

French Polynesia



French Polynesia Travel Guide

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1. Why you should visit French Polynesia

Would you like to visit a country with gorgeous white or black sand beaches that you can visit year-round and that has incredibly turquoise waters with some of the best snorkeling in the South Pacific right off the beach? Would you like to experience French savoir-vivre charm and meet some of the friendliest people on the planet?

French Polynesia has all that waiting for you. So, when do you visit?



Unlike the neighboring Cook Islands, the islands of French Polynesia are usually larger and have much more rugged and towering mountains. Nevertheless, you can easily explore the islands by car or scooter and the well-developed road system. As the population in French Polynesia is higher than that of the Cook Islands, and there are more visitors, the tourist infrastructure is typically better developed. On the other hand, you will have it more difficult finding deserted beaches. Even on busy days, we often had lots of space between us and our sunbathing beach neighbors.

Papeete in Tahiti has the only international airport in French Polynesia. Many tourists use Papeete as a jump-off point to other islands and don't spend a whole lot of time in Tahiti. We can understand that the incredible beauty of islands like Bora Bora and Moorea get so much attention, but Tahiti is quite different and, in our opinion, definitely worth a few days of your time. In this French Polynesia Purple Guide we will tell you why.

Unlike other French Polynesian islands, Tahiti shows its volcanic origins by having mostly black sand beaches and only few beaches where white sand mixes with various amounts of black sand and creates different shades of grey.

In this French Polynesia Purple Guide, we will tell you what you need to know to visit Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora and we show you the best things to do in these islands and, of course, we show you where the best beaches and snorkeling locations are.

To help you find out what best fits you, we have added lots of photos and links to google maps locations and additional reviews. Join us to explore the best things to see and do in French Polynesia.

This is not an in-depth French Polynesia guide. You can buy those from the big travel guide companies. Our goal is to help you Make Memorable Moments on a relaxing French Polynesia trip and help you build the perfect itinerary for your trip.

Please also check out the other exciting destinations and travel guides on our Backpack and Snorkel [website](#).

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We have made some videos about Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora in French Polynesia. Please check them out.

Tahiti



The best things to see & do
© backpackandsnorkel.com

Moorea



The best things to see & do
© backpackandsnorkel.com

Bora Bora



The best things to see & do
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2.1 Disclaimer

In this guide I am doing my best to give you the most accurate information. Over time, however, prices, times, and even attractions are subject to change. Therefore, I and backpackandsnorkel.com cannot be held responsible for the experiences of users while traveling. I strongly suggest that you write or call the attractions you plan to visit for confirmation when you make your travel plans.

Also, please stay alert, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye on your belongings. Pickpockets and other criminals can easily ruin even the best planned vacation.

2.2 Copyright

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3. General Information about French Polynesia

French Polynesia consists of 75 inhabited and 46 uninhabited islands and atolls and has a population of almost 300,000 people. The islands and atolls are divided into 5 groups: a) Society Islands archipelago, b) Tuamotu Archipelago, c) the Gambier Islands, d) Marquesas Islands and e) Austral Islands.

As the name suggests, French Polynesia is an overseas collectivity of France and France's only overseas country. In contrast to the Cook Islands who are in a free association with New Zealand, French Polynesia is largely dependent on France. While the local government controls primary and secondary education, environmental protection, healthcare and infrastructure, the government in France controls defense, university education, justice and security.

3.1 Driving a car or scooter in French Polynesia

Cars and scooters are driven on the right side of the road like in France and the USA. The speed limit is typically 50 km/h (31 mph) in urban areas and 60 km/h (37 mph) outside the settlements.

