

The Australs

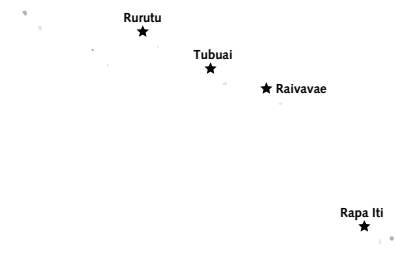


The Australs are like tropical island impostors; they *look* warm, but they're not. Coconut palms line the turquoise coasts and bananas flourish alongside vast taro fields, but don't let that fool you. Unless you arrive here between December and April, you'd better have a couple of sweaters and some warm socks in your suitcase. You won't need any air-con down here and the climate is perfect for outdoor activities like hiking and biking.

Polynesian culture is alive and well in this remote corner of the Pacific. The people live off fishing and taro production and the food is distinctly less influenced by the Chinese and French. This is a great place to meet local people, eat healthy meals and settle into a quiet, though sometimes chilly, island rhythm. The archipelago is remarkably varied, from the limestone caverns of Rurutu and the Bora Bora-like lagoon of Raivavae to the fertile slopes and windy bays of Tubuai. Tourism is developing, but at a pace that is well managed by the islands' inhabitants.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering unexcavated *marae* in the bush of **Tubuai** (p237) and **Raivavae** (p238)
- Visiting the surreal caves and caverns of **Rurutu** (p234)
- Swimming with awe-inspiring humpback whales at **Rurutu** (p235)
- *Motu*-hopping in the radiant **Raivavae lagoon** (p238)
- Climbing to the ancient *pa* on **Rapa Iti** (p240)



History

The Australs were the last of the Polynesian islands to be settled. It is believed that the first arrivals came from Tahiti between 1000 and 1300 AD, though European sightings of the chain were a drawn-out affair. Cook first saw Rurutu in 1769, Gayangos and Varela 'found' Raivavae in 1775, Cook was back to make the first landing on Tubuai in 1777 and Vancouver 'found' Rapa in 1791. It wasn't until Captain Samuel Pinder Henry chanced upon Rimatara in 1811 that the last of the islands came to European attention.

Apart from a colourful chapter in the *Bounty* saga, when the mutineers unsuccessfully tried to establish themselves on Tubuai, contact with Europeans and the Western world was limited until the late 19th and 20th centuries. In 1889 the French established a protectorate over the entire group, and in 1901 the last of the islands was formally annexed. This long period, during which English missionaries (or more frequently their native representatives) held sway, has ensured that Protestantism remains strong to this day.

Culture

Nearly all of French Polynesia was ravaged by disease at the onset of European contact, but the reverberation of these extremely bleak years is felt most strongly in the Australs. The sick and dying were often sent away from the villages to ancient Polynesian *marae*, religious sites. This made the

old beliefs not only heretical in regard to the Christian religion but also *tapu* – if you went to worship the old gods you might get sick. Eventually everything was abandoned and there remains a lingering sadness in the Australs for all that has been lost.

During the islands' prime, before most of the population had been killed off by a series of imported maladies, the Australs produced some of the finest art known in the Pacific. The statue of the Rurutu ancestor god A'a on display at the British Museum in London is one of the most important surviving Polynesian wood carvings. Canoe paddles, giant stone *tiki* and bowls were gradually pillaged and taken away to be displayed in museums far from the quiet islands from which they came. Today the Australs are renowned for their mats, hats and baskets woven from pandanus.

Getting There & Away

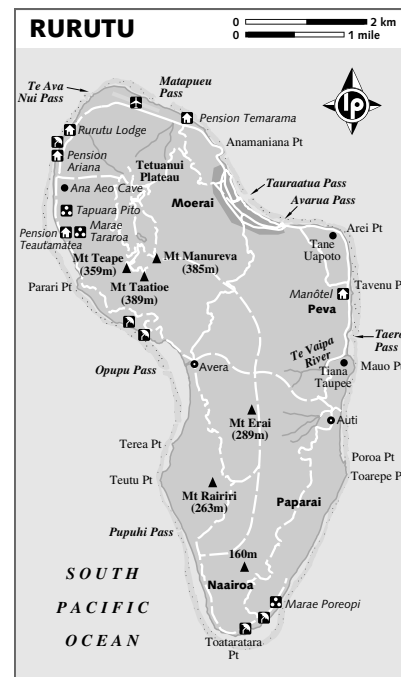
Air Tahiti flies to Rurutu and Tubuai four times weekly in the low season and five times weekly in the high season. One-way fares include Tahiti–Rurutu 19,000 CFP, Tahiti–Tubuai 21,000 CFP, Tahiti–Raivavae 24,000 CFP, Rurutu–Tubuai 10,000 CFP and Tubuai–Raivavae 9500 CFP. Rimatara has recently built an airstrip but no flights had been scheduled at the time of writing.

