if not sooner, the nine islands of Tuvalu will at best become uninhabitable, at worst they will vanish. This is based not on speculation but on mounting scientific evidence. The outlook is grim, but what can Tuvalu do? As one of my predecessors wrote: 'Tuvalu's voice in the climate change debate is small, rarely heard, and heeded not at all. Industrial countries, with all their wealth, may fret, but if atmospheric temperatures [continue to] rise, even by a few degrees, the price will be paid by the islands of Tuvalu and all low-lying land just like it'.

Prior to being appointed to the position of deputy prime minister in 2004 (with the dual portfolios of Minister of Works and Energy and Minister of Communications and Transport), Saufatu Sopoanga served as Tuvalu's ninth prime minister (2002–04).

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For more information on environmental issues in the Pacific islands see the websites of the South Pacific Environment Programme (www.sidsnet.org/pacific/sprep) and the United Nations Environment Programme (www.unep.ch/conventions).

the island. Only the larger islands such as the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa have sufficient forestry reserves to hold the interest of such companies. However, even small-scale logging on smaller islands can have a devastating effect.

As well as loss of habitat for native birds and animals, deforestation leads to massive soil loss, which is particularly serious on small coral islands such as Niue, whose soil quality has never been good. Increased runoff from deforested land can lead to pollution of vital waterways, and muddying of coastal waters can severely retard the growth of coral.

Nuclear Issues

The Pacific Ocean has seen more than its fair share of nuclear explosions. In fact, in one respect it all started here: the world's only hostile use of nuclear weapons, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, were launched from the Northern Marianas. Subsequently, the US, UK and (most stubbornly) France have conducted nuclear testing here.

The nuclear testing issue loomed large at the first meeting of the South Pacific Forum (SPF, now Pacific Island Forum) in 1971. In 1986, the SPF's Treaty of Rarotonga established the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone, banning nuclear weapons and the dumping of nuclear waste. This was ratified 10 years later by France, the US and the UK.

The 2200-sq-km lagoon of Kwajalein Atoll (p278) in the Marshall Islands forms 'the world's largest catcher's mitt' as splashdown point for (unarmed) intercontinental missiles fired from California.

France's Pacific nuclear testing programme commenced with atmospheric tests in 1966 at Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia. Their early atmospheric tests caused measurable increases in radiation in several Pacific countries – even as far away as Fiji, 4500km to the west. Atmospheric testing was abandoned in 1974 under severe international pressure, but underground tests (totalling 127 on Moruroa and 10 on Fangataufa) continued until 1996.

The effects of US atmospheric nuclear testing, which ceased in 1970, have rendered Rongelap and Bikini uninhabitable (although short-term visits are fine); their people live in unhappy exile on neighbouring islands. Fragile coral atolls were always a questionable place to detonate underground nuclear weapons, and the French have confirmed the appearance of cracks in the coral structure of Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls, and leakage of plutonium into the sea from Moruroa. The effect of large amounts of radioactive material leaking into the Pacific Ocean would be catastrophic and far-reaching. Claims of high rates of birth defects and cancer on neighbouring islands of French Polynesia are denied by the French, but are impossible to confirm because of the secrecy attached to government health records.

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South Pacific Diving

Jean-Bernard Carillet

The South Pacific and Micronesia are as much a Garden of Eden below the waterline as on land. No doubt you'll impress your peers when you get home with stories of awesome walls, high-voltage drift dives, close encounters with sharks and manta rays, luscious soft and hard corals, iconic wrecks and gorgeous reefs replete with multihued tropical fish. As if that weren't enough, visibility is excellent, waters are warm year round, most dive centres are first rate and conditions are magnificent at most times – think turquoise coral shallows, inky-blue seas, and idyllic backdrops as you travel to and from the sites. Each island has its own personality and its distinctive assets, which make for a seemingly endless diving repertoire.

Whatever your abilities, you'll experience sensory overload while diving in the South Pacific and Micronesia. Treat yourself to a slice of underwater heaven – don your fins and mask, and jump in!

With an unrivalled variety of atmospheres, textures and shapes, the South Pacific and Micronesia are the Holy Grail of bubble-makers.

DIVING CONDITIONS

Diving is possible year round, although conditions vary according to the season and location. Visibility is reduced in the wet season, as the water is muddied by sediments brought into the sea by the rivers, and areas that are exposed to currents might also become heavy with particles. On average, visibility ranges from 15m to 50m.

In most Pacific countries the water temperature peaks at a warm 29°C during the rainy season, but can drop to 20°C in some areas, including New Caledonia and Easter Island, at certain times of the year. Though it's possible to dive without a wetsuit, most divers wear at least a Lycra outsuit to protect themselves from abrasions. A 3mm tropical wetsuit is most appropriate.

For advice on diving hazards, see p852.

Jean-Bernard Carillet is a die-hard South Pacific lover and a diving instructor. For this book he did a grand diving tour from Easter Island to French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu. He has also co-authored Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling the Red Sea* and *Diving & Snorkeling Tahiti & French Polynesia*.

DIVE SITES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Cook Islands

There's nothing to boggle the mind in the Cook Islands but at least it offers relaxed diving for recreational divers in a safe environment. You've got a bit of everything, but on a small scale. A number of sites were battered by cyclones in 2005, and it will take time for the corals to regenerate. These

RESPONSIBLE DIVING

The Pacific islands and atolls are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators in their efforts to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practise and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves, as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimise your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any litter you may find as well.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust.

days local dive shops tend to use the sites located on the south side of Rarotonga, where you'll enjoy some good dives in the passages and along the sloping reef. Rarotonga also has three wrecks that are regularly dived. It's possible to dive off Aitutaki as well.