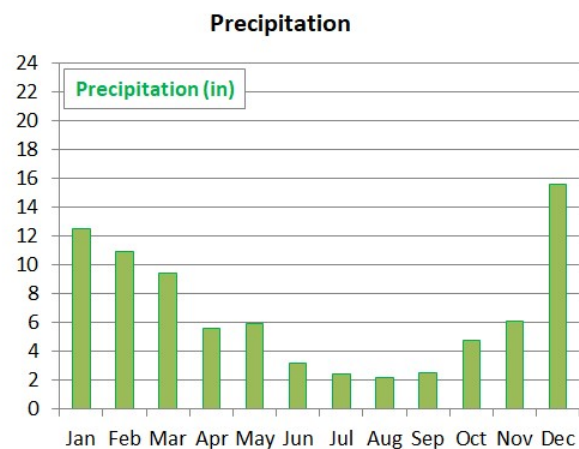
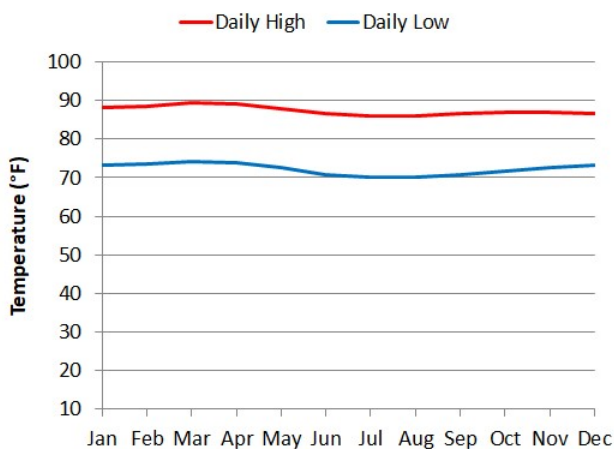
You are not allowed to pump your gas at gas stations. An attendant will pump the gas for you.

3.3 Climate of French Polynesia

French Polynesia have warm and sunny weather all year long. May through October are considered the dry season while November through April represent the wet season. Please be advised that there is a chance of a short rain shower all-day long and during the wetter months you will typically rain showers come and go during the day, but you can also have rain that is heavy at times and that lasts for many days. The higher the mountains, the higher the chance to have clouds hang around and release their water load.

The high amount of rain and the high temperatures during that time lead to high humidity levels that can reach 100%.

The climate that you can expect during your Tahiti and Moorea visit is shown here:



3.4 History of French Polynesia

The Marquesas Islands in French Polynesia were settled at around 200BC and the Society Islands incl. Tahiti were discovered and settled by Polynesians at around 300AD.

- 1521: Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan sights the isolated Puka-Puka atoll in the Tuāmotu-Gambier archipelago
- 1722: Dutch Jakob Roggeveen sights Bora Bora
- 1767: British explorer Samuel Wallis visits Tahiti
- 1812: Protestant Christian conversion of Tahiti happens by the British
- 1834: French Catholic missionaries arrive on Tahiti, but are expelled 2 years later
- 1842: France declares Tahiti and Tahuata French protectorates and Catholic missionaries begin their work to convert the locals to the Catholic church
- 1847: After the Franco-Tahitian war, France and England sign the Jarnac Convention that confirms France's status over Tahiti and declares that Raiatea, Huahine and Bora Bora are to remain independent from England and France
- 1880: France annexes Tahiti, making it a colony
- 1888: France breaks the Jarnac Convention and annexes Raiatea, Huahine and Bora Bora
- 1889: France annexes more islands

4.1 General information about Tahiti

With a population of almost 190,000 people, Tahiti accounts for 69% of French Polynesia's population. It is the most developed island in French Polynesia and has by far the most things to see and do, especially when it comes to non-beach activities.

It is also the largest island in French Polynesia and the tallest and the only international airport is located here.

The highest peak, Mont Orohena, is 7,352 ft (2241 m) tall.

Tahiti was formed through volcanic activity between 1.4-0.87 mio years ago. The island consists of a larger northwestern volcanic part which is called Tahiti Nui (big Tahiti) and a smaller southeastern volcanic part which is called Tahiti Iti (small Tahiti).

Both are connected through an isthmus which is named after the town of Taravao which is located here.

The rugged interior of the island is covered with dense vegetation and is almost entirely uninhabited.

The infamous mutiny on the Bounty took place three weeks after the HMS Bounty under Captain William Bligh left Tahiti, on 28 April 1789. The mutineers seized the ship and set captain Bligh and his loyal crew members adrift in a boat. Afterwards, some of the mutineers went back and settled in Tahiti.

4.2 Getting around in Tahiti

Visitors either rent a car, use the bus, or hire a taxi to get to their destinations. Because Papeete has a lot of cars and traffic and distances can be great, renting a scooter is not a good idea unless you are experienced and know what you are doing.

4.2.1 Taxis in Tahiti

Taxis are plentiful in Tahiti and not too expensive. Only cash is accepted.

As in most places in the world, you can flag taxis down in the streets. The biggest taxi stands are at the airport (near the McDonalds) and near the Vaima Shopping Center ([map](#)) in Papeete.

