

The Marquesas

Grand, brooding, powerful and charismatic. That pretty much sums up the Marquesas. Here, nature's fingers have dug deep grooves and fluted sharp edges, sculpting intricate jewels that jut up dramatically from the cobalt blue ocean. Waterfalls taller than skyscrapers trickle down vertical canyons; the ocean thrashes towering sea cliffs; sharp basalt pinnacles project from emerald forests; amphitheatre-like valleys cloaked in greenery are reminiscent of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; and scalloped bays are blanketed with desert arcs of white or black sand.

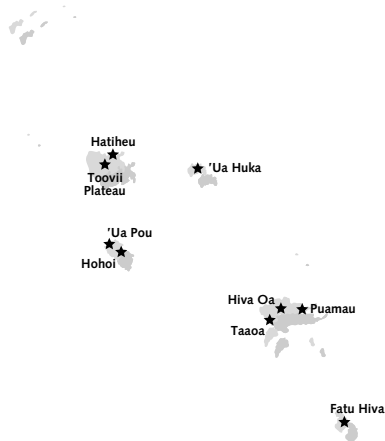
This art gallery is all outdoors. Some of the most inspirational hikes and rides in French Polynesia are found here, allowing walkers and horseback riders the opportunity to explore Nuku Hiva's convoluted hinterland. Those who want to get wet can snorkel with melon-headed whales or dive along the craggy shores of Hiva Oa and Tahuata. Bird-watchers can be kept occupied for days, too.

Don't expect sweeping bone-white beaches, tranquil turquoise lagoons, swanky resorts and Cancun-style nightlife – the Marquesas are not a beach holiday destination. With only a smattering of *pensions* (guesthouses) and just two hotels, they're rather an ecotourism dream.

In everything from cuisine and dances to language and crafts, the Marquesas do feel different from the rest of French Polynesia, and that's part of their appeal. Despite the trappings of Western influence (read: mobile phones), their cultural uniqueness is overwhelming. They also make for a mind-boggling open-air museum, with plenty of sites dating from pre-European times, all shrouded with a palpable historical aura.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Forgetting what day it is and realising the internet is really just a frivolous modern convenience on hard-to-reach **Fatu Hiva** (p225)
- Living out your Indiana Jones fantasies while wandering flabbergasted amid *tiki* (sacred sculptures) petroglyphs, and sacred sites at **Puamau** (p222), **Taaoa** (p222), **Hohoi** (p217) and **Hatiheu** (p208)
- **Clip-clopping** (p205 and p220) across the verdant Toovii Plateau or Hiva Oa's fecund interior
- Gazing down impenetrable valleys while **hiking** (p205 and p220) across the Nuku Hiva or Hiva Oa heartlands
- Experiencing timeless traditional village life on **'Ua Huka** (p211) or **'Ua Pou** (p214), lodging in homestays and meeting master carvers



NORTHERN GROUP & SOUTHERN GROUP

The Marquesas are divided into two groups. The northern group consists of three main inhabited islands – Nuku Hiva, 'Ua Huka and 'Ua Pou – and the deserted *motu* (islets) further to the north: Hatu Iiti (Motu Iiti), Eiao, Hatutu (Hatutaa), Motu One (Sand Island) and the Clark Sandbank. The southern group comprises three inhabited islands – Hiva Oa, Tahuata and Fatu Hiva – and the four deserted islands of Motane (Mohotani), Fatu Huku, Terihi and Thomasset Rock.

History

Among the first islands to be settled by the Polynesians during the great South Pacific migrations, the Marquesas served as a dispersal point for the whole Polynesian triangle from Hawaii to Easter Island and New Zealand. Estimates of the islands' colonisation vary from prehistory to between AD 300 and 600.

The Marquesas' isolation was broken in 1595 when Spanish navigator Alvaro de Mendaña y Neira sighted Fatu Hiva by pure chance. Mendaña's fleet then sailed along past Motane and Hiva Oa, and anchored for around 10 days in Vaitahu Bay on Tahuata. Mendaña christened these four islands Las Marquesas de Mendoza in honour of his sponsor, the viceroy of Peru, García Hurtado de Mendoza.

In 1774 James Cook lingered for four days on Tahuata during his second voyage. Ingraham, the American commander of the *Hope*, 'discovered' the northern group of the Marquesas in 1791, arriving slightly ahead of Frenchman Étienne Marchand, whose merchant vessel took on fresh supplies at Tahuata and then landed on 'Ua Pou. In 1797 William Crook, a young Protestant pastor with the London Missionary Society (LMS), landed on Tahuata, but his attempts at evangelism were unsuccessful.

French interest in the region grew as a means of countering English expansion in the Pacific. After a reconnaissance voyage in 1838, Rear Admiral Abel Dupetit-Thouars took possession of Tahuata in 1842 in the name of French King Louis-Philippe.

Under the French yoke, the Marquesas almost fell into oblivion – the French administration preferred to develop Pape'ete on Tahiti, which they thought had a more strategic value. Only the Catholic missionaries, who had been

active since their arrival on Tahuata in 1838, persevered, and Catholicism became, and still is, firmly entrenched in the Marquesas.

Upon contact with Western influences, the foundations of Marquesan society collapsed. Whaling crews brought alcohol, firearms and syphilis. In a stunning decline the population plummeted from around 18,000 in 1842 to 5264 in 1887, and 2096 in 1926.

In the 20th century the Marquesas were made famous by Hiva Oa residents Paul Gauguin and Belgian singer Jacques Brel (see boxed text, p220). Slow but sure development of infrastructure has helped lessen the archipelago's isolation, while archaeological surveys are uncovering a culture that was lost only a comparatively short while ago. There's now a growing interest in this fantastic island group, whose ecotourist potential is still intact.

Culture

One of the highlights of a visit to the Marquesas is the culture, which is still alive. The Marquesans have their own dances (the Haka Manu or the Dance of the Pig will make your spine tingle) and their own language, and they