Getting to Rapa, over 1000km south of Tahiti, is a real adventure. The cargo ship *Tuhaa Pae II* makes three trips a month to the Australs, but stops off at Rapa only once every two months; see p265 for details.

RURUTU

pop 2098 / area 36 sq km

A magical island of migrating whales, abundant vegetation, limestone caves and smiling faces, Rurutu is the gem of the Australs. While the high islands of other French Polynesian archipelagos are extinct volcanic cones, Rurutu is a *makatea*, a massive chunk of coral reef that was lifted up to form an island (see the boxed text, p234). Because of this, the topography is startlingly different: sheer cliffs of pock-marked coral rise up around the coast, sometimes housing giant caverns filled with ferns and stalactites. There are a handful of ancient *marae*, some well preserved, and the locals will proudly tell you about their myths and history. The island is fringed by a continuous reef, rarely



largest, with the island's only dock plus a post office, bank, medical centre, pharmacy and several shops. A sealed road runs about a third of the way around the island, linking the airport with Moerai and Auti. Another sealed road climbs over the centre of the island to link Moerai with Avera, the third village.

There is an ATM inside the **Banque Socredo** (☎ 7.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) in Moerai. The **post office** (☎ 7am-3pm Mon-Thu, 7am-2pm Fri) is directly next to the mayor's office and the *gendarmerie* (police station) is at the southern end of town.

Sights

MOERAI

The island's main town is about 4km south-east of the airport; Tauraatua Pass leads directly into its small artificial harbour. The island's most famous resident was the French administrator Éric de Bisschop, who dedicated himself to making perilous voyages between South America and Polynesia in unsuitable craft. He is remembered by a simple gravestone in the **cemetery** to the south of the village.

MOERAI TO AUTI

Turning right out of Moerai, a short path leads up to a large cliff-face cavern with stalactites and stalagmites called **Tane Uapoto**. Traditionally this cave was used to salt (for preservation) and divide whale meat among the islanders. Just beyond the cave there's a whale-watching platform.

From Arei Point the road runs south along the coast until it reaches the Te Vaipo River, running into the sea beside Mauo Point, where there is another cavern in the cliff face, **Tiana Taupee**. From here the road climbs inland and skirts around the point before dropping down to quiet Auti village.

AUTI TO AVERA

Once out of Auti the road (now unsealed) climbs, drops back almost to sea level, then climbs again to over 100m before dropping steeply down to the coast near the southern tip of the island, **Toataratara Point**. This road runs along what was once the bottom of the lagoon. This part of the coast, about 500m east of the road, ends in steep cliffs, dropping 50m into the sea, which once formed the reef.

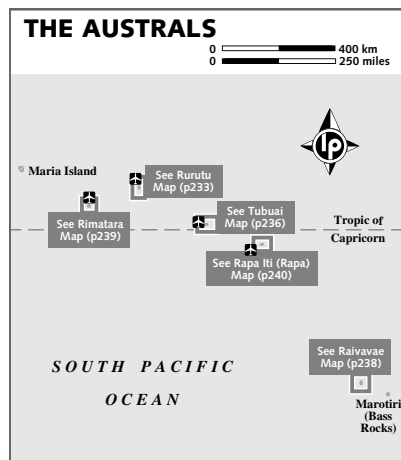
more than a stone's throw from the shoreline, so there's no lagoon as such. Even so, there are more beaches here than on most islands in French Polynesia and the sand is not the yellow-white of Bora Bora or Mo'orea, but a bright white of bleached coral.

Cook sailed past Rurutu in 1769 during his first voyage, but the islanders' hostile reception prevented him from landing. There was little contact with Europeans until well into the 19th century, when the London Missionary Society (LMS) sent native teachers to establish a mission. Christianity quickly took hold and European diseases arrived at much the same time, with disastrous results.

Orientation & Information

Rurutu is about the same size as Bora Bora, but don't even think about pedalling it unless you're a seasoned cyclist. Apart from the Moerai to Marae Tararoa section, which is practically flat, the route is very hilly, with short and steep rises that will discourage even those with the best of intentions.