At the time of writing, these were the government-set prices:

- Base fare: 1,000 CFP
- Luggage in trunk: 100 CFP per piece per 5kg
- Bulky luggage: 500 CFP per piece
- Animals: 100 CFP per animal
- Wait time: 625 CFP up to 15min; 1,250 CFP up to 30min; 2,500 CFP up to 60min
- Rate per km: 130 CFP (from 6am-8pm) and 230 CFP (from 8pm-6am)

Papeete Market ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The Papeete Market is also called Le Marché de Papeete or Papeete Municipal Market. It is one of the must-sees in Papeete. If you have time, then go there on a weekend morning when this place is buzzing much more than it normally is. Papeete Market is located in a large two-story hall, but on Sunday mornings the streets outside the building will be crowded with vendors selling everything from meats, produce and pastry to clothes and souvenirs. This is also the time when many Tahitian families shop here.

Inside the building on the first floor, you will find a section that sells mostly souvenirs, but the majority is dedicated to vendors that sell fresh meats and lots of fish, produce and flowers. There are also several food booths that sell everything from pizza to Chinese or Thai or Polynesian food.

The upstairs section is less busy. It is reserved for local artisans selling their handicrafts including some beautiful paintings.

Cash is king in the Papeete Market.

The Papeete Market is open daily from 7:30am to 6pm, except Sundays when it closes at 9am. Do not expect too many stalls to still be open by closing time.

We did not see it but were told that fresh fish is brought in from the ships at around 4pm.

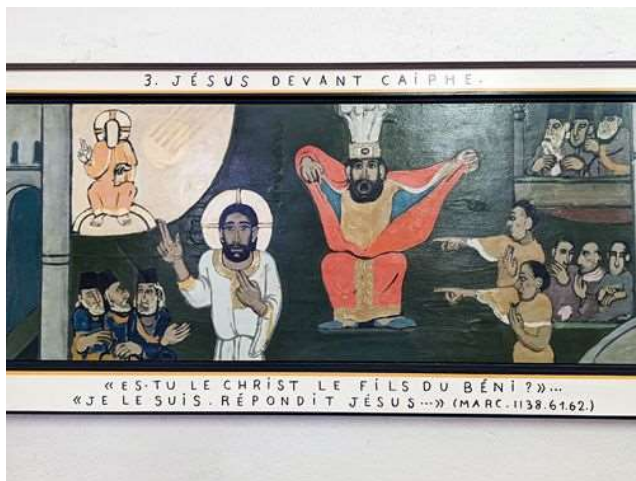
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Notre Dame Cathedral ([map](#), [reviews](#), [website](#))

With construction completed in 1875, the Notre Dame Cathedral in Papeete is the oldest Catholic church in Tahiti and one of Papeete's last remaining buildings built in early colonial architectural style.

What we especially liked are the incorporation of Tahitian people and dresses into the paintings of biblical stories on the walls. In front of the church, you will find the way marker PK0.



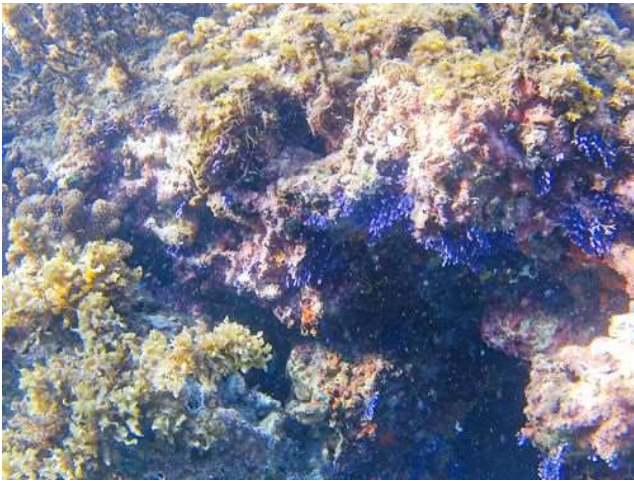
5.2.1 Plage de la Pointe Venus (Point Venus Beach) ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The Point Venus is a peninsula that was named after Captain James Cook established an observatory, and a fortified camp called "Fort Venus", here to observe the 1769 Transit of Venus. Point Venus Beach is a beautiful black sand beach that has crystal clear water, good swimming and very good snorkeling at the buoy closest to the northwestern side of the beach.

Between the parking lot and the beach are several monuments worth your attention. There is the Point Venus Lighthouse, the small Cook Monument that can easily be missed, a monument honoring the missionaries in French Polynesia, and a monument about the HMS Bounty.



