

# Get back to nature in French Polynesia

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Simply put, French Polynesia is a tropical paradise. Whether you are stood on the warm white sand looking out at the clear blue sea, dipping your toes into an emerald lagoon or exploring its volcanic peaks and waterfalls, the islands are a place of great natural beauty.

Avichai Ben Tzur is the author of the *The Independent Traveler's Guide to French Polynesia* and travel consultant for tailor-made trips to the region as well as the publisher and Editor at *X Days in Y*. Avichai told us what made this Pacific paradise such a desirable stop on a world cruise holiday:

"One of the last places on Earth to be settled by humans, French Polynesia is the ultimate paradise escape. With 118 islands and coral atolls (65 of which are inhabited) sprinkled across an immense area of the South Pacific roughly the size of Europe, the French Territory's five distinct archipelagos boast a lot more than just perfect tropical beaches."

The remoteness of the islands leads it to be a really exciting cruise destination. It is a staggering place geographically, with Bora Bora itself being a dormant volcano, surrounded by coral reefs and a vibrant marine ecosystem. As Carl Henderson, CTM personal travel consultant and the man behind [Tahiti by Carl](#) says, it isn't hard to get back to nature here:

"French Polynesia remains largely and untouched paradise for nature, wildlife and lush south seas landscapes. With over 300 different islands and atolls there is plenty to see for nature lovers, birders and of course the aquatic life in the lagoons is incredible."

It is believed that there are around 500 different species of fish living in the waters around Tahiti and its neighbouring islands, not to mention the number of sea turtles, dolphins, porpoises and even humpback whales that can be seen.

Otherwise known as the Islands of Tahiti, French Polynesia is as beautiful a cruise destination as you can ever wish to visit. The brilliant combination of natural wonder and remoteness nudges you towards a cruise holiday where you embrace nature, with endless opportunities to explore and discover.

# Tahiti



Tahiti, along with Bora Bora, is the big-name attraction for French Polynesia. The postcard worthy landscapes have helped to make it one of the most desirable locations on earth, as Avichai explains: “Rising out of the ocean in the shape of a figure eight, Tahiti is your gateway to French Polynesia. It is the beating heart of the territory and home to the capital city - Papeete. Don’t miss mornings in the vibrant Papeete Market and the evening food trucks - roulottes - of Place Vaiete. In between, road trip around the island, surf its waves, hike its peaks and venture into its lush interior on a 4X4 tour of the waterfall-laden Papenoo Valley.”

Carl likened some areas to *Jurassic Park*, but echoed Avichai’s sentiment: “The main island is surprisingly busy with traffic and the bulk of the population living around Papeete. But make sure you escape to explore the lush mountains and waterfalls around the islands. Some favourite spots of mine include the Papenoo Valley with its *Jurassic Park* like jungle like vegetation and hundreds of waterfalls. Also spend some time down on Tahiti Iti – the little island that takes you back in time where life stands still, the island is so untouched and the people are incredibly warm and friendly.”

## Paofai Gardens

This beautiful green space stretches across 4.6 hectares filled with pergolas, footpaths, fountains and close to 400 trees offering welcoming shade from the sun. The Paofai Gardens are extremely diverse, boasting around 324 coconut trees, 40 royal palms, 30 large flowering trees and 2.5 hectares of pristine green lawn. There are plants from all five archipelagos within these gardens.

## Vaimahutu Falls

One of three Faarumai waterfalls in the north eastern corner of Tahiti, Vaimahutu Falls is one of the most visited natural sights in French Polynesia. Brilliantly tall, the falls are a must-see sight on the islands.

## Life below the waters

The only thing that can compete with the sights and colours above the waves is what lies beneath them. There are countless opportunities to go snorkelling or diving around French Polynesia, among the best is Fakarava, a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and somewhere to tick off your bucket list.

Even for the inexperienced, snorkelling unlocks another world. The seas are rich with life and the clear waters make for an unforgettable experience.

## Visit the Harrison Smith Botanical Garden

The former professor of physics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Harrison W. Smith

(1872-1947) was a passionate botanist and purchased 137 hectares of land in Tahiti after he received a significant inheritance. Smith went on to plant hundreds of exotic flowers and trees which were imported from America, Asia and Africa. Now the fruits of his labours can be enjoyed by the public. Indeed, much of the flowers and gardens on the island are in debt to Smith who introduced not only the notion, but also many different plant types.

## Bora Bora

Despite being a dormant volcano, Bora Bora is alive with trees, flora and fauna of brilliant colours. It is a garden of stunning colours and smells, with varieties of coconut palms, vanilla plants and orange trees in abundance.



As Avichai says, there is much more to do than simply sit on a beach in Bora Bora:

“One of the world’s most desired islands, Bora Bora is blessed with a stunning lagoon whose small islets - called motu - are sprinkled with those dreamy overwater bungalows. Apart from relaxing and exploring the main island, spend a day cruising the lagoon on a guided tour which typically includes: swimming with sharks, feeding stingrays, snorkelling in coral gardens, and a Polynesian picnic lunch on an isolated motu.”

Bora Bora is spectacular on approach. The rugged shape emerges from a beautifully crystal turquoise lagoon, with smaller islets dotted around its shoreline.