Easter Island

Yes, there's diving in Easter Island! It's unhyped and that's why we love it so much. It's still a secret, word-of-mouth diving destination that savvy divers will add to their itinerary. But don't look for throngs of pelagics (species that usually live in open oceans rather than waters adjacent to land or reefs) or psychedelic corals – they are rare. What's the pull, then? In a word: visibility. The lack of pollution, runoff, particles and plankton guarantees maximum water clarity – 40m is the norm, but it can reach a phenomenal 60m. Another highlight is the dramatic seascape, with numerous breathtaking drop-offs, chasms, caverns, arches and overhangs, giving the sites a peculiarly sculpted look and an eerie atmosphere.

Easter Island claims the best visibility of all Pacific dive sites, boasting up to an incredible 60m.

Most sites are scattered along the western and northern coasts, with Motu Nui as a prime diving and snorkelling spot. If you're seasick, take note: since the Easter Island waters are devoid of any protective barrier reef, be prepared to cope with sometimes difficult conditions to get to the sites.

Fiji

Fiji has achieved cult status among diving connoisseurs, and justifiably so. Where else in the world can you join a hair-raising shark feed, then drift with the currents along walls festooned with colourful soft corals, all in the same area?

If you're after the thrill of a lifetime, we suggest you register for a shark-feeding session in Beqa lagoon, off Viti Levu. Here you're certain to go nose-to-nose with dozens of sharks – a fantastic adrenaline rush (aargh!). Up to eight types of shark take part in the handfeeding, including ponderous-looking bull sharks and even the heavyweight of them all – tiger sharks! The feeders distribute about 250kg of dead fish during each dive, which gives you an idea of the orgy. Fear not – these dives are conducted in a very professional way by experienced guides who know their job. The two feeders have been handfeeding the sharks for more than six years and they really know their behaviour.

Fiji has rightly been dubbed 'the soft-coral capital of the world'.

In the mood for less challenging sites? Head to the north shore of Viti Levu, off Nananu-i-Ra island. This area is a good balance of scenic seascapes, elaborate reef systems and dense marine life. Dream Maker and Breath Taker rank among the best sites in this area, featuring large pristine clumps of corals surrounded by neon-coloured fish.

Taveuni has gained international recognition in the diving community. The Somosomo Strait, a narrow stretch of ocean that is funnelled between Taveuni and Vanua Levu, is truly world class, with exhilarating drift dives in nutrient-filled waters and steep drop-offs mantled with phenomenal soft corals. Purple Wall, Great White Wall, Rainbow Passage and Annie's Bommies are the perennial faves in this area.

Kadavu's highlight is Great Astrolabe Reef, a 100km-long barrier reef that hugs the southern and eastern coasts of the island. This gem of a reef acts as a magnet for countless species. The seascape is a mind-boggling combination of canyons, crevices and arches. The best dive spots include Broken Stone, Split Rock and Naiqoro Passage.

Diving in the Mamanucas is probably less spectacular, but it's still very rewarding, especially for novice divers. Prominent sites include the Supermarket and Gotham City, but we found them a bit overhyped – it's better to ask about lesser-known sites.

If you have the chance to embark on a live-aboard, you'll probably dive the Bligh Water area and the Lomaiviti Group. Here you'll feel like a National Geographic photographer exploring uncharted territory. Two seamounts rising from the abyss to just below the surface include E6 and Mt Mutiny – both act as magnets for a wide assortment of pelagics and reef species. Off Gau island, Nigali Passage is an adrenaline-packed drift dive.

The rundown in this chapter is by no means exhaustive. For more information, see Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Fiji*, *Diving & Snorkeling Tahiti & French Polynesia*, *Diving & Snorkeling Guam & Yap* and *Diving & Snorkeling Chuuk Lagoon, Pohnpei & Kosrae*.

French Polynesia

Wow! French Polynesia is sure to elicit strong emotions – underwater as well as on land. Consistently billed as one of the world's great diving destinations, the islands provide enthralling diving for the experienced and novices alike. Its great success as a diving Mecca can be attributed to the unbeatable repertoire of diving adventures it offers. From Tahiti in the Society Islands to Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas and Rangiroa in the Tuamotus, the options are countless.

You could start your diving trip in Mo'orea. The Tiki and Opunohu Canyons host regular shark-feeding sessions, so you're guaranteed to see blacktip, grey and lemon sharks. In Bora Bora, Tapu, Muri Muri and Tupitipiti never fail to impress, with frequent sightings of grey reef and blacktip sharks and eagle rays, and nicely shaped sloping reefs. From Bora Bora you could journey on to the Tuamotus for the thrill of a lifetime – base yourself in Rangiroa and dive Tiputa Pass. The stuff of legend, this magical site is usually done as a drift dive. Divers descend at the edge of the drop-off and let themselves be sucked into the lagoon through the pass with the incoming current, amid a swirl of grey sharks and reef species. Fakarava shares similar characteristics. Garuae Pass and Tumakohua Pass are high-voltage drift dives that will leave you awestruck.

Two good resources on diving in French Polynesia are www.polynesia-diving.com and www.diving-tahiti.com.

Adventurous divers will be sure to visit the Marquesas, which open up a whole new world of diving. The main highlight is the dramatic seascape, with a wealth of drop-offs, caverns, arches and ledges, giving the sites an eerie atmosphere. Since the Marquesas are devoid of any protective barrier reefs, the water is thick with plankton and visibility doesn't exceed 10m to 15m. Nuku Hiva's iconic dive is with pygmy orcas, a bewildering dolphin gathering that will enthrall even the most jaded divers. Tikapo is an offshore seamount that consistently sizzles with electric fish action.

SCUBA SENSATIONS FOR EVERYONE

The dive menu is so eclectic in the South Pacific and in Micronesia that it's hard for divers to decide where to go. Here is a brief summary of the types of dives on offer to help you select your slice of underwater heaven.

