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South-Pacific: unique islands and cultures



View from Hotel Lomipeau on Wallis; Wallis & Futuna

Chapter 30

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During previous trips 25 and 12 years ago respectively, we had been lucky to see various regions across the Pacific Ocean. Our visits to some Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian island-nations, whet our appetite for more. Surely, we were interested to see how life changed in the most striking of the remote islands already visited. But in the first place, we were keen to explore even more islands. This led us to some unique picture-book islands far away from the flow of tourists. Well, we wouldn't be the Roving Spirits, if we had flown non-stop for 20,000 km from Central Europe right into the Pacific. Therefore, we had chosen a routing that allowed us to re-visit Helsinki and Singapore.



Samoa: islands of open fale's and wooden buses

The Polynesian Island-group of (former Western-) Samoa was the first stop on our Pacific itinerary. Nowadays, about 190,000 Samoans share a landmass of 2,934 km², made up of several islands.



Roughly three quarter of the population lives on Upolu and about one quarter on Savai'i, the biggest island. The only other inhabited islands are Manono and Apolima with less than 1,000 residents.

The first Westerners emigrated to Samoa long ago, and established themselves with the consent of local chiefs. In the 1870ies, a civil dispute between the ruling clans broke out. In the wake, Brits, Germans and Americans started to listen attentively. In 1899, Samoa got divided, giving control of Western Samoa to Germans, and Eastern Samoa to Americans.

During WWII, the Brits urged New Zealand to seize control of Western Samoa. By 1962, Western Samoa got independent again, but still relies heavily on foreign aid, mainly from Australia and New Zealand, but also from the European Union.

From emerging Apia to traditional open fale's

Within 16 hours, Fiji Airways brought us from Singapore via Nadi to Samoa, where we arrived on June 25, 2017. As many other Pacific capitals, Apia is not really a beauty, though it boasts quite a few swanky government buildings tagged with "sponsored by...". The town isn't very big either, but looks more like a village. Unlike 25 years ago when we first visited, there aren't any open fale's (traditional bungalows) anymore near the centre. Only the public buses look still the same. Made of wood and colourfully painted with all sorts of subjects the driver believes in; be it God or Rugby. The latter seems almost as important as the uncountable churches. Sure enough, the huge bus-terminal is totally deserted on Sunday, but bustling during the week.



Men and women alike, often genders wear tattoos. This is still experience the real traditional Samoan life, you have to leave the capital, and soon you'll see open fale's. A fale is basically an open bungalow, consisting of a raised platform, with a number of poles supporting a thatched, or corrugated roof. It doesn't have walls at all, allowing for natural "energy efficient" air-conditioning. As protection against wind and weather, woven palm-sheets can be adjusted between the poles. Some fale's are equipped with western furnishing. Even though, almost every family owns at least one open fale, nowadays, most Samoans won't use it (anymore) as their main home; many have also a simple "Palagi house" (foreigner/Westernner's house respectively) nearby, or rather behind the fale.

deserted on Sunday, but

wear skirts and likewise, both common sight in Apia. However, to

As Samoans gather in church every Sunday, restaurants don't see any need to open that day. Yet, we did arrive in Apia on a Sunday. As we didn't have any choice, we fed like most other hungry foreigners: at Mc Donalds... At least on that Sunday, we found this outpost of western influence a relief. During our first stage in Samoa, twenty-five years ago, eating options were restricted to a few very simple Chinese, unaffordable to most Samoans. At least in Apia, this has changed a lot. During working days, there is now a wide



selection of restaurants, from simple eateries to upmarket French- or Italian style dining. Not only the cheap ones are now bustling with locals (and foreigners alike).

Outside of Apia, there is hardly any choice of eating places. Visitors' dining experience depends on the cooking skills of their host. We were lucky and ate usually very well. It might help if you love fresh fish and are keen to try local specialities. Daily, we ordered raw-fish dishes like Oka (marinated in lemon juice and coconut milk), Poke (fish cubes in soya sauce with red pepper) or Sashimi, just the way Japanese enjoy it. Sadly, many tourists stick to fish- or chicken and chips, and complain about the limited choice... Regardless of what you order, it's always made to order, meaning it may take a good while until you get your food. Many guesthouses try to minimize waiting time by asking clients to order two hours ahead. Thereby, guests only wait "half of those ages" after arriving at the restaurant. Never mind, waiters are always very friendly and helpful. It's quite common that they introduce themselves with their first names, as well as asking for our names.

Neat villages with happy people

Samoan tourist-accommodation can be anything from simple (mostly overpriced) open beach fale's with communal meals, to luxury and expensive top-notch resorts. Only midrange guesthouses are hard to find. Nowadays, Samoa has established itself as a low-key beach-resort destination, attracting mainly Kiwis and Aussies. The islands boast some pretty beaches indeed, but to us the real highlight is the culture. Therefore, we always chose resorts within or near villages.



We've visited the islands of Upolu and Savai'i and stayed altogether in six different villages, apart from Apia. Village life was very similar on both islands, but we got the impression that people on Savai'i were poorer, yet happier. Both islands are surrounded by a reef. The hilly interior on both islands, is almost uninhabited. Though, after a devastating tsunami in 2009, a few families moved to higher grounds. Never the less, most villages are situated along the coastline and on both islands, there's a narrow though fairly good bitumen ring-road. Wandering along those ribbon-built villages is a real joy.

The houses and posts of the open fale's are colourfully painted and everyone has tidy lawns and pretty, well-tended gardens full of tropical bushes and flowers. Fallen leaves are being picked up daily. In contrast, empty bottles, cans and snack-wraps are commonly dumped at the roadside. When strolling around, we got always in contact with the ever happy locals. Waving children are omnipresent, and adults are often keen and proud to practice their excellent command of English. That way, we had often outspoken conversations about life on the islands. Samoans are always very warm-hearted and genuine. Unlike in Asia, here nobody considers tourists as two-legged cash-dispensers...

Colourful buses and helpful locals

Riding the colourful wooden buses is every time a great experience. Western inventions like time-tables and marked bus stops are wishful thinking. Instead, buses stop wherever you wave it down, and they run as long as the driver feels like. By 5 PM there's hardly any, and once we already got stranded at 4 PM, because the driver felt it's fishing time, and asked the remaining four passengers to disembark. Together with a Polynesian lady, we started walking, though we had about 10km ahead of us. Beautiful Samoan as she was, her weight was about as much as ours combined. No wonder, she was quickly exhausted, which led her to send an SOS message to her husband. He rushed by to pick us all up in the car, for which we too, were very grateful. As he drove some extra 15km to bring us to the hotel, we felt, a little contribution to the petrol would be appropriate. After hesitating, he took about half of what we were offering, but only after saying: "God bless you", what was also the common farewell if we left a guesthouse.

Quite often, some friendly Samoans offered us a ride when we waited for a bus of which we weren't sure whether it had ceded for the day. Apia has traffic-jams and lots of buses and taxis. Out in the countryside, there are few taxis and buses, but generally very light traffic. Yet, considering how little people earn, it's amazing that about half of the families own a car. Often, it's been financed by a relative who works in New Zealand or Australia.



As common in Pacific societies, big is beautiful. Naturally, this kind of beauty leads to sluggishness. On the positive side, Samoans are mostly very gentle and slow moving, also on the steering wheel. It's almost a contradiction, how powerful, strong and quick their traditional dancing is. On the other hand, there seems to be a lack of business instinct among them, as all successful businesses we had seen, were in the hands of Westerners, Asians, or at least Samoans blended with foreign blood.

Church power

In general, many things are expensive in Samoa – even to us. Here, bartering is key to survival. Often, children hardly have proper clothes or footwear. Only for Sunday mass, everyone has some fine dress. As common for Pacific island



nations, there is a stark contrast between the pomp of the church and the poverty of its believers. Modest poor man's huts stand next to vast churches. Even small Samoan villages have some four bold churches of different Christian denominations. Preferably, they are bigger than those of the neighbouring village. Foreigners get overwhelmed with invitations from locals, to attend mass in their church and not in another one, which competes for souls.

So, we did join a service, and it was entertaining, boring and eye-opening at the same time. Samoan churches are famous for their choirs and modern music. There is usually no organ, but rather a piano and often even electric guitars, drums, electric keyboard accompanying the singers.

The elderly priest acted like a cheer-leader, yelling and crying at his believers. It reminded us of indoctrination by populist leaders. Government and churches are strongly linked, and children commonly go to mission schools. They are for free, but only to children of whom parents regularly attend mass. Normally, mass takes some three hours, and is held mornings and afternoons every Sunday and additionally on some working days. This gives believers ample opportunity to donate the little they have, to the church. Showing how grateful the institution is, and to increase peer pressure, the priest reports the given amount of every family during the church service, and mentions which family should give more. We heard from cases, where Samoan families that emigrated to New Zealand, donate so much money to their parish in Samoa that they lack money to buy food and proper footwear to their children...

At the end of the mass, church-goers wish each other well, and everybody shook hands, thanking us for attending their church service and invited us to join them for the afternoon mass as well...

In between, the community disperses and goes home to feast. Often, families unite on Sunday over a meal prepared in the earth oven, called Umu.

Spending three weeks on the Samoan islands was just perfect. Not only did we get a good insight of what's life about on Upolu and Savai'i, we also had the chance to discover two extremely beautiful palm-fringed islands. Beaches, lava-fields, blow holes and turtle ponds, all added up to the natural beauty. The hot and humid climate is a blessing at sometimes, but also a bit sweating and crippling at others. The highlight were certainly the extremely friendly and welcoming people of Samoa, who made our stay a great one and let us see their interesting culture...



Wallis & Futuna: France's hidden secret



The 17.07.17 is certainly a special date and that's when we arrived on a special island. Everybody knows the French overseas-territories of Tahiti and New Caledonia, but when we mention Wallis and Futuna, we usually get a blank look. Even the French, who normally know all their department numbers by heart, have rarely heard about their "*collectivité d'outre-mer*," Wallis & Futuna. About 280km from the tip of Fiji's Vanua Levu island, you find the island group of Futuna. From there it's 230km to the Wallis Islands that lie 360km west of Samoa's Savai'i Island.

Apart from French governance, the two island groups of Futuna and Wallis have little in common. Futuna was settled by Samoans and is divided in two kingdoms. The Wallis Island group was settled by Tongans, and consists of one kingdom. As the line of succession is not hereditary, but by appointment through the other aristocrats, there was lately a dispute about the future king. Less disputed is the French governance. Being a French protectorate since 1888, the 15,000 Polynesians of Wallis & Futuna, overwhelmingly voted to stay with France in a referendum held 1959. There is no independence movement, they know where the money comes from and enjoy French citizenship, free education, free health- and free dental care. As in Samoa, a greater part of the population lives abroad, predominantly in New Caledonia and France.

Futuna Island: where visitors are very welcome - but not beach-holiday makers

A modern jet of Aircalin brought us to the airport of Wallis-Hihifo, where we changed into a small twin otter. Futuna apparently receives less than 10 tourists a year. But those who dare to come are being treated almost like royals, already on the flight. To assure we got the best views from the plane, on the in- as well as on the outbound trips, both of us got a window seat in the front row of the 18-seater aircraft. Full of excitement, we got the first scenic impressions of 46km² Futuna, and its neighbour island of Alofi which measures 18km². Together with some surrounding reefs, they form the Hoorn Island Group; “îles de horn(e)”. Alofi is only inhabited by a hermit. The approx. ~3,500 people of Futuna Island however, use Alofi to cultivate some green stuff.

We stayed at “Fia Fia”, Futuna’s only reputed hotel. It offers western standard rooms, some of which are huge and extraordinary, best of all, the museum-like Napoleon Suite. For us, a more modest room was just as good. During our nine days, we were the sole tourists, but there were all the time some other guests staying for work, predominantly for the French administration. The hotel didn’t have a menu, but offered good full and half-board meals that were well adapted to each client’s taste.



We were also very delighted about the hotel’s location in the small village of Nuku. The island’s biggest stores and supermarkets, the post office with its newest asset; an ATM, were all within easy walking distance. Except for school buses, there are neither public transport nor taxis. Despite this, the locals don’t seem to walk at all. If we did, there was often somebody stopping and offering us a ride as soon as we were a bit further away from a village. Sometimes, a ride ended up in a free sight-seeing tour around half the island. People are extremely friendly and welcoming. Speaking some French is certainly a big asset in Wallis & Futuna. Not only is almost everyone waving on those remote islands, as you pass, the folks often engage in a conversation that might well end up in an invitation.