The population is concentrated in three main villages on the coast. Moerai is the



MAKATEA

A *makatea* is a geological phenomenon that takes Darwin's theory of atoll formation one step further. Volcanic islands gradually grow coral reefs that form a ring around the island and form small islets, as is visible at Bora Bora, Mo'orea and Raivavae. Over time, the volcanic cones sink, forming atolls: rings of coral encircling a lagoon, such as those found in the Tuamotus. A *makatea* is formed by the added jolt of nearby volcanic activity that causes the sea floor to buckle and forces the sunken volcanic cone and its surrounding coral islets up to the surface. This forms a hilly, volcanic island walled in by a fossilised coral limestone shell. Rurutu is a textbook example of a *makatea*, with a fertile interior and a steep, jagged coastline pocked with magnificent limestone caves.

At the southern end of the island, near Toataratara Point, is the small **Marae Poreopi**, with the spike-like vertical stones characteristic of Austral *marae*. A series of beautiful little **beaches** runs to the east of the point.

Avera is a populous little village with sprawling taro plantations, and is beside a pretty beach.

AVERA TO MOERAI

Behind Pension Teautamatea and right in the middle of a coconut plantation are the well-preserved remains of **Marae Tararoa**, the *marae* of the last Rurutu royal family. At one time this *marae* was only a small part of the larger and now destroyed Maraé Vitaria, which stretched for over 1km. It's still an extensive site, punctuated by many vertical stones.

Situated about 500m north, to the right, is **Tapuara Pito**, an ancient sacred site where women who had just given birth came to cut the umbilical cord of the newborn on a rock.

Another 500m further on, there is a little track going to the right that leads to the huge **Ana Aeo Cave**. *Aeo* is the Rurutu word for 'echo', and the cave is named after the echoes of the cries of war victims who were sacrificed and consumed here. Today the locals have also dubbed it the Mitterrand

Cave since President Francois Mitterrand visited here in 1990. With its abundant stalactites and stalagmites, the cave evokes the interior of a baroque cathedral.

Activities

Whale-watching is the reason many people visit Rurutu, and two companies offer whale excursions: the **Raie Manta Club** (☎ 96 85 60, 72 31 45; raiebantadub@mail.pf; half day 10,000 CFP), which has been offering very professional tours for over nine years; and the new, locally operated **Rurutu Baleines Excursions** (☎ 94 07 91, 70 30 53; half day 9000 CFP), which is heavily supported by the population of Rurutu. The **Raie Manta Club** (☎ 96 84 80; http://raiebantadub.free.fr) also offers exploration dives around the coast (see p63 for details about dive sites).

All *pensions* offer worthwhile **island tours** for around 4000 CFP, usually with guides who are very knowledgeable about the history of the island (see opposite for contact details). Other activities can be arranged through different *pensions* – they are all used to working with each other so it's fine to call another *pension* to organise a specific activity.

For **horse-riding**, contact Viriamu at Pension Teautamatea. Superb trips, suitable for all levels, follow trails in the interior of the island, particularly around Tetuanui Plateau and Mt Taatioe (5000 CFP for a half day).

Yves at Manôtel leads informative **hiking tours** with the emphasis on flora, fauna and local legends. At Pension Temarama short **cave tours** to some otherwise hard-to-access caves are available for 1000 CFP – Landry, the guide, is a school teacher so is only available during school holidays and weekends.

The interior of the island, with its gentle variations in altitude, is perfect for **walking**. A network of walking tracks crisscross the fertile Tetuanui Plateau (200m), leading to the peaks of Taatioe (389m), Manureva (385m) and Teape (359m). Located towards the south of the island is Mt Erai (289m). Ask someone to show you the way. Or on your own, on the cross-island road between Moerai and Avera, take one of two tracks signposted at the side of the road (one reads 'Manureva'; the other says 'Pito' and leads to Mt Erai).

Sleeping & Eating

You can't go wrong in Rurutu – every option has something special. Airport transfers are free for guests and, unless otherwise mentioned, credit cards are not accepted.

Manôtel (☎ 93 02 26; fax 93 02 25; manotel@mail.pf; bungalow s/d/tr 6000/6500/7000 CFP, half/full board per person 3500/5500 CFP) Manôtel is in the Peva area on the east coast, near Moerai. There are four clean, very pretty bungalows here with fan, bathroom and terrace, across the road from a long stretch of beach. The garden is blooming with colours and the welcome is charming.