Wreck diving Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Guam, Chuuk Lagoon, Marshall Islands, Palau
Wall diving Yap, Pohnpei, Kosrae, French Polynesia, Palau
Drift diving French Polynesia, Fiji, Palau, New Caledonia, Marshall Islands
Muck diving Solomon Islands
Cave diving Niue, Tonga, Palau
Crystal-clear diving Niue, Easter Island, Tonga
Shark diving French Polynesia, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands
Manta diving French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Guam, Yap
Soft corals Fiji
Beginners all places!

TO FEED OR NOT TO FEED?

Shark feeding is popular in some parts of the South Pacific, especially in French Polynesia, Fiji and New Caledonia. Whether or not it is a good idea is open to debate. On the one hand, these artificial encounters undeniably disrupt natural behaviour patterns. On the other hand, the experience is undoubtedly spectacular and such dives have been conducted without any accidents so far. Some experts think that these shows can have educational virtues and are a good way to raise awareness among divers. If you're against shark feeding, don't hesitate to ask for a 'regular' dive.

Another stunner, Matateteiko features a similar topography, with an underwater platform jutting out to the open ocean.

Diving off Hiva Oa is a recent affair – the first commercial dive outfit started in late 2005. Most dive sites are located off Motu Anakee in Atuona Bay and at the southwestern tip of the bay.

New Caledonia

New Caledonia's main claim to fame is its lagoon – supposedly one of the largest in the world. Off Nouméa, an excellent site well worth bookmarking is Passe de Boulari. Coral is not the strong point of the dive, but for fish action it's unbeatable. If you want to see sharks, this is the place! Another exciting pass is Passe de Dumbéa, which plays home to schools of groupers from October to December. If you make it to Poum, don't miss Grand Récif de Poum, at the country's northwestern tip – this must be the wildest dive area in New Caledonia. Be prepared for enthralling drift dives accompanied by a procession of predators. In Hienghène, you can't but be impressed by Tidwan, Cathédrale and Récif de Kaun, all boasting an outstanding topography comprising canyons, chasms and fissures, plus prolific marine life.

The lagoon in New Caledonia is so large that getting to most sites on the barrier reef involves a boat trip – some journeys last as long as 45 minutes. On the plus side, most sites are uncrowded.

The area off Poindimié is more renowned for reef life, soft corals and nudibranches. Most dive sites are located in Grande Passe de Payes and in Passe de la Fourmi.

Île des Pins features some stunning sites. Vallée des Gorgones, off Gadji's reef, is a killer, with an excellent drop-off adorned with a profusion of graceful sea fans and a dense array of reef fish. Récif de Kasmira is another superb site, featuring a coral mound ranging from 3m to 17m. If you're after something unusual, try Grotte de la Troisième (Cave of the Third). About 8km north of Kuto, it features an inland cave filled with crystal-clear fresh water. You'll navigate inside the cave, at about 6m, wending your way among stalactites and stalagmites. Beware of silt build-up, though.

We're also suckers for the sites in the Loyalty Islands. Lifou's signature dives are Gorgones Reef and Shoji Reef, with delicate sea fans wafting in the current as the main attraction. Keep your eyes peeled for pelagic sightings, including tuna, sharks, rays and barracudas. Ouvéa offers pristine sites south of the atoll.

Niue

Niue offers great visibility (up to 50m), an underwater labyrinth of caves and chasms, and if you're brave, swarms of sea snakes.

Tiny Niue cannot really compete with its neighbouring heavyweights, but it boasts excellent diving nonetheless. No streams, no runoff, no pollution and no fringing reef equal gin-clear visibility (up to 50m). Apart from this, the main highlight is the dramatic seascape. The coral flats surrounding the island are honeycombed with caves, gullies and chasms. If you enjoy diving in atmospheric caverns, you'll love Ana Mahaga (Twin Caves), a humungous coral structure riddled with swimthroughs, tunnels and arches. There are also a couple of great sites off Tamakautoga Reef. The Dome is another great cave system that extends about 30m back under the island. Egypt is almost as atmospheric – you'll meander among boulders in narrow channels bounded by high walls. Niue's iconic dive is Snake Gully, where divers are rewarded with the very unusual vision of dozens of sea snakes – some winding along the bottom, some seemingly knotted up together.

Niue's weak point is the lack of healthy coral. A cyclone in 2004 battered most coral structures, and they will take time to regenerate. Marine life is also poor in comparison with other South Pacific destinations, due to the lack of nutrients. Don't expect swarms of fish – it's the scenery that makes the dives so rewarding. And if you need some action, be here from June to October, when humpback whales frolic off the coast!

Samoa

Samoan dive sites don't disappoint if they are taken for what they are: relaxed and easy.

Samoa is certainly not a hardcore diver's destination, but that doesn't mean you should give it a wide berth. Off Savai'i, Tialipi's Heaven features a pleasant architecture – wend your way around pinnacles, swimthroughs and canyons in less than 25m. If you need to refresh your skills, Lelepa Bay is ideal, with countless juvenile fish in the shallows. At Coral Gardens, you can weave around the coral structures and marvel at the colourful fauna fluttering about. You might also want to explore the *Juno*, a three-mast vessel that sank in 1881 in 25m of water. It's nothing spectacular, but it's scenic and it makes for a welcome change.

Off 'Upolu, you'll probably dive Anganoa Wall on the south coast, as well as Eagle Ray Gully. It's easy and comfortable.

Solomon Islands

The Solomons are still synonymous with adventure, seclusion and mystery.

It's impossible to get bored in the Solomons. The variety of sites is staggering, as are the quality of the diving and the sense of exploration. If you want to feel like a pioneer, you came to the right place!