Small villages, big churches and hospitable people

Futuna is a green lush island with a 400m high mountain ridge in its interior, but only small reef protection along its coast. Ribbon-built villages line the southwest coast of orange-wedge shaped Futuna Island. Towards the northwest, they get sparsely, and the windswept north-east coast is almost uninhabited. Bold churches can be found everywhere, often alone between villages. The biggest one; Basilica St. Pierre Chanel in the lonely tiny village of Poi, is so big, it can host more than the island’s entire population of 3,500. Once a year, it’s visited by pilgrims from around the Pacific, who honour St. Pierre Chanel.

A good catholic country must make sure its churches have space for everybody, just in case the current trend of de-population reverses and suddenly “the whole world” wants to settle on Futuna. In any case, there are several other churches capable to accommodate around 1,000 worshipers each, and two additional ones are currently under construction. In French governed Futuna, all but one of the 15+ churches and chapels are catholic.



In stark contrast to the beautiful churches, are the small and often simple western style houses of the locals. Also in Wallis & Futuna, the missionaries were extremely successful, and we

heard of Futunian families living abroad who rather live in poverty, yet send huge sums of money home to the local parish on their island.

Next to every church, there is a large community fale, traditionally with a thatched roof, a visible sign of the population’s Samoan origins. In those open fales, the folks gather when there’s mass, or other important reunions. In the evenings, men

assemble here and drink kava, whereas ladies gather somewhere to play Bingo, with the revenue going to the parish. Kava is brewed from a root that makes the tongue slightly numb. The taste of this greyish-brown venerable drink is for most outsiders not very delightful.

On Futuna, most people live in western type houses with some having a small open fale as additional, naturally air-conditioned living room in their garden. Sometimes, we've seen a mix of the two; walled fales with very big windows.

Futuna's only restaurant (sofar), is at Fia Fia Hotel. We had no other choice. However, after seeing a sign on the roadside, which advertised for Quiche, Salads, Cake and the like, we hiked up a hill – despite the tropical temperature. There, a nice lady informed us that she unfortunately only runs a catering-service. We didn't get far, walking back downhill. Feeling pity with us, her husband searched for us with his scooter and we were invited for an excellent lunch at their home. They were such wonderful people, so by the time we left, we had made new friends. A few days later, we got the key to their car, ironically a Dacia make, as we had driven in Switzerland. Then, we got invited to a traditional earth oven meal at their relative's place, had another sight-seeing tour around the island, and on our last night, got picked up for dinner.



Upon informing our landlords at the hotel that we would be out that night, they reacted in a way that showed they were not surprised. They mentioned, they got used to hotel guests being invited for a meal by the locals. It's quite amazing, how much hospitality we experienced on this little visited island. We know the village chiefs decided against the promotion of tourism, as foreigners always show too much flesh when bathing. Before the arrival of missionaries, locals bathed (half) naked, but these days, bathing fully clad is the rule of the Christian church. Sure enough, Futuna's climate is sticky and hot and we're not always in agreement of all the things the people believe. Yet, if it earned us so much more respect from them if we covered up shoulders and knees, it was more than worthwhile to bear wearing more.

Wallis Island: a well-developed French speck in the Pacific



On July 26th 2017, another front-row twin-otter flight brought us back to Wallis. What's commonly known as Wallis islands, is actually the 76km² Wallis archipelago, consisting of the island of Uvea and its surrounding reef with several motus (sand islets on the reef). Around 10,000 people of Tongan descent, plus about 800 French live on Wallis. Its chief-village Mata-Utu (if you can call this a village at all), is the administrative centre of the French territorial collectivity Wallis & Futuna. As on Futuna, public services like schools or medical centres are not only paid by France, but also predominantly staffed by French professionals. Considering the small island, Wallis has quite a stately hospital. Patients that can't be treated in Futuna's small hospital, are airlifted to Wallis, and if they can't help, patients are forwarded to specialists in New Caledonia or Australia, still receiving free treatment and transport.

We ended up staying at Hotel Lomipeau. It offers European standard rooms, but a view that's nowhere to be found on the continent. From our balcony, we had a million-dollar-view: over the pool down to a few picturesque palm-studded islets in a lagoon of surreal turquoise water.



Supermarkets offer about the same items as in France, only that the selection is much smaller and the price 2 – 5 times higher. Consequently, French government employees earn 2½ to 3½ times more, as they would for the same job in France. Furthermore, just as the islanders, they neither need to pay taxes nor health care.

Obviously, there is more wealth in Wallis than in Futuna. Here, people live in better and bigger houses and drive better cars with which they ride on roads that are properly sealed. Large Japanese and Korean 4WD vehicles and French-Romanian Dacia cars are widespread, contrasting a few wobbly rusty old bombs.

To us, the chief-village of Mata-Utu was a strange place. Here, the people find jobs (predominantly in the surprisingly large French administration) and anything else they need, like a few shops and restaurants, the island's only ATM, and a few hotels. Despite this sounding like a village centre, we didn't find anything that resembles one at all! The settlements are very much spread out, with taro- and banana plots in between. Only the large church, the king's residence, the post office and the ferry pier group around a big meadow. At least that's where the centre is, when a festival is held, and probably also, where cannibals feasted in ancient times. We read, to get sacrificed could be an honour. Normally, it was a king who chose the "lucky one" (exceptionally, the islanders also decided, to "honour" a king). On the next day at the agreed time, on the agreed place, the chosen one proudly handed him-/herself in, wearing the best festive clothing, ready to get cooked and eaten...



Fête du Territoire: a newer festival with time-honoured customs

Between mid-July and mid-August, three major festivals are being celebrated: Bastille Day (the French national day July 14), Fête du Territoire (Wallis & Futuna's national day July 29), and Fête de l'Assomption (Assumption Day, August 15). Often, the festivities are stretched over several days.

Though in day to day life, people appear quite western, for celebrations however, traditional clothing is still commonly worn, if above western clothes. For the roughly 50 annual tourists, those festivals are certainly a highlight too, but less so for the pigs. Unlike on other Pacific islands, they are reared in sometimes very small pens. Never the less, you don't find pork at the butchers. A pig's sole destiny is to be slaughtered and cooked in the earth oven for festivities, or family feasts. During festivals, roasted pigs are offered to the king by the dozens, and in return, he offers the meat to the community.



We were lucky to be able to attend la Fête du Territoire, celebrating that Wallis & Futuna accepted to be governed directly by France. As all 3 kings, as well as the Catholic church favoured the referendum, the population voted with 95% for it. To this date, all important matters are sorted out between the kings, the church and the French administration.

The festivities started already on the evening before, with a kava ceremony welcoming all the honorary guests. They were seated on the porch of the king's palace facing the groups of traditionally clad dancers, as they were performing on the big lawn. Later that night, there was an open podium held on a stage. It was especially popular among young folks who infiltrated a few modern elements in their singing or dancing. The king and his guard watched to the very end. Therefore, no alcohol was being drunk at all, as this is considered impolite anywhere near the king. Long live the King!

The actual celebration of July 29th, started at 6 AM with a mass, which was certainly the highlight for the islanders. We joined in after 10 o'clock when another religious speech was held, probably by the modestly clad king of Wallis. Now dozens of roasted pigs lay neatly arranged on the lawn, together with additional gifts of taro, mats and more. Again, a kava ceremony was held, in which half a



coconut shell of kava was served to every important person. It took hours, until everyone with honorary status was addressed. Surprisingly, the village-chiefs and most of the crowd were enduring to sit constantly in the sizzling sun.

Next, a huge buffet was set up at the nearby community fale, and everybody was invited to dig in; tourists and locals alike. It was a feast consisting of much more than suckling pigs. There were pouches made of leaves, but also plastic containers filled with all sorts of exotic and well-known foods, like taro, fried noodles or salads. Also drinking-coconuts and soft-drinks were provided. After lunch, a parade was on the program. Traditional dancers in various elaborate costumes lined up. As the locals hardly ever walk, we weren't surprised the parade didn't even move for 100 metres... Because all spectators assembled here, it would have been pointless to parade elsewhere.



Now the approx. ten groups that partook in the parade, performed traditional dances, one after the other. Most of the very big dance groups were from Wallis itself, one from Futuna, plus one even from New Caledonia. Their costumes were handmade with either stitched on shells, treated and woven material of different plants, or colourful wool or cotton stripes. Most costumes were complemented with lots of glittering materials, heavy

necklaces, ankle- and wrist bands. Some of the costumes were quite heavy, and certainly not comfortable to wear in this heat and over the soggy clothing. Men, women and children of all ages were part of most dance groups, which usually represented the parish of one village.

The long lasting dances involved predominantly soft slow movements. Not really what one expects of war dances. Men and women often performed different steps to the music of the dance groups own band.

Honorary guests and family members often rewarded one or several dancers by sticking some banknotes on the costumes. That's probably why every dance lasted at least half an hour... Everybody should have the chance to bring some money and the spectators gave generously. We had seen a number of dancers with the equivalent of several hundred Euros, fixed to their bodies, giving the expression "walking bank" a new meaning.

Fiji: a country with many faces

On July 31st 2017, Aircalin brought us within an hour from one of the Pacific's least-, to the South Pacific's most visited archipelagos. With meanwhile 800,000 annual tourist arrivals, Fiji receives more holiday makers than all other South Pacific islands together. What a contrast to the 50 annual tourist arrivals in Wallis & Futuna!

The Fiji Archipelago consists of 332 islets with a total land area of 18,333 km². islands of Viti Levu (10,429 km²) and up almost 90 % of the country's land-area. Melanesians ~57%, and a strong Indian colonial times as cheap and hardworking



islands, of which 110 are populated, and about 500 Most of its 890,000 inhabitants live on the two main Vanua Levu (5,556 km²). Those two islands make Fiji's population consists predominantly of native minority ~38%, that was brought in during English labourers.

Fiji gained independence in 1966, and in 1987, the form of government was changed from a monarchy within the British Commonwealth to a republic. Though in 2017, the English Queen still smiles from several Fijian coins. After a troublesome period with several military-coups, democracy was finally reinstalled in 2014.

Viti Levu: friendly people and cannibal-history

Nadi on the island of Viti Levu, is home to the country's biggest airport, and that's where our discovery of Fiji started. We stayed in a nice apartment-guesthouse in Nadi's Namaka district. This suburb offered all we looked for: a good selection of restaurants, shops and a native Fijian market. Much more peaceful than Nadi downtown, where all shopfronts are cross-barred, due to alcohol related problems. However, wherever we went most people we passed on the street greeted us with a friendly "Bula" - young and old. As on other Pacific islands, it's a genuine friendliness without hidden agenda. Be they Melanesian or Indian, they often engage in interested small talk. If we asked somebody for advice about where and what, they always felt responsible to stay with us, until we boarded the right bus or found the requested shop; we felt almost adopted.

Our stage in Fiji was predominantly intended as a period of rest between all those exotic islands. Reading the introduction in the travel guide, we first thought the Yasawa Islands would be perfect for a holiday within our holiday. Yet, looking in detail for the right islands to stay, we discovered most have only one, maybe two resorts – all turned out to be either a party- or all-inclusive-resort, making a living with holiday makers from Australia and New Zealand. What we were looking for was rather a local village with a few restaurants to choose from.

Therefore, we altered plans and hopped at first in a bus to Sigatoka. About 55km south-east of Nadi, we stepped off at the Gecko's Resort in Cuvu, a place we had booked just the night before. Several villages and a beautiful beach are within walking distance. Furthermore, it was only a short bus ride to reach the district's main town of Sigatoka, as well as the beautiful Sigatoka Sand Dunes in Fiji's only national-park.



Gecko's Resort houses also a museum about Fijian culture. It is split over several bures made of palm leaves, and that's where we got some more insight about cannibalism. Nowadays, it's believed that missionaries often exaggerated about of the numbers of humans being eaten, just to put their own activity into a better light. In any case, on almost all Pacific islands, the number of people who died of disease brought in by the white man, exceeded by far the number of those being eaten by cannibals! On several, if not most islands, some 90% of the population died within a few years after contact with the white man, as they weren't immune to European disease. Some more islanders died through typhus, caused by wearing wet clothes, after the missionaries convinced them that it's now a sin, to live and bathe naked.