Rurutu Lodge (☎ 94 02 15, 79 09 01; rurutulodge@mail.pf; bungalow s/d 8500/14,000 CFP; 📺 📶) This is the biggest and most upmarket place in Rurutu, recently acquired and given a complete re-model by the owners of the Raie Manta diving club. You won't find as much of a connection with the locals here but it is beautifully designed, with authentic Polynesian detail, and has a swimming pool, tennis courts, flower-filled gardens and a decent beach. Credit cards are accepted; Internet access was being planned at the time of writing. There is a two-night minimum stay.

RURUTU, ISLAND OF WHALES

There are few activities in the world as fantastic as having the opportunity to swim with humpback whales. Rurutu, which has been nicknamed Island of Whales, actually has fewer of these mammals visiting its coastlines each year than Mo'orea or Tahiti. What makes this an ideal place to see them is the absence of a lagoon, which causes the whales to come closer to shore. The incredible visibility allows you to see the whales from quite far away.

The whales come to Rurutu between July and October to reproduce before heading back to the icy waters of the Antarctic. There are no promises that you will see any, but the best chance of seeing the whales is in August and September. *Pensions* fill quickly around this time.

Two clubs organise whale-watching trips that are open to all – they'll even pull unconfident swimmers along on a boogie board if it's not too rough; see opposite for more information.

Pension Ariana (☎ 94 06 69; fax 94 07 14; pension.ariana@hotmail.com; s/d 4000/5000 CFP, bungalow s/d 4500/5500 CFP; half/full board per person 3500/5500 CFP) In a labyrinth of lush gardens and coconut palms descending to a private beach of white sand, this *pension* has four rooms in its main building with shared bathroom, and seven rustic, colourful bungalows with private bathroom. Owner Ariana is a likable character who keeps her staff and guests in good order.

Pension Teautamatea (☎ /fax 93 02 93; pension.teautamatea@free.fr; s/d/tr/q with half board 7500/12,000/16,500/21,000 CFP) There are six extremely clean rooms at this excellent *pension*, four with bathroom. The setting is enchanting: a coconut plantation (which includes Maraé Tararoa) stretches behind the building and you only have to cross a track to get to the beach.

Pension Temarama (☎ 93 02 80, 72 30 20; fax 93 02 81; pensiontemarama@mail.pf; s/d 4000/5000 CFP; half/full board per person 4000/5000 CFP; 📺) Near the airport, this option has eight rooms with bathrooms in a big white house. Although the setting is nothing special and the building is not particularly Polynesian, it's spotlessly clean, the welcome is warm and the food has a good reputation. Credit cards are accepted.

Snack Chez Paulette (mains 900-1000 CFP; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This is the only snack place on the island but it's a good one. It has no sign and is hidden behind a gate right across from the boat quay in Moerai. Regular *snack* fare is offered plus a few extras like stuffed peppers and luscious chocolate cake.

Shopping

Rurutu is known for its hats made with pandanus. Try the shop at the airport, which is open to coincide with flights, and Hei Pae Ore, an artisanal shop right near the mayor's office in Moerai.

Getting There & Around

Rurutu, about 600km south of Tahiti, is the most accessible of the Australs, served by regular flights and shipping services. **Air Tahiti** (☎ 94 03 57) has an office at the airport, which is open before and after each flight. Cargo ships dock at Moerai.

If you have booked accommodation you will be picked up at the airport, which is about 4km from Moerai. Most *pensions*

rent out bicycles for 1000 to 1600 CFP a day. Pension Temarama also rents a 4WD for a prohibitive 8700 CFP for eight hours.

TUBUAI

pop 1979 / area 45 sq km

With its spreading, fertile plains, low hills and temperate climate, Tubuai is the fruit bowl and veggie bin of French Polynesia. Carrots, potatoes, cabbages and leeks are grown, as well as watermelons, pineapples and lychees: some produce is consumed locally but most is sent by cargo ship to the markets of Pape'ete.

Tubuai is the largest of the Austral Islands, and the administrative centre of the archipelago. With an average of 300 days of wind per year, it could also become a mecca for kitesurfing and windsurfing.

Locals are proud to tell visitors about the *Bounty* mutineers who tried, unsuccessfully, to establish themselves on Tubuai in 1789 and were met with such hostility that they were forced to leave. From 1822 the LMS dispatched native teachers to the island who met with a more gentle welcome

and today the island is still predominantly Protestant.