You can start your diving trip at Tulagi in the Central Province. The local dive centre recommends Twin Tunnels, a massive coral mound chiselled by two tunnels, with abundant fish life; Manta Passage, a drift dive famous for its regular manta sightings; Presentation Point, an underwater maze with plenty of canyons; Sandfly Passage, an exhilarating wall drift dive; and Christmas Tree Rock. Keep your eyes peeled for pelagics, especially mantas and sharks. If you need a break from offshore reef dives, several spectacular shipwrecks will keep you entertained, including the USS *Kanawha*, a 150m-long vessel, and the USS *Aaron Ward*, a US Navy destroyer. Unfortunately, they lie deep and are accessible to seasoned divers only.

Having whetted your appetite, you could journey on to New Georgia in Western Province. Savvy divers rave about the sites in Marovo Lagoon – Uepi Point, Bottom of the Channel, North Log, Divers Bay, The Elbow

DIVING & FLYING

Most divers to the South Pacific and Micronesia get there by plane. While it's fine to dive soon *after* flying, it's important to remember that your last dive should be completed at least 12 hours (some experts advise 24 hours) before your flight, to minimise the risk of residual nitrogen in the blood that can cause decompression injury. Careful attention to flight times is necessary in this region because so much of the inter-island transportation is by air.

DO YOU 'MUCK DIVE'?

Growing weary of sharks, manta rays and all the big stuff? Well, it's time to 'muck dive'. Don't feel offended – this simply means that you concentrate on tiny, small and unusual critters, such as ghost pipefish, pygmy seahorses, manta shrimps, nudibranches, flatworms and sand-dwelling species. The Solomons are a good place to get an education in this domain. All you need is a keen eye!

and Point to Point, to name a few. Expect steep walls, prolific invertebrate life and dramatic seascapes.

Another hotspot is Ghizo Island, further west. Here again the diving is superlative, with a stunning mix of WWII wrecks, superb offshore reefs ablaze with marine life, and plummeting walls. Wreck buffs will make a beeline for the *Toa Maru*, a virtually intact Japanese freighter that ran aground during WWII. It's huge – almost 140m long – and lies on its starboard side at a depth ranging from 7m to 37m. Divers can explore the ship's holds, which contain tanks, ammunition, a motorbike and sake bottles. In all, it's a 'mini *Coolidge*' (see below). If you're looking for fish action, Grand Central Station will appeal to you. The location says it all: it's at the northwestern tip of Ghizo, where oceanic currents merge. It's a perfect spot to watch rays, sharks, barracudas and other predators. The Beach Dive, The Gap and One Tree Island are also classic log entries.

Tonga

Tonga's best selling point is its contoured underwater terrain.

Whale-watching is so popular in Tonga that it has stolen the show. While Tongan waters will never be mistaken for those of, say, French Polynesia or Palau, there's some excellent diving off Ha'apai and Vava'u. The reefs are peppered with numerous caves that make for atmospheric playgrounds and eerie ambience. In some places, you'll feel as though you're swimming in an underwater cathedral. Off Ha'apai, some sites well worth logging include The Arch, Foa Caves, Hot Spring Cave or Ha'ano Castle. Off Vava'u, it's more or less the same story below the waterline. Swallows Cave is a must-see, as are Shark Tooth and Hunga Magic. The wreck of the *Clan MacWilliam* adds a touch of variety.

Vanuatu

The USS *President Coolidge* was a luxury cruise liner converted to a troop carrier during WWII. In 1942, while entering what the captain thought were safe waters in Vanuatu's Espiritu Santo harbour, the ship struck two mines and sank very close to the shore. Visit http://www.michaelmcfadyenscuba.info/articles/coolmain.htm for details on the history of the *Coolidge*.

A few finstrokes from the shore, the legendary USS *President Coolidge* is trumpeted as the best wreck dive in the world – we agree. The sheer proportions of this behemoth are overwhelming: resting on its side in 20m to 67m of water off Luganville (Santo), the *Coolidge* is 200m long and 25m wide. It's shrouded with a palpable aura, and much has been written about its history. Amazingly, more than 50 years after its demise it's still in very good shape. It's not heavily overgrown with marine life, but you will see numerous fittings and artefacts, including weaponry, gas masks, trenching tools, trucks, rows of toilets, a porcelain statue (the 'Lady'), a pool, personal belongings abandoned by 5000 soldiers, and all the fixtures of a luxury cruise liner. A minimum of five dives is recommended to get a glimpse of the whole vessel. Although nearly all dives on the *Coolidge* are deep (more than 30m), she is suitable for novice divers. You'll start at shallower depths (about 25m) and go progressively deeper as you become more familiar with the diving.

The only downside is that the *Coolidge* has overshadowed other dive sites in Vanuatu. In Santo, other wrecks worthy of exploration include the *Tui Tewate* and the USS *Tucker*.

If you need a break from wreck dives, don't miss the opportunity to sample some truly excellent reef dives off Santo. Cindy's Reef is a perennial favourite, as is Tutuba Point, but we found Million Dollar Point much more eye-catching. Thousands of tonnes of military paraphernalia were discarded here by the US Navy when they left the country. Divers swim among the tangle of cranes, bulldozers, trucks and other construction hardware in less than 30m and finish their dive exploring a small shipwreck in the shallows.

And what about the diving in Efate? It can't really compete with Santo, but we found Hat Island, about 5km off the north side of Efate, as well as Paul's Rock, also off the north side of Efate, pretty appealing. The seascape is top notch, and you'll see a smorgasbord of reef fish.

DIVE SITES IN MICRONESIA

Federated States of Micronesia

CHUUK LAGOON

The only drawback in Chuuk is the depth. Most wrecks are deep dives, in the 30m to 40m range.