Sand Düne, Sigatoka

In most Pacific societies, cannibalism was predominantly practiced on war victims (to incorporate their power), on people condemned to death (as insult), or maybe on some deceased relatives (to get their power and spirit). In Fiji however, the customs must have been rougher. Fijian gods demanded lots of human sacrifices. For certain ceremonies, or the inauguration of important buildings, sometimes dozens of people were offered to the gods. They took only the souls, and left the flesh to their believers to feast on. Furthermore, as the Celts, also Fijians believed that chief's houses and temples need some strong men to hold corner- and central pillars. Therefore, the chosen ones were buried alive as reinforcement of the foundation. Faith seems to make people believe almost everything!

Bus-rides Fiji style

After three days of sight-seeing we continued to Pacific Harbour, nothing more than a resort town, with several hotels and restaurants to choose from. While waiting for the bus, a business man stopped by and offered to take us there for the bus fare. He had to go to Suva to pick somebody up, and in such cases, it's quite common in Fiji that also taxi drivers take people along for the bus-fare, instead of empty running. It wasn't the first time we were lucky to take advantage of such an economic and comfortable ride, instead of squeezing on the ultra-narrow bus seats to be found even on the modern big vehicles! The one and a half hour's ride to Pacific Harbour was particularly pleasant, as the talkative Indian driver made some scenic detours and a coffee stop with us. What a coincidence! A Filipino store manager we had met in Nadi just stopped for coffee at that very place too. After we introduced the two men, it didn't take long until they exchanged business cards.

Upon arrival at Pacific Harbour, we moved into a modern room at the posh Pearl Resort. We had sniffed out a last-minute deal that gave us 70% discount in this 4-star resort; just perfect to celebrate our 27th anniversary. The hotel offers several types of restaurants and one of it is a French style gastronomic affair that pleased us for the next two nights before we continued by bus to Suva.



Fiji at a glance is a very safe and very friendly tourist country. Yet, on some strange reasons (partly alcohol related) its two biggest cities: Nadi and the capital Suva, can be a bit troublesome – especially at night. Strolling the streets of Suva, we could for the first time sense a few troublemakers. So, we were happy again, to have found a hotel on the outskirts. Again, we saw gridded windows all around the town centre. The taxi driver who drove us to the airport the next day, told us about the sad fact that there are conflagrations with fatalities almost weekly, as people can't escape fast enough, because of all their gridded windows and double locked doors.

Vanua Levu: the hidden paradise of Savusavu

On August 8, 2017, we boarded a small Twin-Otter for the domestic flight from Suva-Nausori north-eastwards to Savusavu, on Fiji's second largest island of Vanua Levu. Thanks to the sea between the two biggest islands being sprinkled with islets, atolls, coral reefs and sand banks, the hour-long flight was much more exciting than any award-winning movie. The multitude of colours and shapes we saw through the plane's window, were absolutely dramatic. Even if we would have turned back right away at the airport, the trip would already have been worthwhile!

However, the small town of Savusavu prove to be the little gem we were looking for. We had reserved a room at the small Gecko Lodge, and it didn't take long until we knew, it was the right decision to book here for 11 days. Also its location, a 20-minute stroll from the centre of the 3,500 inhabitants' town, suited us.



The village, perched between steep hills and a protected harbour, lies just magnificently. It attracts plenty of yachties, fixing their boats, or waiting for calm waters to pursue their voyage.

Savusavu functions also as ferry port, market town and regional centre, providing plenty of shopping and banking facilities.

No wonder, there's a good range of restaurants. Most of them are simple looking, cheap and cheerful Chinese and Indian eateries. Some specialize in greasy fast-food, others look a bit more upmarket, but cook just mediocre. One place serves perfect "haute cuisine" incorporating dishes from around the globe, yet, their dining terrace isn't all that inviting, to say the least.

The weather was always perfect during our entire stay; some days it was rainy, even foggy, which gave us time to sort out our pictures and write our travel diary, on some days it was sunny but not too hot, which was perfect to explore the coastline and visit some villages, and on other days it was sizzling hot, which gave us the excuse to just sit in a café and enjoy some waffles, pancakes and smoothies.

Our flight back to the island of Viti Levu, this time to Nadi, was equally beautiful as the inbound trip. Thereafter, we stayed another three days in the pleasant suburb of Namaka, at the same quarter we've enjoyed before. It was pleasant to have already sought out some favourite restaurants nearby, so we could just dig in, without the sweat driving task of evaluating...

To us, Fiji has been full of surprises; though its largest towns; Nadi and Suva, are (meanwhile) surprisingly unappealing. Yet, people are very friendly and helpful everywhere. Food was surprisingly good and varied, only in places where they adapt to Aussie's and Kiwi's taste, we felt the dishes were surprisingly unseasoned and bland. Especially along the coast of Viti Levu, you find a surprising number of holiday resorts. All in all, Fiji is a surprisingly easy country to travel with extremely welcoming people.



Tuvalu: calm lagoons and very relaxed people

The next destination on our Pacific discovery trip was Tuvalu, some 900km north of Fiji. This South-Pacific Island-Nation consists of the 6 atolls Funafuti, Nanumea, Nui, Nukufetau, Nukulaelae and Vaitupu. Apart from Vaitupu, the surface of the lagoons is several times bigger, than the surface of the encircling islands. The other 3 islands; Nanumanga, Niutao and Niulakita, are actually also atolls, though with very small and enclosed lagoons, pure inland waters without connection to the sea. As Tuvalu's highest point is only five meters above sea-level, it is feared those islands will eventually perish in the sea, due to the effects of global warming. Many have emigrated, and roughly 11,000 inhabitants remain in Tuvalu. Of this population, some 96% are Polynesians, the other 4% Micronesians.

With 27 km², Tuvalu is the world's fourth-smallest country, after the Vatican, Monaco and the Pacific island nation of Nauru. The former Ellice Islands gained independence from Great Britain in 1978, but still belong to the British Commonwealth. Tuvalu is a constitutional monarchy, and the current head of the state is Queen Elisabeth II. The Australian Dollar is Tuvalu's legal tender and in 2017, there still wasn't any ATM; only a Bank exchanging foreign banknotes - if to a rate that should make the clerk turn pink.

With a GSP of 34 Million US Dollars, Tuvalu has the world's smallest national economy. The main source of income comes from the top-level domain ".tv". Otherwise, exports reach ~600,000 US Dollars annually, imports on the other hand, total ~20 Million USD. Saying that, to retain its independence, Tuvalu depends heavily on foreign donors, who are predominantly out of the treasuries of Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, South-Korea, Japan, the EU, Great Britain, the US, Canada and from the World Bank.

Funafuti Atoll: Little land and lots of water

On August 22nd, 2017, a swift flight brought us from Fiji's Nadi Airport to Viti Levu's other coast. From Suva, it was 2½ hours flight, until we reached Tuvalu's only airport:



Funafuti International. After going through immigration, an affair of four different counters, all staffed with friendly officials, the 60 passengers had to wait in a claustrophobically small 5x5 meters room for their luggage. After it was being deposited in the centre of the same chamber, everybody squeezed past each other again with suitcases in tow. Luckily, a new airport, financed by the World Bank, is already under construction.

Funafuti Atoll is by far the biggest, and the most important atoll of the island-state of Tuvalu. The large lagoon is up to 54 meters deep and has an amazing surface of 277 km². In contrast, the 33 islands encircling it, have only a cumulated landmass of 2,8 km². They are narrow sweeps of land between 20 and maximally 400 meters wide! Some 6,000 people, about 60% of Tuvalu's population, live on the islands of Funafuti Atoll. Apart from 150, all live on Fongafale, the atoll's biggest and most densely populated island that functions also as the country's capital and administrative centre.

As everywhere in the Pacific, big (and often oversized) projects and edifices are financed and habitually also built by foreign donor nations. Tuvalu's most outstanding and by far largest building, is the Taiwan-funded administration complex. Despite its impressive size, it's only just big enough to host the central government, the town council is housed in different buildings. The administration is certainly the main-employer for the native Tuvaluans. But we got the impression that Tuvaluans are rather born to dream than to work. The uncountable hammocks and other open-air sleeping possibilities were used all day long. Some locals just put out a mat on their ancestors' walled up grave and had a nap. If they weren't asleep, they were playing cards, with laptops, or driving around with moto scooters. If we saw people working, especially hard working, they were predominantly coming from abroad, be it far or near. Not only specialists, but also labourers and house keepers were "imported", among them many Fijians.

Fongafale is an impressively narrow but long island. Despite its length of 12km, the island makes up only ~2.0 km². On such a narrow sand bar and coral island with lush vegetation, you might expect to constantly see the wild sea on one side and the shallow lagoon on the other. Yet, apart from those rare sections too narrow to build houses along the road, you hardly ever see the water. Hosting ~6,000 people makes the island rather densely populated and there is barely any space to plant some veggies or fruit trees that would make the inhabitants a bit less dependent on imports.



Local transport and local customs: unique like Tuvalu

Tuvaluans favourite vehicles are scooters – almost every family owns several of them. Luckily, there are only few cars. As most locals don't distract themselves too much with work, and as there is no local TV station (only foreign channels), most couples have a cradle of children, despite family-planning. A little trailer attached to the scooter allows large families to move happily around the island. Moto scooter traffic was dense all-day long. Many probably just rode up and

down the island for fun. Only foreigners walk more than a couple of meters. This makes it easier to the many children, to wave to Palangis, as white foreigners are called around here.

The country's only hotel is a donation of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the government of Tuvalu. A pity, the Taiwanese don't operate it. Apart from this hotel, visitors can choose between several guest houses. None of them take credit cards and trouble awaits guests who didn't bring plenty of cash in Australian Dollars (Tuvalu's legal tender) – because there is really NO ATM anywhere! We stayed at Esfam Lodge, which is probably the best bet and kept spotlessly clean by the Fijian employees. Guests get to experience the positive, as well as the negative sides of the islander's way of thinking. If the owner-family has something to celebrate, it's self-understood that guests are invited too. So, we were lucky to partake in an excellent feast with many local specialities, including suckling pig roasted in the earth oven. The food was much better than in any restaurant on the island.



On the other hand, it seems a bad habit in all guest-houses of the islands to “upgrade” visitors unquestioned to more expensive rooms than booked, and then charge the higher price. According to Tuvaluans' way of thinking, this is perfectly all right and you must insist that it's your right to get the room at the price you booked it! Sadly, this little unnecessary game just leaves tourists with a bad feeling of an otherwise friendly island population. The people of Tuvalu have just another point of view, but they are very nice.

Discovering Fongafale island: peculiar around every corner

Walking to the southern- and northern tip of Fongafale Island, was really interesting. We passed many big churches, yet they don't appear as big as they are. On one hand, they don't stand out, but are often squeezed between houses due to the limited space. On the other hand, they are built in the same material as the local's houses, meaning timber-walls and corrugated iron roofs. Almost as plentiful as the churches, were the missionaries, they're not extinct yet! There were a few small colourful cemeteries, but most families choose to lay their deceased relatives to rest in their garden. Most graves are built with a large stone hood, often tiled and complemented with a roof. This comes in handy when a family member searches a place for a shady rest or wants to use the laptop, while lying on the grave. If the roof is big enough, the car can also be parked underneath. Once this vehicle goes into eternity too, it just stays there to rust away, next to the other deceased and beloved family members.

On our way northwards, we passed some rusty remains of a tank, abandoned cranes, more cars, an old bus and old boats all being eaten away by the salt. Never the less, the view over the calm lagoon, is a real joy. The pier, where the monthly supply-boat docks, is also located in the lagoon. We couldn't help but wonder, when we heard that the same vessel supplies also the French islands of Wallis & Futuna on its way from New Zealand. The shops down there are so much better stocked than here, where we found the choice extremely limited. Maybe this has to do with the people's way of thinking; Tuvaluans don't mind making money, but only as long as there is no work involved. So, they sold their fishing rights to Japanese and Koreans, and happily cook frozen fish. At the far end of the island is a rubbish dump, financed by foreign aid who cleaned up a lot of other dumps before. However, by walking the island's length, we constantly felt like walking through a rubbish dump.



Of course, there are sometimes useful things to be found, like a wooden plank, or a sheet of corrugated iron that may be used to extend or fix the house. There are only few nice houses, most resemble shacks nailed together from material of any kind. Tuvaluans didn't develop much sense for tended gardens. Only what smells to heaven is being disposed of at the rubbish dump, the rest might be blown away by the wind.

Running on the runway

The only time when Tuvaluans voluntarily run, is about 2 hours before sunset. Then, a big part of the population moves to the airport and uses the runway as a giant sports-field. On particularly sticky hot nights, this multifunctional airstrip serves as open air dormitory, when entire families roll their mats out, as the airport has a cooling breeze most of the time. Everybody knows the flight schedule; there are only two flights weekly anyway. Sirens are sound prior to every start and landing, the roads across and besides the airport get closed and the runway checked thoroughly. It's quite a spectacle!