European diseases started to afflict the islanders around the time of evangelism, and in the few years to 1828 the population reportedly plummeted dramatically from 3000 to less than 300. The island chiefs ceded power to Pomare II when he visited the Australs in 1819, so when Tahiti came under France's wing in 1842, Tubuai soon followed.

Orientation & Information

Tubuai is the only French Polynesian island that is completely encircled by a sandy beach. Two mountain ranges slope down to the flat plains by the sea and a low-lying central region bisects the two. A cross-island road connects Mataura and Mahu. The island is surrounded by a wide, shallow lagoon with an outer reef dotted by a handful of *motu* at its eastern end.

Mataura, about 4km east of the airport, is the main village and has a post office, a **Banque Socredo** (☎ 7-11.30am & 1.30-4pm Mon-Fri) with an ATM outside and a supermarket.

A few smaller stores are dotted round the island. There is a basic hospital.

Sights

Over 200 *marae* have been found in Tubuai but the few that were cleared were never restored and they are now covered once again with weeds and vines. The most interesting and accessible of these sites is **Taputapuatea**, which, legend has it, was built by Tamatoa, the same king who constructed the better-known Taputapuatea on the Leeward Island of Ra'iatea. A paved track from the village of Tamatoa veers to the left and the *marae* is on a small signposted footpath to the right. A little further along the paved road is the signposted **Marae Hariitaata**, which once served as a meeting place for chiefs.

The *Bounty* is remembered by a sign on the northeastern corner of the island marking the site of **Fort George**, where the mutineers attempted to set up camp for two months in 1789.

If you head towards the airport from Moerai you will see a small reef pass that opens onto a white-sand beach. This was the site where the mutineers massacred Tubuai warriors, and the bay has been dubbed **Baie Sanglant** (Bloody Bay) after the spilled blood that turned the turquoise lagoon to a deep red. The warriors are apparently buried about 100m back from the beach here behind an upright stone (which is over 2m high!) called **faito taata**. This massive stone, which is now nearly hidden in weeds behind a concrete house, was once used to gauge a young man's height; if he was taller than the stone he could become an *aito* (warrior).

Activities

Raroata Kite Surf (☎ /fax 95 07 12; maletdoom@mail.pf), run by effervescent Wilson Doom, was in the process of setting up a kitesurfing and windsurfing club at the time of writing.

The locally run dive centre **La Bonne Bout-eille** (☎ /fax 95 08 41; www.labonneboutelleplongee.com in French) offers diving as well as whale-watching (7000 CFP) or swimming with whales (10,000 CFP). See p63 for details about dive sites.

Lagoon tours offered by the *pensions* cost about 6000 CFP per person, with a picnic provided, and are a nice way to spend

the day. However, the *motu* are not very spectacular when compared with those of Raivavae or elsewhere in the islands. **Island tours** take about three hours, visiting the island's fecund interior as well as some hidden and overgrown *marae*. For more information ask at your *pension*; the cost is around 2500 CFP.

There are several good **walking** opportunities, the best being to the summit of Mt Taitaa (422m). The route is signposted along the cross-island road and the return journey takes about three hours. The easiest way up is from the trailhead near Pension Vaiteanui.

Sleeping & Eating

Come prepared for mosquitoes and don't count on using credit cards.

Pension Vaiteanui (☎ /fax 93 22 40; bodinn@mail.pf; s/d 3500/6000 CFP; half/full board per person 3500/6000 CFP) This well-run, centrally located *pension* on the cross-island road has five rooms with bathroom. All activities can be organised and it also has a good pizzeria.

Chez Yolande (☎ /fax 95 05 52; s/d with half board 8000/12,000 CFP) Right by the sea in Mataura, this attractive place has six immaculate rooms with bathroom in a modern and functional house. The upstairs rooms are the most private.