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5.3.2 Faarumai Three Waterfalls (Cascades de Faarumai) ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The parking lot for the Faarumai Waterfalls is a little farther down the road than what google maps tells you.

Most people only go to the first of the three falls, but our advice is to see all three.

Before you start your hike, apply mosquito repellant, especially if you plan to hike to all three waterfalls.

The legend how the Faarumai Valley got its name

There once was a chief called Marurai who lived in this valley and whose daughter Fauai was the prettiest girl in the valley. To protect her, Marurai announced that he would not allow her to have contact or even talk to any boys her age. The punishment for the boys would be that he would put them to death.

One day, Fauai decided to go and pick flowers in the valley, and this is where she met a young man named Tua. Tua grabbed her flowers and ran. Fauai was taken by surprise and screamed. This alerted her guards who pursued Tua and killed him, making Fauai incredibly sad.

A short time later, the mother from Fauai fell ill and the healer who was called needed certain medical plants that Fauai was then asked to pick.

Fauai went out to find the plants with her two guards. During the search, Fauai met Ivi, a young man of her age. Ivi told her that he was also looking for medical plants. To avoid that Ivi will meet the same fate as Tua, Fauai pulled Ivi behind a bush and told her guards to stay away.

Whispering to each other, Ivy told Fauai that he wanted to take her with him into the valley to which she agreed. So, they snuck out.

When the guards realize that Fauai was gone, they began searching for her. At one time during the pursuit, Ivy ask Fauai to split ways, but she refused and said: You have to hide me, and we will live together ever after.

Hearing this. Ivy revealed that he was the Wizard of the Valley and that he sometimes turned himself into the young man that Fauai was seeing.

Right before the guards were going to catch them, Fauai said: I will stay by your side whatever happens.

Then, a deafening sound filled the air and water started running down the hillsides enveloping them by forming two waterfalls. Fauai and Ivy are said to have lived behind the two waterfalls happily ever after.

It is said that sometimes at full moon, two fluorescent figures appear on the rocks behind the waterfalls. That is the reason the two falls are named Haamaremare Rahi and Haamaremare Iti, meaning: to make fluorescent.

On their way back, a new waterfall came into existence and enveloped the two guards. This waterfall is called Vaimahuta, meaning: water that surprises or passes over.

As a result of this, the valley was named **Faarumai**, meaning: to bear, to endure.

How to get to the waterfalls

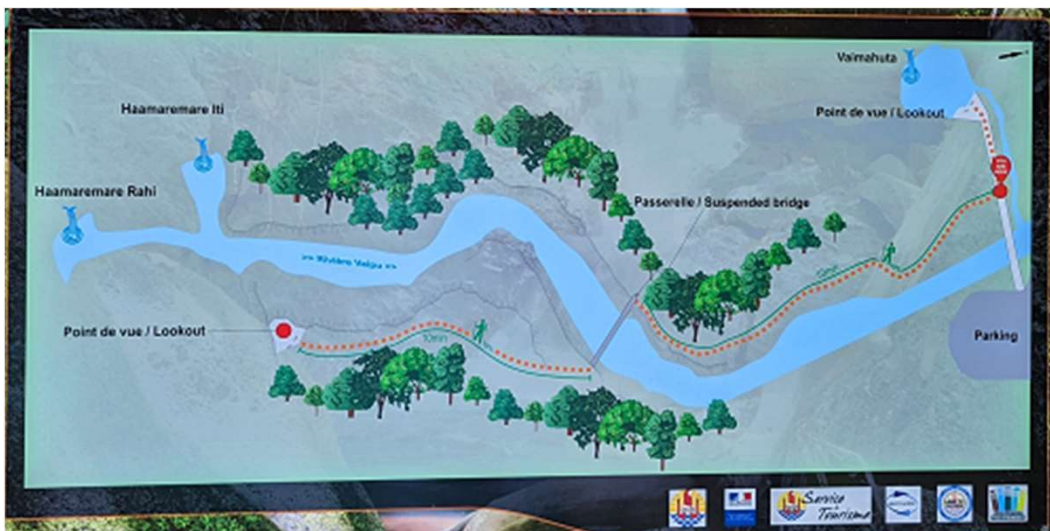
The walking path to the first waterfall starts at the bamboo forest and is only 450ft (150m) long. After a few feet on this path, you will see a path branching off to the left – this trail goes to the other 2 waterfalls.