Just behind the airport is a big rugby stadium, a solar power station, and a fossil fuel power station. The EU powers Tuvalu with fossil-, Taiwan with solar-power. Just behind those power plants, there is a little protective barrier and the open sea, the area facing the highest cyclone- and tsunami risk. Around this danger-zone, pigs are farmed in small pens. There is also a prison, but we think the only cell necessary is the drying-out cell. Nearby, is also Lake Tarasal, separated by a small natural dam from the open sea.



Eating out is a special experience on Tuvalu. Fongafale Island is lucky to have six restaurants. Saying that, we were often facing the question “which one shall we bother to cook for us?” At one place, if you arrived at 12:50h, the personnel had to rush, writing down the three options for the lunch menu. But if you arrived at 13:30h, the extensive three items menu was already sold out – so we were told! Like many shops, almost all restaurants are run by Chinese, who seem to have adapted very well to the Tuvaluan rhythm of life. Only the Chinese restaurant with the unique name 3 T's was standing out, meaning it was as good as a mediocre Chinese restaurant elsewhere. It

was regularly overrun by locals and foreigners alike. Tourists are not very many coming here, and if, they often leave after two nights only. If you stay here for 9 days as we did, the selection of food becomes very boring. On the other hand, life is very cheap here, as there's nothing else than very simple Asian style food...

Yet, we shouldn't moan too much about such trivialities. The locals must deal with much bigger worries. The threat that the rising sea level, due to global warming, could swallow the Tuvalu islands with their elevation of less than five meters, is real, if not that imminent. Tsunamis are not all that frequent, but any big one hitting one of the atolls, would be the death knell to the affected island. However, by far the biggest risk are the seasonal cyclones. On such small islands, also a cyclone can wipe out entire islands!

Dance and body-guards: farewell from a blithe island

For the moment, the people of Tuvalu are still happy, singing and dancing. On our last night, we had the unexpected chance to witness some traditional dancing and singing, performed in honour of a UN delegation. The groups were beautifully dressed in colourful costumes. Also, the honorary guests, including the PM and his ministers wore skirts and participated in the dancing. We could almost not believe our eyes, when the Prime Minister's Limousine (car plate: Prime Minister) of this remote island with only 6,000 inhabitants, arrived with police escort. We wonder, how much security personnel the head of state; Queen Elizabeth II would get, if she was to visit this island again...



Tuvalu is not really a destination fit for average tourists, but for real travellers, it's quite interesting and remains special to the last minute. On this small island, check-in for your flight is several hours before departure. However, after receiving the “exit” stamp in the passport, passengers are invited to go back home, or to the guesthouse respectively, have breakfast, have a shower and come back three hours later. If you didn't see your landlords before returning, they will look for you at the airport and you can legally bypass the security check, to receive a farewell present. What a wonderful world. And we could leave this wonderful Funafuti atoll, with the airport abbreviation FUN, in freedom – whereas the 10,000 people's nations Prime Minister, seated in the same plane, needed a bodyguard!

Tonga: a Kingdom adapting to modern times

After a one day stopover in Suva, Fiji Air flew us in less than two hours south-east to the Kingdom of Tonga. Only 36 of the Archipelago's 170+ islands, formerly called the "Friendly Islands", are inhabited. The total surface is about 750 square kilometres, scattered over 700,000 square kilometres of Pacific Ocean, stretched across ~800km.



The island-country never relinquished its sovereignty to any foreign power, though it had been a British protected state between 1900 and 1970.

Some 70% of Tonga's 103,000 predominantly Polynesian inhabitants reside on the main island of Tongatapu. During our previous stage in 1992, we've visited also the country's second largest island group Vava'u (today ~15,100 inhabitants), and the third largest Ha'apai (~7,100). This time, we decided to stay only on the largest island Tongatapu (260.5 km², 72,045 inhabitants).



We know that the country took a decisive path towards becoming a constitutional monarchy, rather than a traditional absolute kingdom. Popular uprising demanding more democracy have finally been heard during several changes of the throne within just 10 years, as two kings died within 6 years. The Royal Family is still highly respected, but times haven't stood still in Tonga either. We were curious to see, what else changed during the past 25 years.

Tongatapu: a happy marriage between traditional- and modern life

We based ourselves in the capital of Nuku'alofa, where we arrived on Sept. 1st, 2017. Tonga thrilled us immediately again. People were always smiling, and we felt welcome. The town centre is modern, with many new buildings and good roads. There is still a traditional market, but also plenty of designer stores and trendy coffee shops.



Hip fashioned jeans, full of holes were as widespread as traditional Ta'ovala's, mats worn around the waist. The size of a mat, whether it's woven coarse or fine, with delicate patterns or old with holes, indicates the purpose why, and by whom the mat is worn. Also Kiekie, a kind of ornamental girdle with woven, knotted, or otherwise worked stripes hanging down, were often worn over the clothing. As in most Pacific societies, also in Tonga, it's common that men and women alike, wear skirts. Wraparound skirts worn by men are called Tupenu.

Traffic in Tonga moves still very slow, despite the good roads. Today's vehicles however, are a far cry away from the old wrecks that were moving around 25 years ago. Most cars are now rather new, yet we still saw a few rusty old bombs rattling along. During our last visit, cars without fenders or doors were omnipresent.

What didn't dwindle on the other hand, was the number of churches, there are probably even more now! At first, we thought our Lonely Planet travel guide's terminology was exaggerating when we read "there are more churches (on Tongatapu Island) than a year full of Sundays". After making a few excursions, we realized, it was rather an under-estimation! Wherever we saw a few houses, there were also a few churches. Many of them are rather large and, every Christian denomination is represented.

We hadn't seen any other country, where Sundays are as holy as in Tonga. Taxis are banned by law and any activity, except going to church, is considered indecent. Most Tongans attend two to four masses each Sunday, plus some additional ones during the week. Pray and pay your contribution to the church seems compulsory. Internet access comes often with browsing blockers – even Tourists are not meant to watch "YouTube" on Sunday morning. At least visitors don't have to starve, as hotels are allowed to serve meals on Sundays. There are other ways to secure tourists stay in touch with God... Soon after inserting a Tongan SIM card (sold at the airport) into our mobile, we got an SMS offering "two Bible verses daily" for free – only unsubscribing would cost money!

We learned, that Tongan woman initially protested, after the government followed a recommendation of the missionaries banning topless clothing. Previously, nobody had had the idea of wearing a top in this tropical heat, and furthermore,

Tonga had introduced the law of equal rights long ago. No worries, the junta introduced another law, banning topless attire for both genders!

In contrast to the other Pacific islands, where the majority of believers attend church in colourful dresses, we noticed that most Tongans wore black on Sunday. Somebody explained that after the death of a parish member, the entire community wears black for a month and the closest relatives for much longer. Another form of respect is that all traffic stops, if a funeral car is passing. The cemeteries are very colourful. Some have large impressive tombs, sometimes fenced-in, sometimes with a roof. Additional to colourful plastic flowers, the graves are often complemented with either a tomb stone, a decorative quilt hanging behind the grave, or a big depiction of the deceased, and maybe Jesus on a poster.



By public bus we ventured out east and west and explored the island. Most houses are very western, some are small, others quite luxurious, but they never appeared miserable. Wherever we went on Tongatapu, it looked proper, tidy and modern. The coastline was often breath taking, especially when the countless islands and islets popped out of turquoise water.

Discovering the island was very rewarding. If it got later than 4 PM before we headed back, there were almost no buses anymore. Yet, this wasn't a problem. We never waited long on a bus stop, before a friendly local stopped and offered us a lift. That way, we learned a fair bit more about life in Tonga. Many tourists come here just for the beach, or maybe to see whales. To us however, the highlights were the friendly people who gave us an insight into their culture and traditions that are still very much alive. Re-visiting Tonga delighted us again indeed, and we could easily have spent more time here than just the one week on Tongatapu.

French Polynesia: turquoise lagoons and towering mountains

After ten sunny, though chilly days in Auckland, Air New Zealand brought us 4,000km north-east to Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia. This French overseas territory, nowadays called "*collectivité d'outre-mer*," consists of 118 islands and atolls (each consisting of a multitude of islets), of which 67 are inhabited. They are divided



into 5 different archipelagos: The Society Islands; the Tuamotu Archipelago; the Gambier Islands; the Marquesas (with Fatu Hiva etc.), and the Austral Islands. Those 5 archipelagos are stretching over an expanse of ca. 2,000 kilometres. In 1966, France started to use Fangataufa in the Gambier Islands, and the Mururoa-Atoll in the Tuamotus, for nuclear tests that only stopped in 1996 after a worldwide wave of protests. One of the atolls used for nuclear tests is still under constant military surveillance. The nuclear tests caused so much destruction, its feared that a reef-wall of the lagoon could collapse and cause a tsunami!

Some 68% of French Polynesia's ~286,000 inhabitants live on the Society Island of Tahiti. The overall population consists of about 78% Polynesians, 12% Chinese and 10% French from the continent. Since 2004, French Polynesia enjoys a partly autonomous status. In 2013, the political party in favour of full independence lost the election. Nevertheless, in the same year, the UN added French Polynesia to the list of countries to be decolonialized. French is the official language and widely spoken. Many native Polynesian speakers prefer nowadays to communicate in French, even at home. Therefore, several Polynesian dialects are endangered to extinct.

In French Polynesia, the missionaries weren't as quickly "successful" as on other islands. Or, as one sailor noted at the time in his diary: "the only visible sign of religion was the fear of the missionaries ...!" Well, finally the missionaries succeeded with the simple, and often used tactic of buying trust from well-respected chiefs and kings, by donating weapons and other gifts! Thereafter, they convinced them to prohibit the islanders' "wicked ways". In Tahiti, dancing, indecent songs, nudity, indiscriminate sex, and even ancient



customs like tattoos, drinking kava or wearing floral wreaths were banned. For blasphemy, or praying to other (old) Gods, the dead penalty was introduced! In 1856, Brother Laval a catholic missionary, abducted people from the Gambier Islands to Papeete. There, he used them, along with locals, as slave labourers, to build a huge cathedral and uncountable bold churches. Subsequently, a famine broke out, as breeding of livestock and farming was neglected. However, the biggest killer were diseases, brought in by missionaries and other white men, against which the islanders had no immunity. That way, Tahiti's population decreased within a few decades from 40,000 down to only 6,000. In the Marquesas, it took only a century to deplete the population from 80,000 to 2,000!

Papeete: Tahiti's biggest town

With almost 26,000 inhabitants, Papeete is not only the capital, but also by far the largest town of French Polynesia. It's situated in the north of the mountainous island of Tahiti. After 5 hours flight from Auckland, we reached Papeete on Sunday, September 17, 2017, about 19 hours before having left New Zealand. The dateline gave us the unique chance to enjoy 6 meals on a single day, but also the obligation to pay for two nights' accommodation. We stayed at the brand-new YHA associated Mahana Lodge Backpackers, right in the centre of town. Papeete is reputed as being rather ugly, but it



didn't appear so bad to us. During working days, Papeete is quite a lively town, with Polynesian and French vibe.

After having been to other Pacific Islands, it felt very French to us. The predominantly Polynesian population obviously dresses much less conservative than in other Pacific island nations. Ladies with strapless tops and shorts were common sight. Despite the people being still quite religious here, though it's on the decrease, they wear just light clothing because it's hot. We heard that the huge French Military presence during the nuclear testing period, lead to a more liberal European way of thinking, reversing some of those "wicked ways" introduced a century earlier by the missionaries.

As we wandered around Papeete, we came across the big market hall. Not only fruit, vegetables and other groceries, but also lots of souvenirs are being sold. Tourist shops, croissants, baguette and patisserie could be found all over town. A large Carrefour supermarket offered everything you'd also find in France, including products from all over Europe. The only visible differences were a handful of foodstuffs imported from Australia and New Zealand. Everything is quite pricey, though New Zealand meat and butter are cheaper than in their country of origin!

