



Discover the

Austral Islands

Rurutu, Rimatara, Tubuai, Raivavae, Rapa





The Austral Islands

In the Polynesian language the Austral Islands of French Polynesia are collectively known as Tuhaa Pae, referring to the five parts or islands that make up the archipelago.

They include the high islands of **Rurutu, Tubuai, Rimatara, Raivavae, and Rapa**, plus the low, uninhabited islands of Maria (or Hull) and the Marotiri (or Bass) Rocks. These islands lie 538-1,074 km. (334-666 miles) south of Tahiti on both sides of the Tropic of Capricorn, extending in a northwest-southeasterly direction across 1,280 kilometers (794 miles) of the Pacific Ocean.

Captain James Cook discovered Rurutu in 1769 during his first voyage to the South Pacific and during his third voyage in 1777, he sighted Tubuai, but he did not go ashore. Fletcher Christian and his mutineers on the H.M.S. Bounty made two attempts to settle on Tubuai in 1789, and this event is re-enacted every two years on the site of Fort George near the sheltered harbor. Spanish Captain Thomas Gayangos discovered lovely Raivavae in 1775 and remote Rapa was first sighted by English Captain George Vancouver in 1791. Rimatara, the lowest of the high islands, was not found until 1821, when Captain Samuel Pinder Henry of Tahiti arrived, returning the following year with two native teachers who converted the entire population to the Protestant religion. The Austral Islands have all flown the French flag since 1901.

The 141 square kilometers (54 square miles) of land surface in the Austral Islands is home to some 6,400 Polynesians, who live peaceful lives in their attractive villages, where their houses and churches are usually built of coral limestone or concrete. Due to the rich soil and the cooler climate of the Australs, good quality vegetables can be produced, including taro, manioc, potatoes, sweet potatoes, leeks, cabbage and coffee, as well as apples, peaches, figs and strawberries. archaeological diggings in these isolated islands have uncovered habitation sites, council platforms, and marae temples in the village of Vitaria on Rurutu, showing man's presence around the year 900. Tubuai, Rimatara and Raivavae also have ruins of open-air marae stone temples, and giant sized stone tikis have been found on Raivavae that resemble those in the Marquesas Islands and on Easter Island. Today they have many of the advantages of civilization, including electricity, potable water, telephones, and television. There is regular air service to Rurutu, Tubuai, Raivavae and Rimatara, and a cargo ship from Papeete brings supplies to all the islands on a frequent basis. Humpback whales can be seen and often heard offshore all the Austral Islands between July and early November, and you can scuba dive with the whales in Rurutu and Tubuai. Activities also include 4x4 tours, biking along quiet roads, hiking the gentle slopes of Tubuai, exploring limestone grottoes and waterfalls on Rurutu, visiting archaeological sites, picnicking on the motu islets, snorkeling in the lagoons or simply relaxing on the soft sandy beaches.

The "mamas" of the Australs are noted for their finely made hats, baskets, tote bags, mats and other woven products. You can visit the arts and crafts shops and you will also see the women sitting together on the grass or on their front terraces, creating an outlandish hat for them to wear to church or a beautiful traditional hat for you to buy.

Islands of quiet beauty, peace and pride; these are Polynesia's Temperate Isles, waiting to be discovered.



The only island in French Polynesia that is below the tropical zone, remote Rapa stands proudly alone at 1,074 km. (666 miles) southeast of Tahiti, 600 km. (373 miles) distant from Raivavae, its closest neighbor. The crescent shaped island has a circumference of 18 miles (30 km.), and there are 12 deeply indented bays along its fjord-like coastline. There is no fringing reef in these cold waters and several sugar-loaf shaped islets lie just offshore. Rapa was first sighted by English Captain George Vancouver in 1791.

Rapa-Iiti, as the island is also called, has a strong cultural connection to Rapa-Nui, the Polynesian name for Easter Island. Rapa's 500 inhabitants are strong survivors, descendants of fierce Polynesian warriors and kings, hardy sailors and pearlshell divers. The entire community owns the land and the simple houses are grouped together in Haurei Village and in the smaller village of Area, which is reached by boat across Haurei Bay. There is a town hall, post office, infirmary, weather station and school. A cooperative store provides the villagers with basic supplies and many of the homes have television and telephone service. Archaeological ruins include the remains of seven famous pa fortresses built on superimposed terraces among volcanic pinnacles. These structures were found nowhere else in Polynesia except New Zealand where the Maori people settled. Mt. Perahau, the highest of six peaks, hides among the scudding clouds at 650 meters (2,145 feet) above the island. Herds of cattle, sheep and wild goats roam the velvety green mountain ridges, and farms of coffee, taro, cabbage, apples, oranges, and peaches supplement a diet of fresh salmon, cold water lobster, mussels, oysters, crabs, bêche de mer, shrimp and sea urchin, with occasional portions of beef and tender goat meat from the cooperative store. The South Seas staple of canned corned beef is scorned in favor of fresh food. Because it is below the tropical zone, the coconut trees on Rapa do not produce many nuts.

The temperature in this southerly clime can drop to 5 degrees Celsius (41 degrees Fahrenheit) during the Austral winter of July and August, when violent winds blow across the turbulent open seas, bringing cold temperatures up from the South Pole.

There is no airport in Rapa and supplies are brought in by cargo ship from Tahiti. There are no tourist facilities other than a bed or room in a private home. Even though this lonely island almost at the bottom of the world is difficult to reach, there are still venturesome souls who heed the call to those far away places.