Chuuk Lagoon is an absolute must for wreck enthusiasts. Picture this: several dozen WWII Japanese ships of varying shapes and sizes lying in the lagoon. The wrecks were discovered by the diving world in the late 1970s and make for a fantastic collection of vibrant artificial reefs within easy reach. Each section of the wreck is like a miniature version of a full-blown reef, from pelagic predators to tropical fish to thriving coral. An added bonus is the historic aura that emanates from this phenomenal underwater graveyard – most ships contain various artefacts and war relics.

It's hard to decide which wrecks to choose. On the photogenic scale, the *Shinkoku Maru* scores high, as do the *Yamagiri Maru*, the I-169 submarine, the *San Francisco Maru* and the *Fujikawa Maru*. The *Shinkoku Maru* (maximum depth 40m) is a stunner, with artefacts, excellent fish life and lush coral growth, while the *San Francisco Maru* (maximum depth 58m) also has its fair share of devotees in spite of its depth. Tanks rest on the main deck at the forward part of the ship. The *Fujikawa* (maximum depth 34m), affectionately dubbed 'The Fuji', sits upright. It's fairly shallow and has loads of corals and artefacts, and penetration is easy.

KOSRAE

Although less charismatic than Chuuk, Kosrae boasts its fair share of underwater wonders and deserves attention for its number of relaxed, easy sites. The island is surrounded by a magnificent reef chock full of technicolour species. Be sure to check out Shark Island, a high-voltage drift dive where sightings of pelagics are common; Blue Hole, a perennial fave, famous for its concentration of colourful reef species; Walung Drop-Off, a steep wall punctuated by exuberant hard corals; and Yela Wall, a deeper dive (maximum depth 37m), for seasoned divers only.

POHNPEI

If you want relaxed diving, Pohnpei will appeal to you. Novice divers in particular will feel comfortable – the dive conditions are less challenging than anywhere else but still offer excellent fish action. A longstanding favourite, Areu Wall is an inner-lagoon dive north of Areu Point. It features an excellent mix of invertebrates, small fish, large corals and sea fans. Mwand Wall and Pass is also a beautiful site. You'll enjoy weaving your way among large coral heads lavishly blanketed in a bright mosaic of sea fans. To the south, Rainbow Island (Nahlap Island) is renowned for its pelagic sightings – expect close encounters with jacks, sharks, turtles

and schools of surgeonfish. At Poahloang Pass, strong tidal currents push the deep water back and forth through the passage, providing nutrients for corals that form a vivid tapestry on the reefs. The wall at Black Coral Island is liberally draped with sea fans, sponge formations and colourful soft corals. Tuna, barracuda, jacks and sharks can occasionally be seen cruising by.

In the mood for a high-voltage drift dive? Ask for Palikir Pass. Gliding with the current, you'll be captivated by the prolific fish life, including grey sharks, schools of jacks, barracuda and Napoleon wrasse, among others.

The nearby atolls of Ant and Pakin are still largely untouched and offer pristine dive sites.

YAP

Manta, manta, manta. Consistently hailed as the best manta destination in the world, Yap features truly world-class sites where divers can just about be assured of seeing mantas. The best area to spot them is the long and winding Miil Channel, to the northwest of the island. It's home to large concentrations of manta rays visiting the many cleaning stations where small fish come out of the coral heads to scour the mantas of parasites – a unique sight. Yap's signature dives include the aptly named Manta Ridge, Manta Ray Bay, Valley of the Rays and Miil Point, all less than 25m.

Manta rays commonly range in size from 2m to 4m. They are harmless filter feeders, eating mainly plankton. They have tails, but no barb as stingrays do.

Although the manta experience is the true clincher, there's much more to diving in Yap than just these graceful giants. You'll find superb reef and wall dives off the southern tip of the island. Recommended ones include Eagle's Nest, an easy drift dive along the barrier reef where squadrons of eagle rays are regularly spotted, and Yap Caverns, the most atmospheric part of the Gilman Tip. Here you can see white-tip and grey reef sharks lazing about near overhangs and along sandy slopes, and explore the well-lit tunnels carved in the caverns. If you want sheer wall diving, Gilman Wall is hard to rival. Magic Kingdom says it all: here you can expect a fantasyland of textures and shapes in less than 25m.

Guam

So, you want variety? You came to the right place. Sure, nothing is really world-class, but Guam offers a wide range of diving experiences, from wall diving to drift dives to wreck dives. For sensations and photogeny, the Blue Hole is hard to beat. Picture this: a perpendicular shaft in the reef extends down to about 40m, but at 38m a large window opens to the outer wall, allowing the diver to exit and ascend a free fall through the shaft. The Crevice is another must-see, with the occasional appearance of pelagics. Coral Gardens is a relaxing dive, with various coral mounds and their accompanying sea life. Another stunner is Pete's Reef, which presents a nice mix of small caves, coral heads and sandy patches, all endowed with a variety of marine life.

Penetration of wrecks is a skilled speciality and should not be attempted without proper training.

Guam also boasts a number of diveable shipwrecks and airplanes in Apra Harbour. Try the highly-rated *Tokai Maru*, a Japanese freighter sunk by a submarine torpedo attack during WWII (maximum depth 38m), or the nearby SMS *Cormoran*, which was scuttled during WWI.

For more information on these dive sites, see p231.

Marshall Islands

The strong point of this archipelago is the sheer variety of attractions, including a collection of WWII plane wrecks, breathtaking walls, a varied topography, exuberant coral gardens and countless fish species, including pelagics.

TAKE THE PLUNGE!

The South Pacific and Micronesia both provide ideal and safe conditions for beginners, with their warm, crystalline waters and prolific marine life. Arrange an introductory dive with a dive centre to give you a feel for what it's like to swim underwater. It will begin on dry land, where the instructor will run through basic safety procedures and show you the equipment.

The dive itself takes place in a safe location and lasts between 20 and 40 minutes under the guidance of the instructor.