We got the impression, French Polynesians are anything else than lazy. Many buildings were decorated with impressive artwork of giant murals. There are lots of small businesses operated by locals and after work, we saw them active on sports grounds, exercising with rowing boats, and jogging or walking along the pretty seaside promenade. Soon after sunset, many families have dinner at the food-trucks called Roulottes, a French Polynesian institution. Those were initially caravans, but nowadays rather camping cars, equipped with kitchen only. From them, the owners are selling meals on designated places, often town squares reserved for Roulottes. It may sound simple, but most deliver great meals of raw fish, BBQ meats or fish, usually with delicious pepper- or Roquefort-sauces. Others offer pizza and pasta, or crêpes tasting as good as those in Brittany. Tables and chairs are always provided and often also a roof protecting against the elements. All in all, Papeete felt almost like a French town, inhabited by Polynesians.



Discovering the archipelagos: air-passes, the way to go

Tahiti is the most populated, and probably also French Polynesia's most famous island. However, the best parts of any visit to this region are the trips to the outer islands and archipelagos, be it to famous Bora Bora, or lesser known destinations like Maupiti or Fakarava. Luckily, Air Tahiti offers an economical way to do so: air-passes. Already the flights over the islands make such trips more than worthwhile. For € 310.-, you get for example three of the Society Islands. For about € 570 you get three atolls in the Tuamotu Archipelago, plus six of the Society islands. There are several

variations in between, and also extensions to add the outer Archipelagos like the Austral Islands and/or the Marquesas. However, every pass, including added extensions, has a validity of 28 days only.

According to the travel-literature, tourists could easily see the Society Islands, the Tuamotu Archipelago and the Marquesas all within two weeks, still having plenty of time to relax (two days?). If you believe those books, a month should be plenty to visit all five archipelagos. However, as we have more time than money, we felt already rushed to fit the Society islands and the Tuamotus into one 28 day's air pass! So, we decided to invest in two air-passes, the "Discovery Pass", and the "Bora Bora Tuamotu Pass". That way, we got nine weeks to visit ten of French Polynesia's breathtaking islands, dotted over two archipelagos.

The Society Islands: craggy mountains surrounded by deep-blue lagoons

The Society Islands are with ~235,000 inhabitants by far French Polynesia's most populated, and economically most important archipelago. (Re-)Named by Captain James Cook during his voyage 1769, the Society Islands consist of the Windward Islands (Îles du Vent) Mehetia, Tahiti, Tetiaroa, Moorea & Maiao and the Leeward Islands (Îles Sous-le-Vent) Huahine, Raiatea, Tahaa, Bora Bora, Tupai, Maupiti & Mopelia. Ten of the twelve islands and atolls are inhabited. Their total landmass adds up to 1,590 km². Almost 70% of French Polynesia's population lives on one of the Society Islands, of which 50% live on the main island of Tahiti. We've visited most of the Society islands, but not Mehetia; an uninhabited Volcanic Island, Tetiaroa; a private island resort named after Marlon Brando, Maiao; ~300 inhabitants, uninhabited Tupai and neither Mopelia, inhabited by less than 10 people. In the Society Islands, our discovery tour brought us to Tahiti, Maupiti, Taha'a, Bora Bora, Moorea, Raiatea and Huahine.

Maupiti: a cute island, surrounded by a stunning blue lagoon

On Sept.19, 2017, we started exploring French Polynesia with a flight from Papeete to Maupiti. Already the one-hour flight over the Society Islands offered divine views of Moorea, Huahine, Raiatea, Tahaa and Bora Bora. Depending on the cloud-/weather situation, and the side you're sitting in the aircraft, you would see more or less, but all passengers were excited long before we reached our destination.



Maupiti is a small mountainous island with the highest peak, volcanic basalt "rock" Te Uru Faatiu, reaching 385m. The main island is surrounded by a lagoon supporting five bigger, and several small motus (islands on the surrounding reef), culminating to a landmass of 12km². The two biggest motus: Aira and Tuanai, have each a surface similar to the main island's in the centre of the lagoon. The airport is situated on Motu Tuanai and the boat ride to the main village Vai'ea, across the turquoise lagoon, was already a highlight. Here, those passengers who had

chosen to stay on the main island, were met by a member of their host family. Maupiti does not have any hotels, only small family run pensions. There is no ATM and no major supermarket on this island, only tiny grocery shops. Therefore, many of the 1,200 inhabitants regularly take their boats, and sail in two hours to Bora Bora, for shopping and banking.

In order to minimise maintenance on the boats, people have invented some kind of cranes on stilts, mounted on the lagoon floor. This allows them to lift their small boats above the water. The hanging boats look very colourful and can be seen anywhere along the 10km long ring-road encircling the island. While discovering Maupiti afoot, we were astonished about the good, concrete road and the many neat and proper houses. French Polynesia has certainly more wealth than the other Pacific Island nations we've visited previously. Locals jokingly said, they are evolving – showing us the way how they produce coconut-milk semi-automatically as proofing example. The machine they developed still requires holding the coconut half manually, only the grating is done electrically – but you must be damn careful with your fingers!



We stayed at the very personally run Pension Tereia, owned by a local family. It offered simple rooms, communal dinners and of course a baguette-breakfast. It is located near Tereia Beach, a beautiful stretch of white sand. The lagoon is as turquoise as everywhere, but so shallow around this area, you can wade through the water for a few hundred meters to reach Motu Auirā. We really enjoyed our three days at Maupiti; the island is certainly one of the jewels of the Society Islands.

Tahaa: the vanilla and black pearl island

On Sept. 22, 2017, Air Tahiti brought us to Raiatea, an island that shares its surrounding atoll with the neighbouring island of Tahaa. We only spent one night at the Teavapiti-Lodge in Raiatea, an island we will describe later, as we came back to spend more time here. Presently, our destination was Tahaa, to where we continued the next day. Due to its proximity to Raiatea, Tahaa doesn't have an own airport, as the island is only a 30 minutes boat ride away. The 88km² large island of Tahaa has a round shape, with four deep (fjord-like) bays cutting into its southern half. Therefore, the coastal road accumulates to 67km.



Tahaa is probably a bit more traditional than others of the French Polynesian islands and people's faith seems to be stronger. The few ones who refuse to go to church, are simply not greeted by the villagers. No less than 18 churches compete for the souls of the 5,300 inhabitants. We heard that also here, unfair practices are applied by church-leaders to get more donations! However, there are also some leftovers from their ancient cultures; i.e. in Tahaa chickens are kept as pets. Neither are their eggs collected (found), nor is their meat consumed. Of course, people appreciate both, yet they only consume imported eggs and poultry. Dogs, on the other hand, are once a while eaten, pets as well as stray.

We had booked four days in Pension Titaina, run by a French family. The meals we got with half-board, were always excellent and made with local ingredients. Fish and vanilla was always on the menu and everything was well presented. Tahaa is one of the islands that could establish a name for itself with two worldwide exported products: vanilla and black pearls. A boat trip around the island included guided tours to a vanilla-, as well as a pearl-farm which both were very interesting.

Sailing through the turquoise lagoon between the island and the reef with its many motus, was already splendid. A lunch stop on one of them, and snorkelling above a "coral garden", just added to the joy.

Bora Bora: where paradise is an ordinary, beautiful island

After a short ferry ride to Raiatea and a short, but sweet flight, we reached Bora Bora on Sept. 27th. We gave ourselves 7 days to find out whether Bora Bora's reputation as THE dream-destination is justified (in our lagoon blue eyes, anyway) and whether it can be visited without spending a fortune. By booking a place to stay that was neither over the water, nor on a motu, we had already provided the foundation for economic lodging. The € 700 we paid for one week in a modern, and large apartment at Sunset Hill Lodge, were certainly not overpriced. The place was situated on a hillside above the main village of Vaitape. It even included free airport transfer. Those staying in the luxury resorts, some much closer to the airport than our place, had to pay up to USD 250 for the transfer. While we made breakfast by ourselves, and dined every evening in another place, those on the motus are kept "captive" to their resort's overpriced restaurant, whether it was good or bad; unless the



precious holiday makers (often honeymooners) agreed to pay for a taxi-boat to the main island, which set them back USD 84. One couple told us, the USD 84 were about what you paid less for fine dining on the main island, but the food in the restaurants they chose, was much better than the overpriced fare in their resort.

Well, earning a fortune with people believing Bora Bora must cost a fortune, is a long-established tradition on this dream island. However, the incredibly pretty lagoon, the iconic mountains and the warm tropical climate please everybody visiting Bora Bora – also those staying in budget accommodations. From our hilltop location, the view over the lagoon was probably even more splendid than from many overwater bungalows. Those can cost up to € 2,500 for a single night, but don't expect to find one much below € 500 in a resort on a motu.

French Polynesia has uncountable beautiful islands and atolls, though Bora Bora, with its surface of 38km², is certainly one of the nicer ones. On a fine day, already the flight approaching it, is worthwhile and the free shuttle boat from the airport-motu to the main village of Vaitape, offers great views of the motus and main island. It has quite a few remarkable craggy peaks, of which the highest is an impressive 727m tall; Mont Otemanu. To get the most of the island, we did quite a bit of walking, and encircled it by bicycle on the 32km long coastal road.

Most of the 9,600 residents of Bora Bora live along the coast, some have nice luxurious villas, but many just ordinary houses. The chief village of Vaitape is the only place with a



good selection of stores and restaurants. During the day, it often gets crowded by cruise line passengers, raiding the (pearl) shops and temporary souvenir stalls along the main road. Late afternoon, Vaitape's street belongs to the locals again. Nobody would find signs that Bora Bora is such a sought-after tourist destination. The town has a good selection of restaurants, from cheap and cheerful snack bars and roulottes, to a Chinese restaurant and several places offering French Haute Cuisine. We tried a good many of them and wherever we went, be it a cheap or an expensive place, there were virtually no other tourists – only locals! Tourists seem to contend with what's offered in their resorts. As all over the

Pacific, restaurants in Vaitape had most clients during the week.

On weekends islanders go to church and feast between the masses at home – only expats visit restaurants on weekends. Experiencing this, gave us the feeling of being on a very ordinary island, where we could mingle with locals.

Well, those willing to pay a fortune for a beach holiday, can do so in Bora Bora. However, those wanting to visit this dream destination at a modest price, can also do so. The sheer beauty of Bora Bora justifies a visit, though there are many competing islands. However, Bora Bora has just the right number of residents necessary to offer a good selection of restaurants and supermarkets, including a Super U. Being on a discovery trip, rather than on a beach holiday, we loved Bora Bora a lot. Away from the upmarket resorts, it's just the way we like it!

Archipelagos, atolls, passes, islands and islets: varied wonders of the oceans

Our travel tales contain lots of well-known words like atolls, lagoons and the like. Many landlubbers probably know only that all this stuff can be found in the wide expanse of the oceans... Let us try to give a few rough explanations.

An archipelago is a group or chain of islands and/or atolls and the water body in between. An atoll is a ring-shaped coral-reef or coral rim that completely encircles a lagoon. This coral reef is the base of uncountable sandy islets; in French Polynesia called motu. All are narrow, but some are very short, others incredibly long. Between the motus, the reef is normally just barely under water. A water passage between motus is called hoa, or pass respectively, if the water depth is profound enough that boats, or even large vessels can enter the lagoon. Those passes are where most fish feed and therefore all divers head for.



Atolls are leftovers from volcanic islands, after they erupted. In the course of times, the volcano often collapsed so much that the crater rim became a reef, and the crater a lagoon. Sometimes, the central volcanic island(s) still sit in the centre of the lagoon, as is the case in Maupiti, Bora Bora or Huahine. Sometimes, it can happen that the submarine crater of an atoll

raises in the cause of time, triggered by sinking sea levels or movement of the tectonic plates. The lagoon will dry out and, a few million years later, become a raised atoll, as is the case with Niue island. To make things a bit more complicated, mankind distinguishes between islands and islets. The latter is normally smaller, but depending on whom defines it, an islet can be bigger than an island. However, an islet is always uninhabited.

The Tuamotu Archipelago: vast atolls scattered over an area the size of Europe



Now we interrupted our trip to the Society Islands, to discover some atolls further afield. The Tuamotu Archipelago is also part of French Polynesia, and consists of 78 atolls of different sizes, including three tall coral islands. With an expanse of roughly the size of Europe, the Tuamotus are the world's largest archipelago. However, the total land-mass of the 45 inhabited and 33 uninhabited atolls, cumulates only to a surface of 850 km². Only 17,000 people live in this remote archipelago, of which we visited the Atolls of Tikehau-, Rangiroa- and Fakarava.