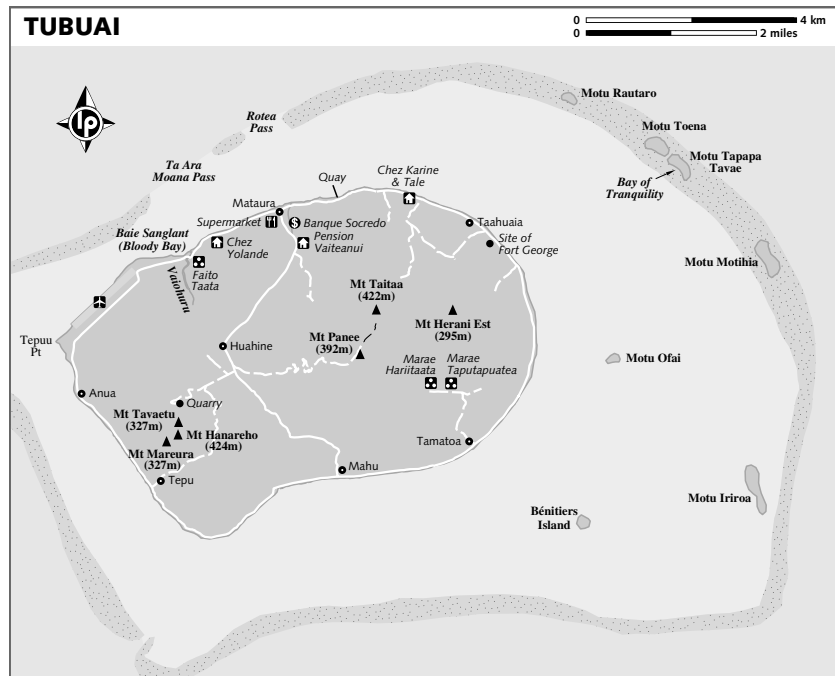
Chez Karine & Tale (☎ 93 23 49; s/d/tr 5000/8000/10,000 CFP) The two well-equipped and spacious bungalows are homey and clean. Breakfast is included in the price but you are on your own for other meals.

Roulotte Vahinearui (☎ 95 03 97; mains 900-1000 CFP; ☎ 8am-1pm & 6-10pm) About 1km after the quay from Mataura, this pleasant place serves hefty portions of steak, chicken or fish with fries.

There is one supermarket in Mataura, plus a scattering of smaller stores around the island. The best deals on fresh produce are from roadside stalls.

Getting There & Around

Tubuai is 600km south of Tahiti and about midway between Rurutu to the northwest and Raivavae to the southeast. It can be reached by plane or cargo ship. **Air Tahiti** (☎ 95 04 76) has an office at the airport. Cargo ships enter through the large passes on the northwestern edge of the reef and dock at Mataura.



Airport transfers are free if you have booked accommodation. Cycling the flat 25km of coast road is a pleasant way to pass a few hours; Pension Vaiteanui and Chez Yolande have bicycles (free) and a car (rates negotiable) for clients' use.

RAIVAVAE

pop 1049 / area 16 sq km

Often cited as one of the most beautiful islands in the Pacific, Raivavae (rye-vie-vie) has a lagoon that rivals that of Bora Bora's, a mountainous interior dominated by square-topped Mt Hiro (437m) and five quiet, flower-filled villages. The airstrip opened in 2001 and this somniferous paradise has yet to be discovered by the tourist industry. That said, there really isn't that much to do once you've been around the island and visited the lagoon.

The quay is at Rairua as well as a post office, infirmary and *gendarmerie*. Little stores everywhere along the coast road are well stocked with canned goods but there is little fresh produce available. For fish you'll need to contact the local fishermen.

History

Captain Thomas Gayangos of Spain was the first European to land on Raivavae when he stopped there in 1775 en route to Peru. The island was ceded to Pomare II of Tahiti in 1819, and then became a French protectorate in 1842.

In 1826 the same European fever that had devastated the island of Tubuai reached Raivavae and killed almost the entire population. Of 3000 inhabitants, only about 100 people survived, and the island's cultural and seafaring traditions were wiped out.

Archaeological Sites

Most of Raivavae's *marae* have either been destroyed to create taro fields, used as foundations for houses or been simply forgotten in the bush. **Marae Paomaovao**, across the street from the airport, gets periodically cleared but it's not always visible.

Raivavae is most famous for its two giant stone *tiki*, which are now displayed in museums on Tahiti (one at the Musée Gauguin and the other at the Musée de Tahiti). Legend states that a third *tiki*, the

son of the two giant ones, leapt from the boat when it was being taken away with its parents and now lies on the bottom of the lagoon near the boat quay. So far there is no solid evidence as to whether this third *tiki* really exists. The only verifiable remaining *tiki* stands neglected and overgrown in a private garden just to the west of Mahanatoa.

Sleeping

All *pensions* offer excursions to *motu* (2000 to 6000 CFP) and Mt Hiro (2000 CFP), plus a free tour of the island by car and free bikes for stays over three days. Don't even think about mentioning credit cards.