You'll practise breathing with the regulator above the surface before going underwater. Then the instructor will hold your hand if need be and guide your movements at a depth of between 3m and 10m. Some centres start the instruction in waist-high water in a hotel swimming pool or on the beach.

There is no formal procedure, but you shouldn't dive if you have a medical condition such as acute ear, nose and throat problems, epilepsy or heart disease (such as infarction), if you have a cold or sinusitis, or if you are pregnant.

If you enjoy your introductory dive, you might want to follow a four- to five-day course to get first-level certification. This will allow you to dive anywhere in the world – it's like a driving licence. The South Pacific is an excellent area in which to do the certification course.

Dive sites around Majuro include Aneko Island, with loads of coral pinnacles, Calalin Pass, a longstanding fave for drift dives, Calalin Island, adjacent to the pass, Second Island, Fourth Island and Bokolap Island, all of them blessed with healthy reefs and copious fish life. For shark encounters, Shark Street is hard to rival – divers have reported sightings of more than 20 toothy critters here.

Fancy wreck diving? Check out the dozen or so WWII plane wrecks around the island. Most divers swear by the *Kabilok*, a sunken freighter that rests on a sandy floor in Majuro lagoon, the *Grumman Duck*, a bi-winged aircraft in good shape, and the B-24 *Liberator*, an American bomber. Not only are they steeped in history, but they are also overgrown with marine life. More recent wrecks include *Cenpac*, a former inter-island ship, and *Ratak-Ralik*, a freighter sunk in the late 1980s.

And for those who really want to get away from it all, Arno Atoll is a treat. Absolutely no crowds and very few dive boats – it's still virtually pristine and pelagic sightings are almost guaranteed.

Palau

Feeling somewhat blasé? Palau is the perfect place to rekindle your passion. Dive Jellyfish Lake, and you'll know what we mean. This must be one of the most unusual sites on Planet Scuba. Where else in the world can you dive (snorkel, actually) in a marine lake chock full of nonstinging jellyfish? Diving down into this layer of gelatinous animals made translucent by the sunlight is an ethereal (some would say sensual) sensation.

Palau is the only place in the South Pacific where saltwater crocodiles can be found. Fear not: it's rare for divers to encounter them.

Another iconic calling card in Palau is wall diving. Peleliu Wall, Ngemelis Wall (Big Drop-Off) and West Ngemelis Wall (New Drop-Off) are world renowned, and for good reason. They combine the thrills of diving steep walls – it's a bit like sky-diving – with heart-pounding drift dives in the current. To top it all off, these sites consistently sizzle with electric fish action. You're likely to encounter sharks in great numbers, manta rays, groupers, sea fans, soft corals and just about every form of marine life you can imagine. Anything can happen at these sites.

If you have a hankering for wrecks, Palau is also a choice destination. Off Koror, the *Chuyo Maru* (maximum depth 36m), the Helmet Wreck (maximum depth 29m) and the *Iro Maru* (maximum depth 36m) will

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keep wreck buffs entertained. These easily accessible vessels are heavily overgrown with corals and replete with fish life.

Palau's varied underwater terrain offers a couple of opportunities to sample something different. Want to weave your way amid giant stalactites? Ask for Chandelier Cave, off Koror. Feel like exploring a mysterious cavern, ablaze with marine life? Siaes Tunnel, west of Ulong, is for you. In the mood for an otherworldly experience? Dive the Blue Holes, which comprise four vertical shafts that open on top of the reef flat. Sunbeams play though openings in the reef system – a magical sight.

DIVE CENTRES

In most cases, the standards of diving facilities are high in the South Pacific and in Micronesia. You'll find professional and reliable dive centres staffed with qualified instructors catering to divers of all levels. The majority of dive centres are affiliated with an internationally recognised diving organisation – eg PADI, SSI, NAUI and CMAS. They are mostly hotel based, but they welcome walk-in guests. The staff members usually speak English.

HOW MUCH?

Two-tank dive: US$100 (without gear), US$120 (gear included)

Introductory dive: about US$95

Open-water certification: about US$450

Centres are open year round, most of them every day, but it's best to reserve your dive a day in advance. Depending on the area, centres typically offer two-tank dives (usually in the morning) or single dives (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). Many sites are offshore and involve a boat ride.

Be aware that, even if common standards apply, each dive centre has its own personality and style. It's a good idea to visit the place first to get the feel of the operation.

Diving in the South Pacific or Micronesia is expensive in comparison with most destinations in Asia, the Caribbean or the Red Sea. Set dive packages (eg five or 10 dives) are usually cheaper. All types of courses are available. Gear hire may or may not be included in the price of the dive, so it's not a bad idea to bring your own equipment if you plan to dive a lot.

See Dive Shops in the Activities sections of the individual country chapters for details of operators in those countries.

Required Documents

If you're a certified diver, don't forget to bring your C-card and logbook with you. Dive centres welcome divers regardless of their training background, provided they can produce a certificate from an internationally recognised agency.

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Food & Drink

The food of the South Pacific is as sturdy, jovial and inviting as the people who cook it. It's fulfilling comfort fare, so don't worry about consuming thousands of extra calories or piling your plate too high – the more you eat, the more the islanders will love you for it. One of the most important priorities in life on these warm, convivial islands is that there is enough food for all to sit down and enjoy a nourishing meal in good company.

While staples were once dictated by what the ancient navigating peoples brought in their canoes, each island nation now has a distinctive culinary style, influenced by French, English and US colonisation and the presence of Chinese and Indian labourers. Root tubers, fish and pork now share a plate with pasta, rice and a smorgasbord of canned foods from corned beef to foie gras. Although visitors to the South Pacific will find traditional food less available, they will encounter a delicious mingling of cultures.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Starch, meat and fish make up the bulk of the Pacific diet. Vegetables have never played much of a part in traditional cuisines, although foreign influences have added some colourful touches incorporating a wider variety of ingredients.