## Mount Otemanu

You’d be forgiven for wanting to spend your time in French Polynesia on the beach, perhaps paddling in the waters or sampling a local tippie from a beachside bar. But no trip to Bora Bora is complete without taking a few strides into the dense volcanic landscapes.

Mount Otemanu is the dominating tower of volcanic rock protruding from the green forests of inland Bora Bora. It immediately draws your gaze as you approach the island and such a place can’t just be ignored. It should be explored. Otemanu is the highest point of the island and reaches 727 metres (2,385 feet) above sea level and the view from the top is reason enough to get off the beach.

## Explore some coral gardens

Remember that old snorkel you used once but has just spent years collecting dust? Well remember to pack it. Within the beautiful lagoon that circles Bora Bora you’ll find a hive of life in the coral reef. To really make the most of the setting, book yourself a spot on a local tour boat.

Carl Henderson acknowledges how fortunate this place is to have such rich waters surrounding it and says any trip to Bora Bora isn’t complete without embracing life beneath the waves:

“Probably the most famous lagoon in the world you would miss out if you didn’t get a mask on to explore what is beneath the surface. Whether you are a certified diver or amateur snorkeler you don’t want to miss seeing the coral, thousands of fish, sharks, sting rays, turtles, manta rays and so much more. Warm waters. Unreal visibility. Nature abounds!”

## Visit Leopard Rays Trench

Although Bora Bora and French Polynesia aren’t blessed with animals on land, they do offer some of the most magnificent marine creatures within their waters. Head to Leopard Rays Trench not only for a brilliant scuba diving spot, but also for the chance to come up close to manta rays. Beneath the shallow waters you can exploit the soft-sand sea bed and marvel in the wonder of these elegant giants.

## Nuku Hiva

One of twelve islands making up the Marquesas Archipelago of French Polynesia, Nuku Hiva is the largest and arguably most beautiful. This archipelago is the most isolated chain of islands in the world, in the middle of the Pacific and as Carl says, this results in fewer tourists than other islands:

“Part of the most remote island archipelago few visitors make it out to this chain of islands called the Marquesas. The language and culture are even different here and the landscape is much more dramatic without the tranquil lagoons yet with fjord like bays, tower spire rock peaks, waterfalls and lush green vegetation. A 4 wheel drive is the way to get around this rugged island to explore but setting off on horseback through the rugged untouched hill sides to a deserted beach for a picnic is a pretty good way to spend a day too.”



It is a place that Avichai described as the ‘Real *Jurassic Park*’ when we asked him to describe the island: “In the distant Marquesas Islands, Nuku Hiva’s dramatic natural beauty exceeds your wildest dreams. The 90-minute scenic drive from the airport to the only town - Taiohae - offers views of the “Grand Canyon”, the lush Toovii Plateau, waterfalls, and a few other surprises. Don’t miss hiking in the Hakau Valley to Vaipo falls amid the island’s signature jagged basalt cliffs, visiting the exquisite ancient temples near Hatiheu, and the hike to Anaho Bay.”

There is plenty to do in Nuku Hiva. One thing you may find is that it feels and is presented differently to its neighbours around French Polynesia. Be sure to visit Hakau Waterfall which stands at a staggering 350 metres, Anaho Bay for brilliant beaches and Taipivai Valley for unforgettable panoramas.

## Moorea

In an area known around the world for its beauty, Moorea can comfortably pit itself up against any other island in terms of its beauty. And yet, it is often dismissed for the better known isles of Tahiti and Bora Bora. Its shoreline is bordered by an electric blue lagoon which is only emphasised by the rich green of the mainland.

Although photos will entice you and even make you question if they are real, the only real way to appreciate it is by visiting. Carl Henderson of Tahiti by Carl is one such lucky person and recommended a few things to those heading there as part of a World cruise: “The quintessential lush south Pacific island can be easily explored by land with a car rental but also be sure to take an ATV tour or 4 Wheel Drive tour so you can get into the inner island and crater of the volcano. As well, don’t miss the humpback whales season when you can dive or snorkel with these massive giants who come to the warm Tahitian waters to raise their young each year. If you are not there during whale season of late June to October, then definitely get out to the dolphins that enjoy the lagoon year round.”

Another is Avichai, who also suggested a number of pursuits:

“Only a short ferry ride separates Tahiti from Moorea, but time here ticks at a much slower pace. Its deep twin bays carve Moorea into the shape of a heart, and the island is a haven for beach goers, water sports enthusiasts, and hikers. Don’t miss the drive to the scenic Belvedere Lookout, where you can pick up a DIY hiking trail to the Three Coconuts Pass.”



The Lagoonarium de Moorea is a protected park bustling with a coral reef and sea life where you can find sharks, rays and tropical fish. Away from the comfortable beaches you can hike across the hills, explore the coast in a kayak or head out on dolphin and whale tours.

## Take a Aquablue Helmet Dive

For something a bit different, why not try helmet diving? The bizarre looking activity is much like scuba diving of old, with a large helmet-come-mask filled with air allowing you to bounce along the seabed like an astronaut. It is a fun and alternative way to come face-to-face with the sea life of the area.

Given that French Polynesia is made up of hundreds of islands, it won’t be hard to find your ideal paradise. By all means, relax and unwind on the soft sand beaches with the warm sea lapping at your feet. But for anyone else who is willing to get back to nature and explore, you really will be spoiled for choice.