Tikehau: our first impression of the Tuamotus

On Oct. 4th 2017, another flight with breath-taking views brought us from Bora Bora north-eastwards to Tikehau Atoll. This is a classical atoll, consisting of a lagoon encircled by a coral-reef dotted with motus. After disembarking from the plane, the perspective of the atoll got rather two dimensional, and we could hardly see the chain of motus on the opposite side of the lagoon. In fact, the diameter of the roundish lagoon measures about 28km, and the circumference of the surrounding reef is 80km. The motus on the reef, and a few islands inside the lagoon, sum up to a landmass of only 20 km², whereas the water body of the lagoon measures 460 km². We were delighted about this new seascape, though retrospectively we know, Tikehau is only a baby-atoll in comparison to those we've visited afterwards.



Our bungalow stood on the eastern tip of 5km long motu Tuherahera. We stayed at Pension Justine, situated right on a white sandy beach facing the lagoon. There was a pier, under which we regularly saw colourful fish and reef sharks passing. With kayaks, it wasn't that far to reach uninhabited motus though, if wind and waves were high, it took quite some strength to paddle. Never the less, it was worthwhile as the scenery was just gorgeous. In such a paradisiac environment, we dared to bathe like Adam & Eve.

If we felt like mingling with the locals, we cycled to Tuherahera village, home to most of the atoll's 530 inhabitants. As everywhere in French Polynesia, it was easy to find brie-cheese, paté and baguette – but only if you found the shop, as locals in such a small community don't need advertising bills. Easier to spot, was the island's landmark building: a modern concrete cyclone shelter on high stilts.

What Brigitte spotted from the plane, seems not to draw many tourists; wonderful karstic limestone rocks, strewn on the ocean beach. They were up to 7m tall and had awkward shapes of sharp edges. It was interesting clambering among them and distinguishing ever prettier silhouettes. A bit inland, various coconut groves hid more such diverse limestone rocks.

Tikehau is not a very touristy atoll and there is neither an ATM, nor a big hotel. Most visitors book half-board, though we had decided otherwise, as we like to sample different restaurants. In Tikehau, there are only snack-bars, but no restaurants, a pension owner pointed out. Snack-bars are often nicely decorated open air eateries, and their plates come neatly arranged – certainly much better than what you'd get in a PMU-Bar in France. However, finding one that also serves snacks is tricky; in French Polynesia most "Snacks" cook proper meals, and if they also prepare small snacks, like sandwiches, it's your lucky day!



Typically, snack-bar menus include the locals' favourites; meaning fish & meat; raw, grilled or fried, accompanied by rice, french fries, and delicious sauces, like Roquefort, curry or pepper, often based on Crème-fraîche. Seeing how small the village is, we were quite amazed how popular the three snack-bars are among the Polynesians. On Friday nights, the customers may even bring some instruments or high-tech equipment along, and start a karaoke session.

Talking with those working in the tourist industry, they often moan that French Polynesia doesn't attract enough visitors. Tikehau is certainly one of the lesser visited places. However, witnessing that this atoll's 530 inhabitants are served by 11 flights a week by 70 seater planes, we can hardly imagine how the atoll could absorb more tourists.



Rangiroa: one of the world's largest atolls

On October 8th, we boarded another Air Tahiti plane for a very scenic 20 minutes hop. Now we headed to Rangiroa Atoll, the largest in French Polynesia, and one of the largest atolls in the world. Its lagoon has an impressive size of 1,640 km², encircled by a coral reef of 230km. On it, a chain of 415 motu-groups accumulate to a landmass of 79 km². The roughly elliptical lagoon has a length of 80km and an average width of 20km. Most of the atoll's 3,500 inhabitants live in the villages of Avatoru and Tiputa, which are on neighbouring motus, both next to a pass.

We've explored the 10km long Motu Avatoru, and the namesake village by bicycle, and were surprised by the big number of snacks and churches. The Main-Motu actually counts 7 islands, connected by short bridges. We found a few small sandy beaches on both sides of this island chain. Because of sharp coral stones, swimming in the lagoon is only possible from piers and raised up sand patches.



Due to the vastness of the atoll, the water inside the lagoon may get almost as agitated as on the oceanside of the motu. The colour of the water may give you an indication at best, which side of the motu you're on. As the depth of the lagoon has a maximum of 35metres, it can happen that thunderstorms develop just over this atoll.

Although Rangiroa isn't all that touristy, it's by far the most visited destination in the Tuamotus. Consequently, a fair number of good quality restaurants has emerged. We stayed for 5 days at Turiroa Village - Chez Olga, ideally situated in the middle of 10km long Motu Avatoru, where the airport is situated. A few excellent dining options were literally at our doorstep.

On the eastern end of the motu, there are two snack-bars pleasing the tourists: one with excellent and nicely prepared dishes, and one with filling plates which they serve on a terrace with excellent views of the marine life in the lagoon. To us landlubbers, it was a perfect opportunity to watch colourful fish and large sharks.

Not far from there is Tiputa Pass, where the ships and the rough waves from the Pacific Ocean enter the lagoon. From a nicely set up view point, it was interesting to watch the agitated water to calm down. If you're lucky, you may see dolphins playing in those waves. Diving-boats are here most of the time too: "Passe de Tiputa" is THE diving spot! Fish abounds, and divers may see different species of shark, or a Napoleonfish (Humphead wrasse). Diving is the biggest business here. Some lagoons in the archipelago are said to host 700 species of fish. On the other hand, seeing life corals on the Rangiroa Atoll, is wishful thinking. There are also boat trips to various sites around the atoll, but as the lagoon is so vast, it will take 90-120 minutes to get there. Unless you're fortunate to pick a day with very calm water and persisting sunshine, it may be a very bumpy and cold boat ride. We talked to several people who got soaking wet and sea sick.



During our stage, the lagoon was for most of the time quite rough – too rough to use the kayaks provided by our hosts. At night, the sound of the waves appears even louder, and first, we had to get used to it. Our room was situated some 10m from the shore, but we wonder how much more intense the sound of the waves would be during a stormy night in an overwater bungalow.

Fakarava: a boomerang shaped main-island on a vast atoll

We took to the sky again on October 13, 2017. Though the weather wasn't that great, it didn't mean the sightseeing part of the flight was void; in contrary! After descending through various blankets of clouds, Fakarava Atoll became visible quite clearly. However, due to strong sidewinds and pouring rain above the airport, the 72-seater ATR72 plane couldn't touch down. Consequently, the pilot decided to abort landing. While passengers with aviophobia closed their eyes and



prayed, we stuck with our eyes to the windows, and enjoyed the following scenic loop around the pretty atoll. Twenty minutes later, the rain stopped, and the pilot resorted to a hard sidewind landing. After alighting from the plane, the lagoon shined in a very mystical light under the still very dark clouds.

Fakarava is the second largest atoll in the Tuamotus. Its lagoon has a water surface of 1,121km² and the 41 groups of motus on its encircling coral reef of 60 x 25km, accumulate to a landmass of 16km². The width of the motus might be smaller than on other atolls of the archipelago, but its boomerang shaped main island has an impressive length of ~45km.

We stayed some 4km south of the village of Rotoava, home to about 450 of the atoll's 830 inhabitants. The village has some pretty churches, one with an interesting cemetery. The biggest eye catcher is probably the one business, attention-grabbing with large sculptures, elaborately made of colourful buoys. We believe they belong to a black pearl farm, but we're not sure, as we were more fascinated by the big balls than by the small farmed ones.

Fakarava also attracts many divers and yachties. Sooner or later, foreigners and locals alike, end up in one of the island's few snack bars. Whilst we had lunch, a group of men that appeared like locals to us, set-up an ad-hoc band, playing Polynesian songs. As also some passers-by joined in, we were all the more surprised, when it turned out that the initial "band" was from Rapa Nui, better known as Easter Island. This proved that Polynesians of all the Pacific Islands share a common culture and language base, independently of their being now under American, Australian, New Zealand, English, French, or Chilean influence.

Fakarava is one of those islands and atolls, where eateries are a bit pricier than elsewhere. After a while we discovered that we were almost the only ones, burning some calories on the way to our meals, as we cycled or walked. Everybody else took advantage of the free pick-up and drop-off service, offered by many snacks and restaurants in touristy areas. Therefore, the surcharge paid not only for the fries or rice that were superfluously always included with any raw fish salad, but also for the taxi-service. On the other hand, we must admit that the long lonely road down the island is almost as "exciting" as driving through Australia's Nullarbor Plain, with the exception that this road in Fakarava is palm-lined.

The new Kori Kori Lodge, where we stayed, has only two bungalows, both right on the lagoon. Because of sharp coral-stones, there was no beach to enter the water, but guests have access to a covered platform stilts, next to the snack bar that belongs also to the lodge. From there, it was often possible to observe sharks and other fish and if you dared, you could enter the water over a ladder. Reef shark, be they small or big, are normally harmless to humans and abound all over the territories lagoons.



Together with six neighbouring atolls, Fakarava figures on UNESCO's list of "Réserves de Biosphère". Despite this, some marine species are almost extinct. To fight this, French Polynesia runs e.g. efforts to re-settle the beautiful giant clams. They are endangered, yet have a good impact to the marine eco-system. The owners of Kori Kori have successfully re-introduced some of those colourful shells (named Bénéitier, in French) and we saw lots of baby-clams around the bay.

After 4 days on this vast and astonishing lagoon, another scenic flight brought us back to Papeete in the Society Islands.

Tikehau, Rangiroa or Fakarava: choosing the right atoll in the Tuamotus



As most visitors travel with more money than time, they face the difficult question of which atolls to choose in the Tuamotus. All abound with fish. Shark sightings are almost warranted, but most corals are dead. Otherwise, there are differences. If you're looking for sandy beaches, uninhabited motus that can be reached with a short boat ride, or even by kayak, and reasonably priced snack-bars: Tikehau is the place to go.

Foodies however, should resort to Rangiroa. If you hope to see at least some life corals, divers told us the best chance is on the opposite side of the reef in Fakarava.

None of these atolls are very touristy, but if you wanna go

away from it all, you might choose some atolls only accessible with lesser known air-passes, like the Ahe- or Manihi-Atoll. Furthermore, there are countless other atolls, easy accessible by plane from French Polynesia's capital Papeete. The worry in such places, is not the more expensive flight, but probably rather the lack of tourist infrastructure like tour- and dive-operators.



Back on the Society Islands

We had loved our first insight to the wonderful and varied paradise islands of French Polynesia a lot. The 6 atolls and islands we've visited already in the Society Islands and the Tuamotus, just stirred up our appetite for more. Unlike most other visitors, we didn't dive here. Yet, there is so much to see and explore everywhere that 3 or 4 days on each island are just not enough to do them justice. So, we invested in a ferry ticket and a second, this time a small, air pass. This allowed us to discover even more of the Society Islands and gave us a new time horizon of a further 28 days.

Moorea: bizarre mountains like out of a fairy-land

Once again, we dived into the low-key "hustle and bustle" of Papeete and overnighed at Mahana Lodge YHA hostel. On October 18, we travelled on to the neighbouring island of Moorea. This time, we didn't fly, but took the amazingly large and amazingly popular (car-)ferry that sailed in 40 minutes to Moorea. From the "gare maritime", we took a bus which brought us in 45 minutes halfway around the island (300 XPF = € 2.50).

We had

booked a bungalow at Tapu Lodge. The kitchen-equipped little cottage was great, but even better was the new swimming pool high above the 6 bungalows. It didn't only offer refreshing dips, but also amazing views over the lagoon, though the short walk up there was very perspiring. For more water activities, we had to cross the road, to reach a private pier, kayaks and a small sandy beach – all waiting to be used.

We were lucky, the lodge run an excursion with an outrigger-boat. Near some islands in the lagoon, the captain stopped in shallow water. Here, he let us get in touch with manta rays and to see reef sharks, which was really exciting to us! It seemed, the manta rays were not only after the feed donated by the captain, but also after close contact with humans.

We stayed 1,5km from the area called "Petit Village" with a good choice of restaurants and two supermarkets. Never the less, we had to walk a bit, as the nearest places to eat "celebrated" their annual leave, though there were also decent restaurants offering free pick-up.

Free pick-up was also offered by the rental-car companies, despite their offices being based almost 40km away. Having a car for more than two days, gave us the opportunity to explore Moorea island independently. There is one road circling the island and a smaller one, leading to Belvédère, a great viewpoint inland. On days when cruise liners with 2,000 - 4,000 passengers anchor in the lagoon, big buses climb up there too, which means the narrow road and parking space get



real tight. At least Moorea has 17,000 inhabitants, but if such cruise liners visit islands with only a few hundred inhabitants, the locals must feel overrun.