Although hypotheses abound, no-one knows for certain how *kumara* (sweet potato) arrived from South America to the Pacific islands.

Breadfruit

Breadfruit is typically eaten unripe and roasted till charred on an open fire; the flavour of the steaming starchy flesh is somewhere between a potato and a chestnut. It can also be fried into chips, boiled or baked in the oven. The addition of coconut cream kneaded into the cooked flesh makes a sweet, doughy paste that can be eaten as is or wrapped in leaves and baked to create a starchy pudding.

Many traditional cultures fermented breadfruit, both as a preservation technique and to add flavour to an otherwise bland diet (it has a strong, sour taste). There have been stories of century-old fermented breadfruit being still edible. Fermented breadfruit is prepared less and less in the region, but dried breadfruit continues to be consumed in places such as Samoa and the Solomon Islands. It can be eaten as chips, ground into meal or mixed with water or coconut milk to make a porridge.

The Breadfruit Institute's very informative website (http://breadfruit.ntbg.org) was created to promote the study and use of breadfruit for food and reforestation.

Taro

There are several varieties of taro, all producing an oblong root tuber that is boiled in water or steamed in a traditional earthen pit oven. It's a firm, starchy, potato-like food that has a slightly gooey exterior when cooked just right. Covered with coconut milk it exudes a hearty, gotta-be-good-for-you quality and makes a satisfying accompaniment to a meal.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Pacific cuisines have been heavily influenced by other cultures and nowadays you won't find too many traditional dishes on the menu. Here are a few modern specialities that are found throughout the Pacific:

Sashimi Japanese-style raw fish, thinly sliced and served with rice and a sauce.

Raw fish in coconut milk Thin chunks of fish marinated in lemon juice, tossed in with veggies and spices (changes regionally) and doused in coconut milk.

The leaves of certain species of taro can also be eaten, usually mixed in savoury stews or eaten with coconut milk. They resemble spinach when cooked, and are the only traditional leafy green in Polynesia.

Coconut

Nothing invokes the flavours of the South Pacific more than the versatile coconut. It's an all-in-one food: meat, sugar, oil and water, all conveniently presented in its own bowl and cup. Each of the nut's four growth stages provides a different form of food or drink. The first stage is ideal for drinking because there's no flesh inside, except for a tasty jelly-like substance. The best eating stage is the second, when the flesh inside is firm but thin and succulent. After this, the flesh becomes thick and hard – ideal for drying into copra. At its fourth stage the milk inside goes spongy, making what is sometimes known as 'coconut ice cream'.

A Taste of the Pacific by Susan Parkinson, Peggy Stacy and Adrian Mattison is a culinary guide to the region and includes 200 island-inspired recipes.

Fruit

While the Polynesian islands are generally dripping in fresh fruit (think mangoes, papayas, giant grapefruit and the world's sweetest bananas), Micronesia and some parts of Melanesia are less well endowed. Most locals source fruit from their own trees or from family and friends, so it can sometimes be surprisingly hard to buy local fruit throughout the Pacific. When possible, the best and cheapest places to buy it is at markets and roadside stalls.

Coconut-lovers should head to www.coconut.com, a website devoted to the nut and everywhere it grows. You'll find recipes, nutritional information, a vast amount of article links, blogs and more.

Meat & Fish

Fresh fish and shellfish are found on nearly every restaurant menu and, as a rule, are fabulous. Surprisingly, pigs were traditionally more highly valued than seafood, and the preparation of pork played a key role in celebrations and events. Dog was once widely eaten but it's now a rare occurrence.

Regional meats include flying foxes (fruit bats) in eastern Polynesia and Melanesia, venison in New Caledonia and goat in the Marquesas Islands. High-quality lamb and beef imported from New Zealand (NZ) is often available, as are low-quality frozen chicken legs from the US.

Canned Influences

Ever-popular canned meat is cheap, easy and tasty; unfortunately, it's also full of fat, nitrites and empty calories. The effect of this and other imports such as soft drinks, canned fish and fast food on the weight and health of native Pacific peoples is devastating. Heart problems, hypertension and diabetes are rife throughout the region.

A single coconut has about as much protein as one-eighth of a kilogram of beef.

DRINKS

Nothing is better on a hot Pacific day than an ice-cold coconut. It's slightly sweet, chock-full of electrolytes and comes in the world's best, most ecological cup: its own husk. Fresh juices can be difficult to find, and you'll often have to choose a bottle or can of juice that has been imported from somewhere far less appealing. If you can't find a coconut, your best choice for healthy rehydration is bottled water – stay away from the tap water unless you've been assured by a reliable source that it's OK (see p852).

Coffee is found everywhere, but the further you get from the major towns, the more likely it will be instant coffee.

Kava (see the boxed text, p82) is the most important drink on many Pacific islands, both for ceremonial and mind-calming reasons.

WE DARE YOU!

If you've got the guts, give these regional favourites a try:

Fafaru (French Polynesia) Raw fish marinated in rotting fish–infused seawater; it smells like roadkill but the texture is divine.

Palolo worm (Vanuatu) Collected from coral reefs, *palolo* looks like green caviar and is served on toast.

Sea (sea slug innards – Samoa) This incredibly salty, oyster-like delicacy leaves a metallic aftertaste.

Alcoholic Drinks

Attitudes to alcohol vary across the region. Having witnessed the detrimental effects of alcohol, such as domestic violence, some communities have banned alcohol completely, but in most countries it's freely available. Those nations with their own breweries – such as Tahiti (Hinano Beer), Tonga (Ikale Beer) and Samoa (Vailima Beer) – brew excellent beers, and Australian, NZ and US beers are also widely available. There aren't too many happening bars or nightspots on most islands, but at swank hotels and resorts you'll find all the tropical, coconut and pineapple cocktails you could dream of imbibing. The French colonies offer a surprising selection of fine French wines.