Keep going straight on this easy trail and you will come to the first waterfall in 2 or 3 minutes. This waterfall is called Vaimahuta, and you can get all the way to the small pond in front of it. The water drops 300ft at Vaimahuta.



On your way back, you will come to the trail that brings you to an overview of the other two waterfalls: Haamaremare Rahi and Haamaremare Iti.

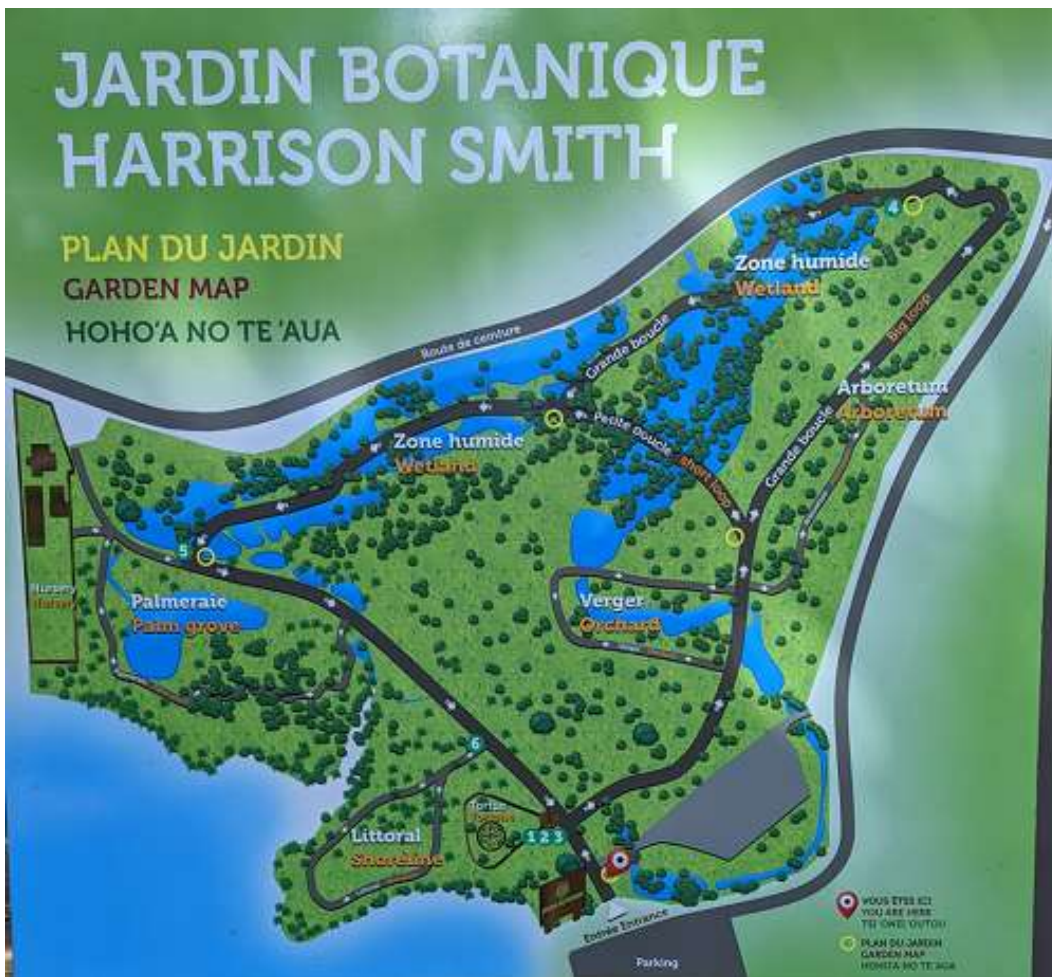
This trail is a dirt path with rocks, and it goes up and down a lot. Close to the end, you will need to cross the river on a solid metal footbridge. After the footbridge, the path goes up. This can be a challenge when the ground is wet after rainfall has muddied the trail.



You will pass some impressive Tahitian Chestnut trees and come to a viewpoint from which you can see Haamaremare Rahi and Haamaremare Iti.



There are a lot of free roaming chickens in Tahiti, so don't be surprised to even find them up here.