Written by Jan Prince

Photos by Tahiti Tourism Board, Danee Hazama, J. Sekkaki, D. Travers, J. Bourke, L.Pozzoli,





Rurutu



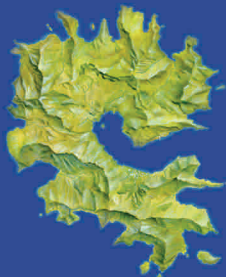
Rimatara



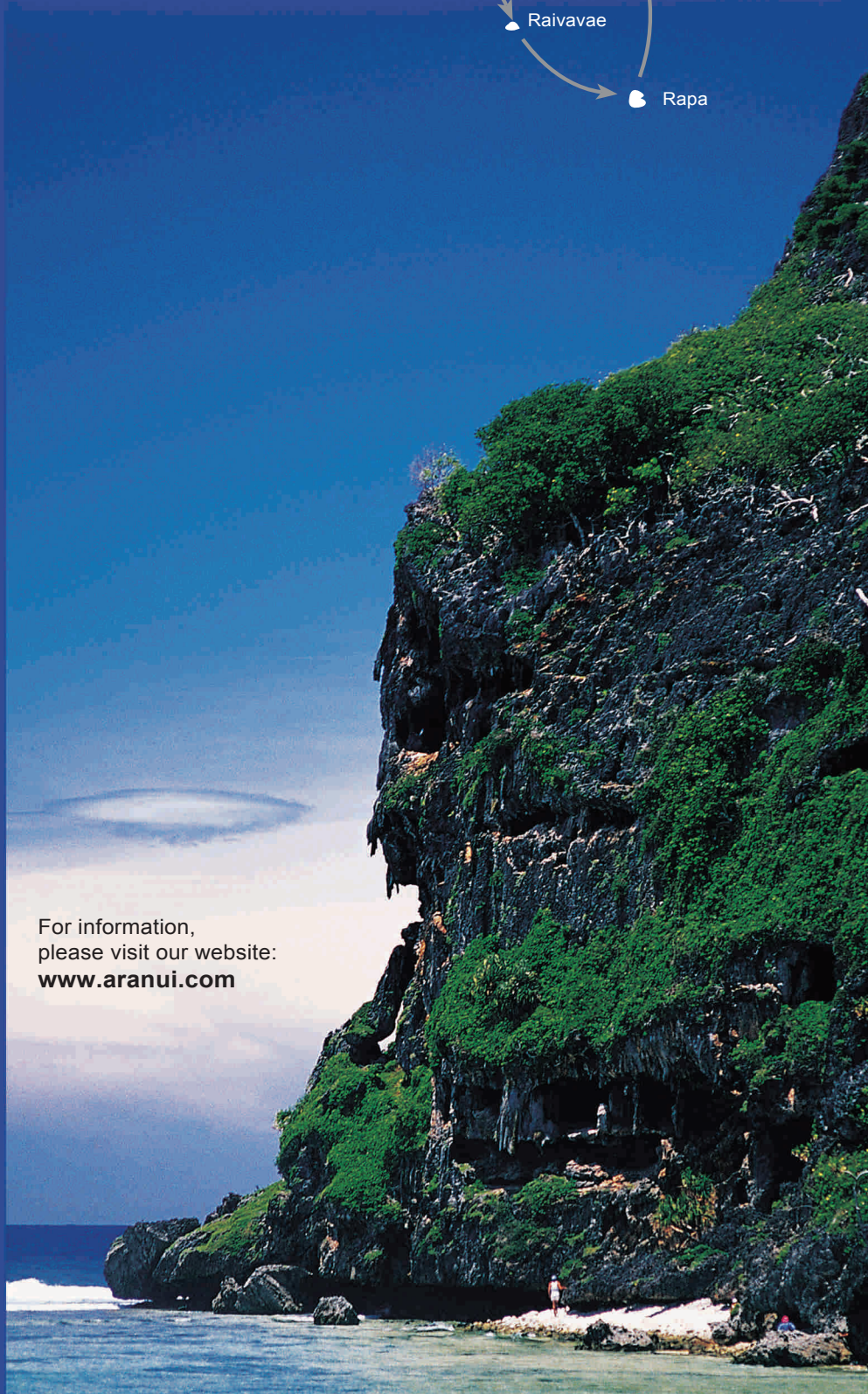
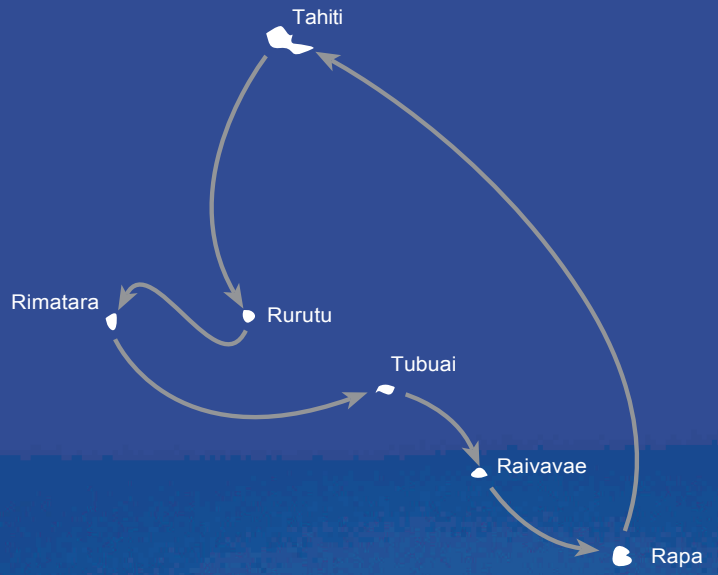
Tubuai



Raivavae



Rapa



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