Moorea is extremely beautiful, no wonder so many tourists want to admire it. If no cruise liner moors in one of its two northern bays, the roads are rather lonely and very easy to navigate. The interior is dotted with bizarre, fairy-tale mountain peaks, often shrouded in clouds. Of course, also the surrounding lagoon boasts wonderful colours. Brigitte couldn't get enough of these fine views, so we drove the 70km around the island several times. This allowed us to look out for those up to 1,207m high craggy mountains again, which are not always visible because of the frequent clouds. That way, we also enjoyed seeing Moorea in various shades of light. Apart from marvelling at Moorea's unique mountain-peaks, our rental car offered us also the opportunity of some more sightings of marine-life. Right from the shore, we could see some Pacific white-spotted Eagle Ray, as well as more black tip reef sharks. The best spot to observe sharks without wetting our feet, was certainly from the public creperie, situated in the midst of Hilton's over-water bungalows. With very short interruptions, there were always some of these majestic creatures visible from the pier, normally 2 – 5, sometimes up to 15! After one unforgettable week in Moorea, we dropped our rental car at the airport, and boarded a late afternoon flight to Raiatea, just for once; not in the best of light!



Raiatea: the island with one of Polynesia's most important ancient temple grounds

Just as we arrived at the airport of Raiatea on October 25th 2017, the sun reappeared and bathed the coastline in golden light. As most of the time, we were picked up by our hosts. For the next three days, we stayed at Pension Temehani (chambres d'hôte). It is situated right on the lagoon, 11km southwest of the main town of Uturoa. The pension is run by a French couple, and they cook excellent Polynesian style meals, served convivially on a communal table. Ironically, the French hosts we stayed with, were always more likely to spoil their guests with traditional Polynesian food (raw fish, oyster-mussels, taro, bread fruit, plantain or sweet potatoes). Polynesian hosts on the other hand, usually served us what they like best themselves; French and Chinese food.

Polynesian family patterns: Child raising and child sharing



According to our (Lonely Planet) travel guide, Raiatea is the spiritual heart of Polynesia. However, to us the island appeared pretty French. Most Polynesians have obviously adopted a pretty French lifestyle. Unfortunately, we hardly heard them speak Tahitian, and this applied to all islands visited by us. The only visible sign of cultural difference is that this island boasts even more churches than others. However, despite the missionary's influence and a strong Christian belief, some ancient customs could survive all over French Polynesia. For instance, if a couple prefers to have a girl, the next born boy might get raised as a girl, with clothes, hairstyle and toys for a girl (rarely the opposite). As

adults, those feminine men are well respected and integrated into the society as women, called Mahu. Surely, homosexuality is not accepted by the church – so these people enjoy a special gender-status, the so-called third sex. They are free to live together with any gender without being considered homosexual. This is quite common in other Polynesian societies too, namely the Samoas and Tonga, where they are referred to as Fa'afafine or Fakaleiti respectively.

Again, very unique to French Polynesia, is the concept by whom children are raised. Nowadays, sexuality is predominantly restricted to couples. In pre-



missionary times, it was rather liberal and therefore, fatherhood was not often known. Babies were always welcome, and the entire village contributed in raising a new-born. This concept is partly still in place today. Furthermore, at a certain age, children can decide in which family they like to live, without forgetting who are their parents. They might decide to stay with a relative or just somebody else after a few years again. The tables are big, and the doors are always open. A child is not considered as one's possession, but as a gift of God.

Discovering the island of Raiatea: sheer beauty all over

In Raiatea, we took advantage of the economically priced rental-cars. For XPF 5,500 (€ 46) including pick-up and drop-off, we got our 4-wheels for 24 hours. So, we ventured out to discover this island of 238km², populated by 13,000 inhabitants that live along the 98km of coastal road. Like in Moorea, bizarre, up to 1,017m high mountain peaks, are

leftovers of collapsed volcanoes. As we caught some rain in the south, clouds did only once a while permit to get a glimpse of a peak. As such, they appeared all the more mystical.

In the southeast of Raiatea, we visited the restored ancient Marae Taputapuatea, a sacred temple ground, considered to have been among the most important all over Polynesia. Before the missionaries invaded, changed life on the islands and destroyed the ancient temples of worship, such maraes were the sacred sites of the islanders. What can be seen today, is a big meeting place, laid out with boulder stones of various sizes, and some standing upright, especially along its seaside.



Off the south-west coast, the lagoon was dotted with countless tiny islands that gleamed beautifully in the evening sun. There were also many étangs, separated from the lagoon by natural and manmade dams. The landscape in this area, with the mountains now well visible in their full grandeur, was just dramatic as it could be.

In stark contrast to most Pacific islands, Raiatea has a charming little town. Uturoa in the north of the island, has a pretty location, and a quay where the small boats to and from Tahaa dock. The quay around the corner can hold huge cruise liners. Several restaurants, snacks and finally an excellent patisserie invite to sit by the water's edge and watch the life passing by. Along three parallel roads, you find shops, boutiques, supermarkets and a market hall. Except on Sundays, there's always something going on, though it is hard to believe that Uturoa is French Polynesia's second largest town, just after Papeete.

When choosing a place to stay, we always look for something with good reviews that is reasonably priced. To our big surprise, already in May, the best deals were booked, and we didn't find suitable accommodation for 5 days in a row. That's how we ended up booking two "top spots". After three days, we were picked up by one of the owners of Villa Tonoï, who's place 1,5km east of Uturoa, is a little gem. Four well-appointed bungalows are situated on a hillside, high above the lagoon. Between the villas, a little pool invites to cool down, while enjoying equally breath-taking views, as from the bungalows. The vista reaches from eastern Raiatea over the reef, which also encircles the neighbouring island of Tahaa, 14km to the north. Just below, two scenic motus stick out of the turquoise lagoon. Between them is Teavapiti pass, where the reef is interrupted and allows ships to enter and leave the lagoon. But we didn't see boats passing only. On our departure day, we were lucky to witness two whales jumping.

Huahine: starting place of the Hawaiki Nui Pirogue race

Our flight on October 30, 2017, was anything else than in the best weather, but coincidentally, we arrived at Huahine Island just at the best of time. Two days later, the famous pirogue race Hawaiki Nui was set to take off from the chief village of Fare. This gave us the opportunity to watch the preparations, as well as the start of the 79 outrigger canoes. Life in the village of Fare was upside down, the day before the big event started. The main road along the quay had turned into a funfair. We hadn't seen any Pacific Island village as bustling, as



Fare was on this October 31st. Countless people were strolling along the souvenir-, fruit-, and food-stalls lining the road. To give contestants the chance of an early breakfast, snack-bars and the large Super U supermarket already opened at 05:00AM or 04:30 AM respectively, on the day the race started. Opening a supermarket only at 05:30 as habitually, would simply have been too late on this great day. Polynesia is a true early bird society!

On a big lawn, the 79 pirogues participating in the race, were prepared. Sure enough, in the 21st century, there were no wooden outrigger canoes anymore. Only state of the art fiberglass six-person canoes, with fiberglass outriggers stood around, all colourfully plastered with advertisements of their sponsors.



Late afternoon, the official opening ceremony was held with speeches in French and Tahitian by top politicians. Strangely, not even half of the rowers were present. In fact, mainly competitors from abroad, like the teams of Brazil, Easter Island, Japan, and mainland France, endured the ceremony. After the speeches, a buffet was set up in no time, and hundreds of guests were catered for. An hour later, the huge buffet was cleared, and all tables and chairs put on small trucks. In a masterpiece of logistic co-operation, also the stage, two party tents, all floral decoration and high-tech gear disappeared, leaving an uneventful and clean square. French Polynesians can be amazingly efficient and hardworking!

At 07:30 sharp on the next morning, the 150kg canoes attempted the first leg of the race, taking them from Huahine 45km to Raiatea. The next day, the rowers were partly replaced by their team-mates, who paddled the ~25km to the north of Tahaa. This, we were told, is the most difficult part, as the course remains inside the lagoon with differing waves. The finish is on Bora Bora, another 58km away, which is reached on day three. From there, the exhausted canoe racers are flown home, and the pirogues are loaded onto government vessels, and repatriated to their island of origin.

Exploring Huahine: sightseeing among the twin islands' friendly people

We stayed at Fare Ara's nice apartments, a bit outside Huahine's main village of Fare. To explore this island at its best, we rented a car. Huahine's landmass of 74km², and its population of 6,500 are actually spread over two islands, connected by a 100m long bridge; Huahine Nui (big Huahine) with a circumference of 60km, north of Huahine Iti (small Huahine) with a circumference of 35km. The highest peak is 669m tall Mont Turi. These twin-islands hold still uncountable witnesses of the island's former culture. Left-overs of more than 280 maraes have been identified, and quite a number have been partly restored. Seeing those impressive remains of old temple grounds, makes one aware, how much proof of the old religion, was purposely destroyed by missionaries, in the name of their (newly introduced) God. Who wasn't upset, when the Taliban detonated the famous Buddha statues in Afghanistan? They could remind people of an old religion and had to go. Christian missionaries were (and still are!) exactly the same! It's shocking to see, how much was destroyed here, and all over the Pacific – just to stamp out any reminder of the old Gods, and to gain land for Christian churches!



Again, a good road follows the coast. The interior of Huahine has quite some pointy leaning peaks, and also a big lake. Inland, the landscape is lush and green, with many streams. In the east of Huahine Nui lies the village of Faie, famous for its population of blue eyed eels. If someone comes to the little river to feed them, the large and gentle eels leave their hideaways below the stones. A local lady showed us, how the eels are capable of moving upstream, sometimes overcoming little rapids, by literally getting out of the water and slither over the rocks.

It was a good idea to spend two weeks on Huahine. It's a nice place, where tourism is refreshingly low-key, so that children and adults alike, waved us regularly, even if we passed by rental car. The twin islands of Huahine are a peaceful and placid corner of French-Polynesia indeed!

Tahiti: our farewell from French Polynesia



On November 14th we had a last (scenic) flight before leaving the territory. It brought us from Huahine to Tahiti. Some might think we had been “there” all the time for the last two months. But strictly speaking, Tahiti is no more than French Polynesia’s biggest and most populated island. As described at the beginning, we had already been to the capital Papeete, but now we’ve reserved the last week of our trip to French Polynesia, to discover the island of Tahiti. This time, we stayed at Pension de la plage in Puna’auia, some 15km south of Papeete.

The 1,042 km² big island consists in reality of a big main island, called Tahiti Nui, and a much smaller island, called Tahiti Iti (or Tairapu respectively). In actual fact, Tahiti Iti is a *presque-île*, as the French speakers call it, meaning it’s only “almost” an island, as

Tahiti Iti is connected by a 2km wide neck of land to the main island. The island(s) of Tahiti has an overall length of 61km and a width of 29km. Most of its ~190,000 inhabitants live in the north of Tahiti Nui, where traffic is almost as dense, as in Europe.

To have a good look around the less inhabited parts, we rented a car. The island of Tahiti may not be spoiled with as much natural beauty, as some of the other islands of French Polynesia, but the sights are all very well marked and accessible. Often, there are information boards, picnic-tables, toilets and other infrastructure, making those places popular among locals for day trips.

On our chosen day, it was a bit cloudy, so we couldn’t see Mont Orohena, with 2,241m French Polynesia’s highest mountain. Many of the marked sightseeing points are beaches; from white to black sand. Beach life and water sports are very popular also among locals. Teahupoo, in the south of Tahiti Iti, is famous for its huge surf waves, though as we stood on the beach, the sea was as calm as can be! Other attractions were more of a surprise, like the Taravao Plateau, also on Tahiti Iti, which had a scenery that did resemble more of New Zealand or northern Europe, than of a Pacific island. On Tahiti Nui, we liked the blow holes at Arahoho and the Grottos at Mara’a very much. Last but not least, there were also some nice maraes, notably the one at Arahurahu, which was very unusual, as it had almost pyramid like platforms. Sure enough, also churches abound all over Tahiti. We heard stories from several people that missionaries still abuse their power to press even more money out of the locals, to build even more churches despite the fact that they’ll never fill up, as there are simply not enough people.

While waiting for the bus that should bring us to the airport on November 20, 2017, we experienced once more the typical hospitality of the Polynesians. A lady with her adult daughter offered us a ride with their car, as had happened several times before, during our two months in French Polynesia. A warm-hearted, perfect farewell indeed.