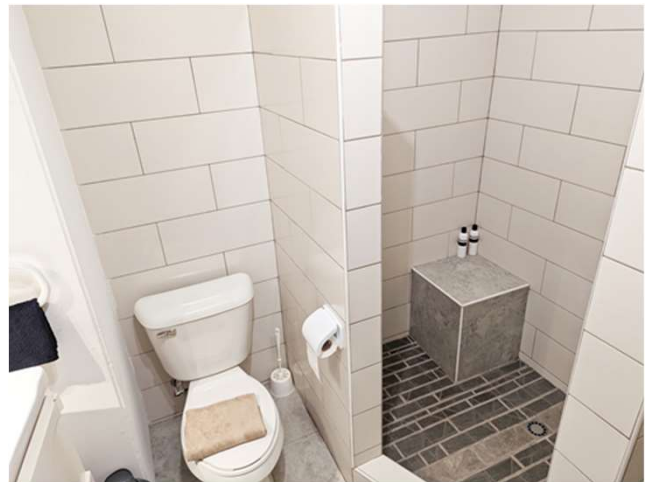
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8.1.1 Plage publique de Temae (Temae Beach) ([map](#), [reviews](#))

Temae Beach is one of the best beaches on the main island of Moorea. It is a 3,000 ft (900 m) long stretch of white sand in a protected bay. A small part of the beach is occupied by the Sofitel Kia Ora Moorea Beach Resort.

There are stones and coral pieces on the beach and in the water, so wearing water shoes can be helpful. Palm trees and other trees can provide shade if needed.

The water is beautifully turquoise and good for swimming. There is, however, a constant current from east to west that can be exhausting for weak swimmers to swim against. Weak swimmers can, however, get into the water and float with the current towards the overwater bungalows of the Sofitel Resort and then get on the beach and walk back.

Snorkeling is excellent and you can find more details about [snorkeling at Temae beach review](#).

There are restrooms (3), but you will need to bring your own toilet paper.

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1 = entrance to Temae Beach

2 = parking

3 = restrooms

4 = fantastic snorkeling

5 = Sofitel Kia Ora Moorea Beach Resort



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8.2.3 Coral Garden Tiahura ([map](#), [reviews](#))

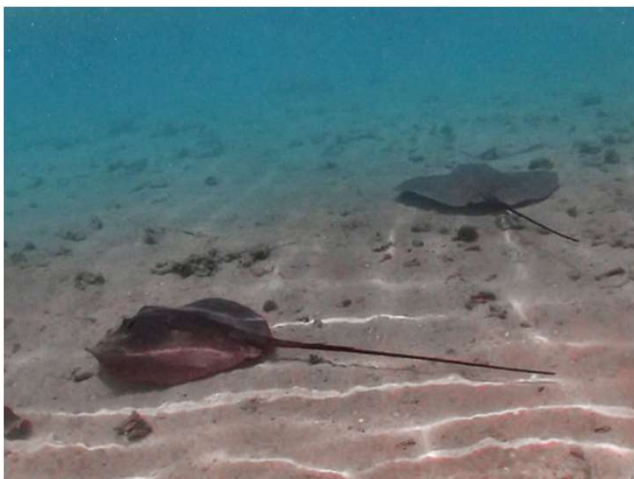
Coral Garden Tiahura is found between Motu Tiahura, where Coco Beach is located, and Motu Fareone. You can get here by either paddling by yourself or taking the Coco Beach Moorea Restaurant ([website](#)) water shuttle for 500 XPF per person or by taking an [island tour](#).

Coral Garden Tiahura has very good snorkeling among colorful and healthy corals and colorful reef fish. There were also several sting rays and a couple of sharks.

We got there on an [island tour](#).



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8.4.2 Marae Complex ([map](#), [reviews](#))

The marae complex consisting of Marae Titiroa, Marae-o-Mahine, Marae Fare-aito and Te mau marae-rii-noa and some platforms is accessible from one parking lot through various trails.

A few minutes after we parked our rental car, we were approached by two gendarmes who asked us to either take our belongings, which were visible inside our car, with us or to lock them in the trunk, because there have been recent car break-ins.