Tama Resort (☎/fax 95 42 52; r or bungalows with half/full board per person 8000/10,000 CFP) Two clean coconut-thatched bungalows with bathrooms sit on one of Raivavae's best beaches; there are also three more simple rooms with shared bathroom back towards the mountain on offer.

Chez Linda et Nelson (☎/fax 95 44 25; s/d with half board 7000/13,000 CFP, with full board 9500/17,000 CFP) This is a well-kept place with three rooms with shared bathroom. Four Polynesian-style bungalows were under construction at the time of writing. The owners could possibly be some of the nicest people in the world.

Pension Ataha (☎/fax 95 43 69; r per person 3500 CFP, Ataha Sauvage per person 1500 CFP) Ataha has three options: a three-room house west of the airport (all rooms have shared bath, equipped kitchen and living area) and Ataha Sauvage, a rustic hut on stilts situated all by itself on a dreamy *motu* of white sand. Excellent *maa tahiti* is served at the *pension* or brought out to the *motu*. Half/full board per person is 3500/5500 CFP.

Pension Moana (☎/fax 95 42 66; s/d/tr 2500/4000/5000 CFP) The three rooms with shared bathroom are pretty funky but the site, on a secluded peninsula, is fantastic. Grandma cooks up plenty of local treats for guests and is a respected hat weaver. Half/full board per person is 2600/4600 CFP.

Pension Rau'uru (☎/fax 95 42 88; r with half/full board per person 6000/8000 CFP, s/d incl daily excursions 22,000/40,000 CFP) One suite with bathroom and kitchenette and two rooms with shared bathroom are available in the house of this charming family.

Getting There & Away

Raivavae is about 650km southeast of Tahiti and 200km southeast of Tubuai. Air Tahiti operates flights to/from Pape'ete three days a week, sometimes via Tubuai. The ship *Tuhua Pae II* comes by about twice a month.

RIMATARA

pop 791 / area 8 sq km

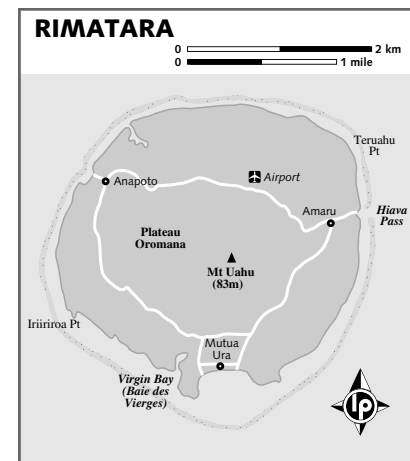
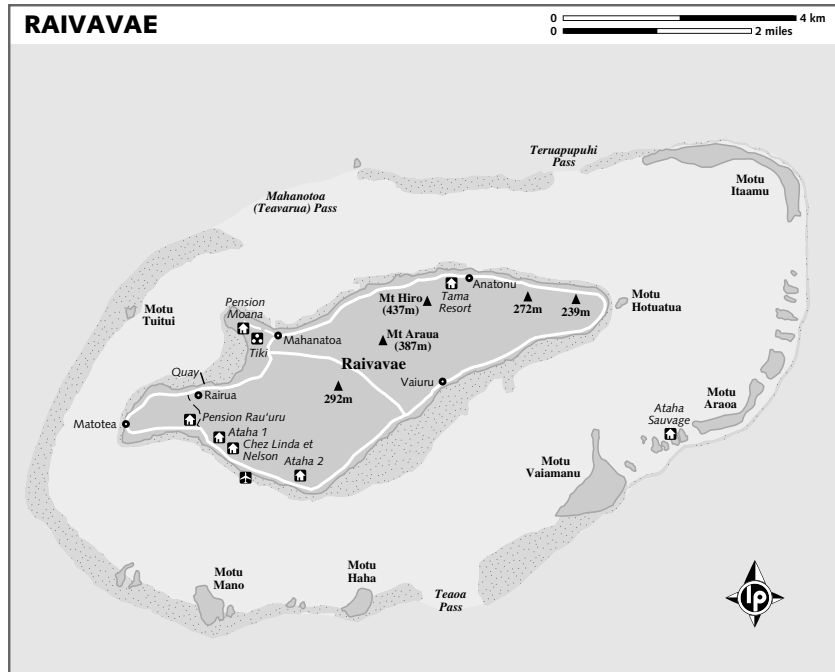
The tiny island of Rimatara is a rough circle measuring 4km in diameter, rising to Mt Uahu (Mt Vahu; 83m) in the centre.