French Polynesia ranks fifth in the world for the quantity of beer consumed per capita.

CELEBRATIONS

Throughout the Pacific a party often means that delicious food will be prepared in an *umu* (*ahima'a* in French Polynesia, *lovo* in Fiji), a traditional earthen oven. Every island has its own method of preparing the feast, but the common theme is that a variety of food, ranging from meat and fish to taro and cabbage, is neatly wrapped in leaves or a wet cloth and cooked in a stone-lined, wood-fired pit covered with earth. The flavours and juices mingle for several hours and the resulting meal is steamy, tender and delectable.

Kava, the Pacific Elixir by Vincent Lebot, Mark Merlin and Lamont Lindstrom is an exhaustive study of the South Pacific beverage from a New Age perspective.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

In most cases Pacific islanders do not have the ready cash to patronise restaurants, so eating establishments mostly serve the tourist or expat population and are concentrated in highly touristed areas. Bars are more the exception than the rule, although some restaurants double as watering holes.

Restaurants in the French territories can be superb, but they are very expensive. In Fiji there are sumptuous, reasonably priced Indian restaurants and most islands have at least a handful of Western and Chinese places.

Opening hours vary from country to country, but in general restaurants are open for lunch from around 11.30am to 2pm or 3pm, and dinner is served from 6.30pm to around 9pm. In restaurants that are also drinking spots, the dinner hours might extend until 2am or later.

There is inevitably some form of shopping outlet in all but the smallest of villages. Depending on the level of isolation, the choice may be limited and the goods expensive. Markets are the source of the freshest and cheapest foodstuffs, while shops may rely on canned goods.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Fish, pork and chicken form the basis of most Pacific dishes so vegetarians will have to either pick through their food or get creative with self-catering. The exception to this is Fiji, which has a large Indian population and great vegetarian options.

KAVA

The drinking of kava remains a strong social tradition in many Pacific cultures, and is practised throughout almost all of Polynesia and much of Melanesia. As well as a form of welcome, it's used to seal alliances, start chiefly conferences and to commemorate births, deaths and marriages. To decline kava when it is offered is to decline friendship – so even though it may taste disgusting to you, you've got to gulp it down and appear impressed.

In many countries kava has helped retain ancient customs. Many people attribute a low crime rate to the calming, sedative effects of the drink, which, unlike alcohol, does not produce aggressive behaviour.

Ceremony

In more traditional areas, kava root is prepared by chewing it into a mush and spitting the hard bits onto leaves. Water is added to the mush, then it's all filtered through coconut fibres. This method produces a more potent brew, as saliva triggers the root's active ingredients. Modern techniques involve pounding the kava root in a bucket, and it can even be prepared from a commercially produced powder.

Kava is served in a coconut-shell cup and usually the chief and honoured guests drink first. Some cultures expect drinkers to down the kava in a single gulp, any remaining liquid being poured on the ground. Sometimes kava is drunk in silence, but some cultures prefer a great deal of slurping to show appreciation. Sometimes your companions will clap while you drink, but other noises and conversation are generally kept to a minimum.

In some areas, particularly the more touristy ones where customs have become more lenient, both men and women drink kava. In most places, though, it is an exclusively male activity – some say the original kava plant sprang from the loins of a woman, hence the *tapu* (taboo).

Kava makes the drinker's eyes sensitive to glare, so any strong lights, especially flashbulbs, are very intrusive.

Experiential Effects

Kava has a pungent, muddy taste and you'll begin to feel its effects within 10 to 25 minutes. If it's a strong brew, it'll make your lips go numb and cold like you've had a Novocain injection, then your limbs will get heavy and your speech will slow. If it's really strong, you might get double vision and want to go to sleep. Even from the mildest form of the drink, you will feel slightly sedated and have a general sense of wellbeing. Some islanders claim to have repeated religious experiences after drinking kava.

Medicinal Uses

Broken down, kava is a cocktail of up to 14 analgesics and anaesthetics that work as natural pain and appetite suppressants. The root also has antibacterial, relaxant, diuretic and decongestant properties, and has been recommended for cancer, asthma and stomach upsets. Studies showing that kava can combat depression, reduce anxiety and even lower blood pressure led to a short-lived kava boom in Western countries during the 1990s. Another study that claimed the root could potentially cause liver damage (this study was later discredited) resulted in bans and warnings on kava throughout the Western world.

EATING WITH KIDS

Kids can happily munch on fresh fish and fruit, chicken and coconut. Most places in the region have kid-pleaser items such as hamburgers, pastas and rice dishes on their menus, and the local cuisine is often soft enough for most children to be able to try new foods such as taro and breadfruit. Baby supplies are available in all but the most remote places.

Ice cream is frequently available, and it's a real treat in the hot weather.

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DOS & DON'TS

- Do make sure you try at least one meal cooked in a traditional earthen oven.
- Do wash your hands before a meal; you might be eating with your fingers.
- Do check regional chapters to find out the tipping protocol of the country you are visiting.
- Don't eat turtle; it's endangered and you'll be promoting illegal business.
- Don't just dig in; the Pacific is very religious and many people say grace before a meal.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Ways of eating in the Pacific islands vary according to the fare: Chinese and Japanese food is eaten with chopsticks; you should use your hands when eating traditional Pacific fare and some Indian specialities; and you can finally pick up a knife and fork for Western food. It's not as confusing as it sounds and, for the most part, no-one will ever complain if you fork through everything.

While many islanders eat copious breakfasts of fish, meat and staples, visitors are more likely to encounter more familiar fare like breads, coffee and sometimes fruit.

Lunch and dinner are often similar to each other, with plenty of fish and meat dishes available.

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