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10. Bora Bora on a Budget ([map](#))

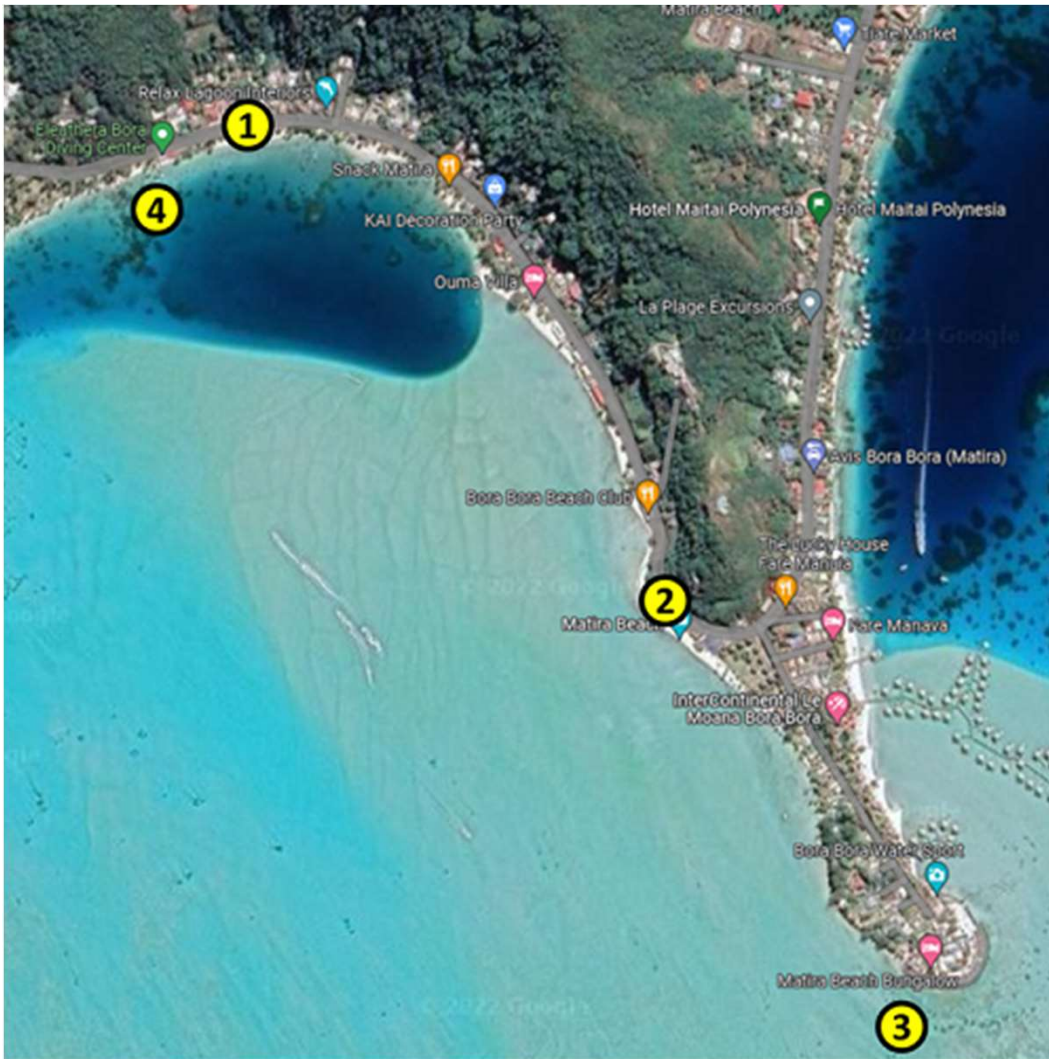
Bora Bora is probably the most well-known island in French Polynesia. It stands for luxury vacations on white sand beaches with gorgeously turquoise waters and the highest concentration of overwater bungalows in the world.

Contrary to popular belief, you can vacation on Bora Bora on a budget and have a fabulous time. We will show you how to do that and spend a wonderful and relaxing vacation on Bora Bora without breaking the bank with a \$1,000 per night overwater bungalow stay.



11.2.1 Matira Beach ([map \(2\)](#), [map \(1\)](#), [reviews](#))

Matira Beach is one of the best beaches in French Polynesia and in the world. It has two public beach access points. The southern access point (2) is the only one that most people seem to know about. The northern access point (1) is the preferred access for snorkeling.



1 = [Matira Beach North](#)

2 = [Matira Beach South](#)

3 = [good snorkeling](#)

4 = [excellent snorkeling](#)

Matira Beach has soft white sand on the beach and on the sea floor, so snorkeling right off the beach is not good. But, don't despair, we tell you where you can find good and excellent snorkeling.

Snorkeling at Matira Beach North Access (1) ([map](#))

The best snorkeling can be found near the north access of Matira Beach. Get into the water and swim to the west for about 150 ft (50 m) and then away from the beach. You will soon see rocks and corals appear in the water. This is where you will find lots of colorful fish.