Tahiti & French Polynesia: sheer beauty and not as overpriced as feared

Altogether, we’ve spent 9 extremely exciting weeks on the diverse islands of French Polynesia. We never got tired of looking at those intense blue lagoons and craggy mountain peaks. Fascinating was also the marine life, often abound right on the coast, like reef sharks and manta rays. Best of all; the archipelagos and islands are well connected by planes and very easy to travel. French Polynesia doesn’t feel much different to Europe, and corruption is (almost) non-existent. The predominantly Polynesian inhabitants adapted a pretty French lifestyle. They’re living in neat proper houses, are wearing light clothing that may show some skin, nourish on French food, work more efficient than some Europeans, only that the 280,000 French Polynesians visit probably more church services than their 66 million compatriots on the French mainland altogether!

Crusty Baguettes, Brie and “Jambon de Paris” (ham) are omnipresent, even on islands with just a few hundred inhabitants. Surely, French Polynesia isn’t a cheap destination to travel, but there is no need to spend a fortune, unless you want to do so!

In general, at small pensions and family run guest-houses, we paid about 100 Euros a night for a double room or a small

studio. This mostly included breakfast. Sometimes we paid a bit more, sometimes we found already something for € 50 to € 60. Surely, those keen to pay more for a single night than we did for a fortnight (at the cheapest place), won't need looking far! Nevertheless, quite a number of luxury resorts went bankrupt, yet, there are still plenty...

Also food is not as expensive as you might think. Admittedly, some items like mineral water, soft drinks and yoghurts are not cheap at all. Apart from NZ-meat and some Aussie biscuits, almost all groceries are imported from France and other European countries. Therefore, foodstuff can't be cheap naturally. But western visitors will find almost anything they know from home, only at higher prices! However, a few things can be good deals. Baguette goes for XPF 53 – 65 (€ 0.45 to 0.55), New-Zealand butter and meat is cheaper than in its country of origin, and some freshly cut cheeses are cheaper than in New-Zealand or Switzerland.

Nevertheless, saving money by self-catering is not all that easy, as bargain packages are always geared towards extended Polynesian families, and finding a meat-pack for two is an illusion! Even mayonnaise and ice-cream come in handy family containers of 5 to 15 litres. If you're on holiday together with your parents, grandparents and five children, you will be all right. But if you travel as a couple, economic self-catering is only an option, if you're happy with pre-cooked everybody staying at your sandwich with ingredients your trip money more than those made to order at a



Restaurant meals aren't the good quality you get. "gastronomique" is widely slightly more than in France. normally cheap alternatives to meals than (just) snacks. In touristy areas,

their food resembles rather what you'd get in a gourmet-temple. However, away from the tourist flow, especially on the more populated islands, snacks and roulottes may offer some real bargains. A large panini can cost less than two euros, a crusty and warm baked up baguette-half, filled with tender New-Zealand prime steak (Kiwis export the best pieces at discounted prices!), blue-cheese sauce and French fries goes for about € 3.50, or generous portions of raw fish in all its variations, for € 6 to € 10. Sweet or savoury crêpes, or Belgian-waffles go from € 2,50 upwards. Looking for something a bit more substantial? No worries. A hearty (250 gram) portion of grilled fish, topped with plenty of curry sauce with crème fraiche, plus rice or fries can go for as little as € 8.-, as can mi-cuit (half cooked) tuna with salad and a side-dish, or steak with a sauce to your liking. You won't find those deals near your dive resort in the Tuamotu Atolls, nor at your dream-resort on a motu in Bora Bora, but in Vaitape, Bora Bora's largest village, you will already find similar deals! If you keep your eyes open, and look for "value-for-money offers", it's not all that overpriced, especially if you consider the quality of food and accommodation you get. You pay what you get, and long-term discounts haven't made it to the Pacific Islands yet. If you get a reduction of 3% for staying a week, or 5% for staying a month, you're lucky!

tin-food, or if you're keen to cook for guest-house! Every homemade from the supermarket will debit any pre-made one, or even Snack!

ultra-cheap either. You pay for French style "cuisine available and sets you back only Snack-bars and roulottes are restaurants. Most serve rather proper some Snacks went downright upmarket, and

The sheer beauty of French Polynesia's islands and turquoise atolls, make a trip more than worthwhile. The friendly people of Polynesia add to the magic and the western life-style makes travelling around French Polynesia easier than in any other similarly beautiful island group in the Pacific! If you speak some French and like to eat fish, raw and cooked, it's probably even more rewarding. If you shy away from the resorts and stick to small guest-houses, accommodation is reasonably priced, especially if you consider they often have prime-locations, with lagoon view, or right on the water! Best of all: if you pay more, (usually) you get more, and this applies also to food. So, if you don't find any budget-eateries at all, you might end up eating awfully well every day, resulting in a holiday full of gourmet-meals! French Polynesia is certainly among the more expensive places we've visited on our travels, but it was worth every cent, indeed.

Easter Island: mystic statues and Latin American vibe

Easter Island is remotely situated in the eastern South-Pacific. Politically, it belongs to Chile, but geographically to Polynesia. It's situated about 3,800 km from the Chilean Coast, and 4,250km from Tahiti. Easter Island (Spanish: Isla de Pascua, Polynesian: Rapa Nui) has a landmass of 162.5km², and is inhabited by ~6,500 people. Most live in the little capital of Hanga Roa, and about 60% are descendants of Rapa Nui people, the original Polynesians to settle here. La Isla de Pascua is a volcanic island, sitting on the Sala-y-Gómez saddle. This is a 2,500km long submarine mountain range consisting of several volcanos, with Sala-y-Gómez Island being the only other mountain towering above sea-level. That all sounds already very interesting, but Easter Island's fame of comes from the monumental statues called Moai, erected by Rapa Nui people between 1250 and 1500 CE.

Are we still in Polynesia or already in Latin America?

Easter Island was the last destination on our South Pacific tour. However, as soon as we stepped out of the airport on November 21st 2017, we felt much more like being in Spain than being in Polynesia, not only because everybody speaks Spanish. The centre of the only village, Hanga Roa, is dominated by white Chileans, be they working in tourism or being tourists themselves. We were surprised by the big number of souvenir shops, restaurants, ice cream parlours and cafés selling a good selection of sweets.

We were also very surprised that people here live after a totally different rhythm than on any Pacific Island we had been visiting previously. On Easter Island, nobody rises and shines with the rooster, and nobody goes to bed with the chickens. In contrary; those dining before 9 PM are all foreigners, and playgrounds are still bustling with children at midnight. As in Spain, it is very quiet in the morning. To us, it was easy to adapt, whereas other tourists had dinner, when the last locals had lunch! Favourable is that in summer, the time zone is set that it gets dark only at 9:30 PM and not already at 6 PM.

Hanga Roa is a bustling village and it feels already Chilean. Unlike on most other Pacific Islands, tourists find here everything they want, including a very good selection of eateries; from simple Snackbars to posh restaurants. We felt, everything you could order on the mainland, is available here as well, only at a higher price. And best of all, the Rapa Nui people are as friendly as any Polynesians, and here too, people were offering us rides in their cars.

Moai statues: remnants of unknown customs

Sure enough, also for us, the main draw of Easter Island was to see the myth-enshrouded manlike Moai statues. Historians believe there were initially more than 1,000 of those statues, but nowadays, only about 900 are left; most of them toppled over. Probably to justify the 80 USD entrance-



fee for foreigners, some of those giant statues have been re-erected. A handful of Moais had been placed in a tourist-friendly way in and near the village. To see the big line-ups of statues, you need some kind of transport, as the furthest are about 20 km outside Hanga Roa's. Initially, we thought about renting a car, until we discovered a little detail in the contracts' fineprint: NONE of Easter Island's rental cars have insurance cover; there is not even third-party liability! Who rents a vehicle, must agree to take full responsibility of his vehicle, as well as any other vehicle, person, building or whatever he might harm or get harmed. Under such conditions, we gave it a miss and decided renting bicycles is probably a smarter option!

So, we happily pedalled from one fascinating site to the next, facing the stiff wind and surprisingly hilly inland. Rapa Nui is dotted with volcanic cones of about 200m – 500m in height. Apart from a few touristy ones in Hanga Roa, all Moai statues are facing westwards. In most places, where archaeologists and their teams have re-erected Moais, there are several standing in a row, normally on a platform called Ahu. In ancient times, all the statues seemed to have had a hat or top-knot, yet during restauration those have hardly ever been placed again. In some places, those hats, which are of a reddish stone, different to the grey rock the bodies are carved, lay around the area. One of the most impressive sites is Tongariki, where 15 statues of various heights are lined up. Only one wears a hat, and more hats are placed nearby on the ground in a circle. At other sites, there are Moais lying face down and many more are temporary covered with wooden roofs, waiting to be restored and re-erected.





Totally different from the other Moai sites is Rano Raraku, known as the quarry from where many statues were cut. On an open rock face, it is obvious that work on 397 Moais had been started, but not completed. However, the many sculptures dotted below the quarry, are quite different from the other ones; another unsolved mystery. Most of them consist only of a giant head. Some look as if their body had been buried obliquely in the grassy hillside, with the face directed down to the sea. In average, a Moai measures about 4m in height, but the tallest one that had been completed, is just under 10 m high. The tallest, of which construction had been abandoned, was meant to be a proud 22 m tall.

We won't go into details of the purpose those statues were rock-hewn and erected for. There are already uncountable theories, tales and books.

Steep cliff faces and might(il)y inspiring volcanoes

Mystic statues are not all the Easter Island has to offer. The volcano-cone dotted landscape and the craggy coastline, make the island's volcanic origin apparent. There is neither a surrounding reef with a lagoon, nor a sheltered harbour, but sheer cliff faces. In various places along the coast, former lava flows, now in different colours, are still recognizable as such. Furthermore, there are several lava-tubes and caves.

Another impressive archaeological site is Orongo, an only 350 years old settlement that had been abandoned some 150 years ago. It is perched on a narrow ridge, with the crater of the Rano Kau volcano to one side, and 300 meters high cliffs to the other. The shape of the grass covered, low houses, built almost underground of dry stone, is quite unique. Just next to this historic settlement with its ceremonial site, you stand on the crater rim of Rano Kau and enjoy phenomenal views of the sea and into the volcano. You virtually still feel the power of the boiling magma that once escaped through this giant hole. Yet, now the crater floor is a grassy swamp that resembles more of a crater lake, dotted with islands. To us, this is a very awe-inspiring site which invited us to think about our lives.

To us, Easter Island was a perfect last stage on our South Pacific journey. It offered us mystified sights, it's still in the Pacific, there are still Polynesian people living here, but life here is so different than on any other Pacific island we had



visited. Yet, most of all, people are still exceptionally friendly and helpful, unless they get stubborn in getting things going their way. On our departure day, a family clan occupied the check-in counters at the airport, leaving 700 passengers stranded for 7 hours! As it was a peaceful demonstration with music and dancing, some tourists were at first clapping hands, as they thought it was free entertainment during a delay on technical reasons. As the hours went by, even the naivest realized what's happening and this cumulated in truly international discussions, as everybody in this endless queue started to talk to each other...

Summing up 5 South-Pacific months: a worthwhile adventure

While planning our trip to the South-Pacific, we were initially a bit reluctant, to spend almost half a year in one of the world's most expensive regions to travel. Somehow, we felt tempted to restrict our trip to just a few islands, but we couldn't decide, which ones we shall wave. However, just before booking our first flights, we heard about several people who unexpectedly died at a rather young age. This motivated us to say "now, or never"! So, we added every desired island we could fit into our itinerary, before the beginning of the hurricane season. This added up to an imposing list of 20 islands and atolls.

Meanwhile we know: it was the best trip of our lifetime, and it was worth much more than the money we've spent! We're so glad we went to the South Pacific (again), as we've collected so many unbelievably good memories to take along when destiny sends us on our last journey.

Wherever we went, we felt extraordinarily welcomed by the islanders, who liked to explain us their culture. In respect of traditional life, Samoa, Wallis & Futuna, Fiji, Tuvalu and Tonga offered more than we hoped for.

Then, the turquoise lagoons, the craggy mountains, and the vast atolls of French Polynesia, all abound with fish, were no less fascinating. Last but not least, Easter-Island impressed not only with its famous Moai statues, but also with a vibrant South-American vibe that reminded us much more of Spain, than of the South-Pacific. Everywhere, the contacts with the friendly locals were real highlights. Wherever we went, the islanders regularly offered to drive us with their cars, when we attempted walking, and even when we were cycling (uphill), the large pick-up vehicles made it possible.

The South-Pacific is a wonderful world, we're so thankful to all the Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians that they were happy to share it with us.

Brigitte & Heinz



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