Like Rurutu the island is circled by a fringing reef, and the narrow Hiava Pass lets small boats in to land on the beach in front of Amaru or Anapoto. The waterfront cemetery is the first thing visitors see on landing at Amaru. Traditionally, arriving visitors would pass through the smoke of a purifying fire as they stepped ashore.

Rimatara is the most densely populated Austral island. Pandanus work and shell necklaces, plus the plantations, support the islanders, who have preserved their own distinct dialect.

Rimatara was the last of the Australs to be 'discovered', in 1811. The first native missionary teachers came to the island in 1821 and within two years the entire population of 300 had been converted to Christianity.

There are no hotels or *pensions* as such, but you won't have any trouble negotiating directly with the locals for accommodation. It's a good idea to bring some supplies, as there are no grocery stores.



Getting There & Away

Rimatara is located about 600km south-west of Tahiti and 150km west of Rurutu. At the time of writing an airstrip had just been completed but Air Tahiti had not yet scheduled flights to the island. Inter-island cargo ships stop at the island every three or so weeks.

RAPA ITI (RAPA)

pop 521 / area 22 sq km

Rapa is French Polynesia's most remote and isolated island – its nearest inhabited neighbour, Raiavae, is over 500km away. This far south there are no coral reefs and no coconut palms, and the temperature can drop as low as 5°C in winter.

Of its soaring and jagged-edged peaks, six reach over 400m, the highest being Mt Perau (650m). The island is known as Rapa Iti (Little Rapa) to distinguish it from Rapa Nui (Big Rapa, the Polynesian name for Easter Island) but everyone just calls it 'Rapa'. The population is concentrated in the villages of Haurei and Area, which are on opposite sides of Haurei Bay. They are generally linked by boat as there is only a rough road around the bay.

History

Like the rest of the Australs, Rapa's European contact led to a series of disastrous epidemics starting around 1816. From a crowded 2000 at first contact, the population had plummeted to 500 by 1838 and

to a mere 150 people by 1864. The final blow came when Peruvian slaving ships raided the islands and carried people away to work on guano islands off the Peruvian coast. The men of Rapa Iti seized one of the ships, sailed it to Tahiti and demanded that the French take action. The Peruvians attempted to return over 300 of the Polynesians they had enslaved, but the vast majority died en route; the handful of survivors who landed on Rapa Iti brought a smallpox epidemic with them, which decimated the rest of the population.

When steamships began to operate across the Pacific, a coaling station was established on Rapa Iti for ships crossing the Pacific Ocean to Australia and New Zealand. In an attempt to combat the English influence in Polynesia, the French annexed Rapa Iti.

The waters around the island are rich in fish, and the island possesses an abundant population of goats. Taro is the principal crop but some fine coffee and excellent oranges are also grown.

Archaeological Sites

Between Haurei and Hiri Bays, **Morongo Uta Pa** is the best preserved of Rapa Iti's ancient *pa*. It was restored by Norwegian archaeologists led by Thor Heyerdahl and by New Zealand archaeologist and anthropologist William Mulloy in 1956. Heyerdahl wrote about their work on Rapa Iti in his book *Aku-Aku*. The great *pa* has terraces separated by deep moats around the central fortress, which has a perimeter of over 300m and is overlooked by a double-pyramid watchtower.

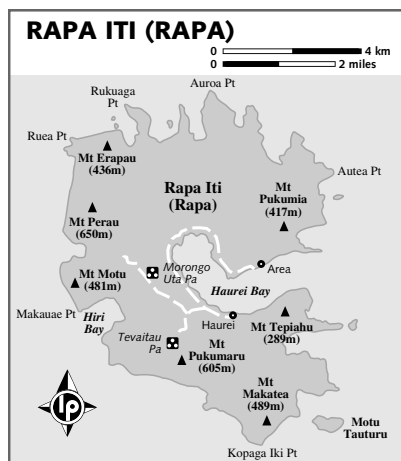
Directly overlooking Haurei is the **Tevaitau Pa**, restored in 1960. Other *pa* can be found along the mountain ridge and at the passes from one valley to another.

Sleeping

Chez Titaua (☎ 95 72 59; fax 95 72 60; r per night/month 5000/60,000 CFP), near the quay in Haurei, is the only *pension* on the island.

Getting There & Away

Rapa Iti is more than 1000km southeast of Tahiti and more than 500km beyond Raiavae. The *Tuhaa Pae II* usually calls at Rapa Iti once a month, but that can be subject to changes due to weather, freight demands and scheduling.



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