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From the 3 lagoon cruises that we participated in in French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, this was the only cruise where the plates were made from palm leaves. What a wonderful idea. Like on the other cruises, we were taught how to open coconuts and what the individual parts of the coconut can be used for - for cooking and non-cooking purposes. They showed how to weave hats and the plates we used for lunch from coconut palm leaves.

Long story short: This was probably the best lagoon tour that we have participated in in French Polynesia and the Cook Islands.



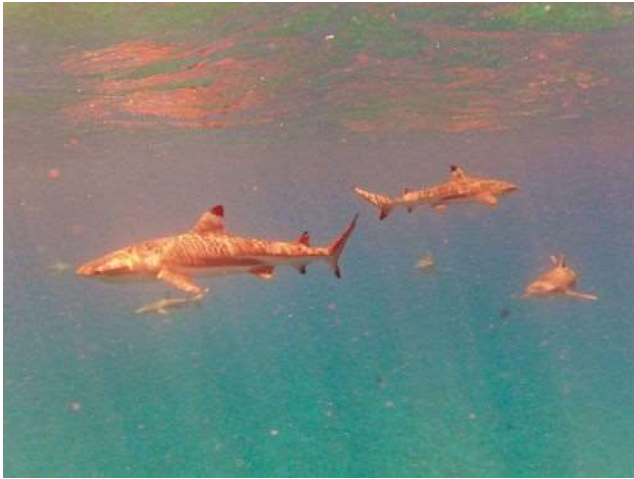
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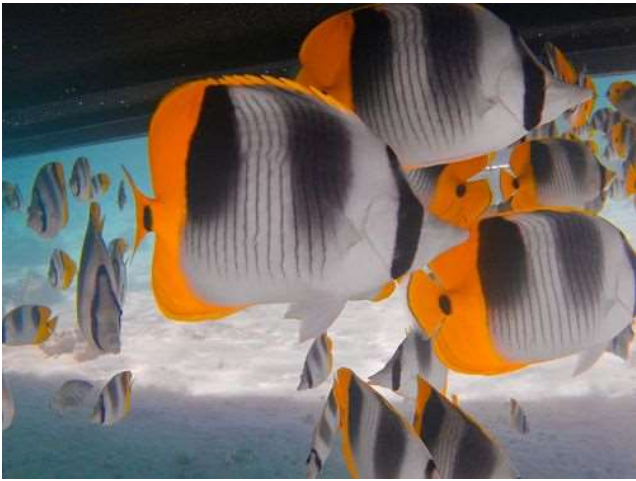
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13. Closing Remarks

ABOUT RUDY FROM BACKPACK & SNORKEL

I was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in 2003. My wife and I are a truly multinational couple: I, with my German background, and she with her Chinese heritage. Both of us live in the USA.

Sadly, working in the US means we have much fewer vacation days compared to other countries like e.g. Germany and thus we cannot travel very frequently.

Through a lot of trial and error, we have found our ideal travel and vacation style. **Making Memorable Moments** by focusing on important destinations, planning time for meeting the locals and, of course, for relaxation are our priorities.

We have also learned to appreciate local foods and try to eat as many local dishes as possible. Just for fun, we try to eat at one Chinese restaurant in each country we visit. It is absolutely amazing how different Chinese food is all over the planet.



MAKING MEMORABLE MOMENTS

You may take 10,000 photos during your vacation, rush from one attraction to the next, but what you will remember in your heart is how you were **Making Memorable Moments**.

For me, that was e.g. Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly (ever heard of this US National Park?). When I first saw it, I was blown away by this majestic natural obelisk and the beautiful canyon that it sits in. I have been there two more times and still feel the same.

Or think of Isla Mujeres, a small island outside Cancun, Mexico. On the surface, Playa Norte is supposedly Mexico's most beautiful beach and it is always crowded and the boats that anchor there play loud music. Below the surface, Isla Mujeres is very relaxed, quite walkable and it has friendly locals, good authentic Mexican food and good international cuisine and is often very affordable.

Isla Mujeres is our personal paradise!



PACK YOUR BACKPACK & SNORKEL AND LET'S GO

Our travel style has evolved over the years. We are packing light these days when we travel and typically only need a small backpack per person - see my [Traveling Light Guide](#).

With this guide, I want to provide value to you and help you plan your own relaxing vacations with the goal of **Making Memorable Moments!**

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments.