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ACCOMMODATION

Glossy brochures focus on the idyllic over-water bungalows but French Polynesia actually has a pretty wide range of accommodation options – from camping to extreme luxury. Whatever the category, however, the price-to-quality ratio is invariably discouraging. It's not necessarily that standards are low; it's just that the prices visitors are charged are so damn high they have a right to expect much more. The most basic, ramshackle room in a family home (you know, the one with the calendar pictures of wild horses plastered on the walls, the saggy mattress and shared bathroom) can cost as much as a three-star, amenity-packed hotel in London or Los Angeles. Then again, you're not paying to

be pampered; French Polynesia is all about the oh-so-irresistible real estate. So if you're in the market to rent a slice of paradise, you might as well stop fingering those worry beads. Throw common sense to the wind and deal with the credit-card damage when you get home.

Most hotels and resorts, and all *pensions* (guesthouses), quote their rates in French Polynesian francs, although the high-end places will usually also list the price in euros and US dollars.

French Polynesia's high season runs between June and September, and during the Christmas holidays; prices jump and many favourite places are booked out well in advance at these times. The majority of French Polynesia's accommodation is in bungalows. Unless otherwise stated, the prices listed in this book are for two-person bungalows. Many bungalows can actually sleep between four and six, and extra guests are generally charged a per-person supplement of between 1000 and 2000 CFP. Children under 12 almost always stay for half-price. Some places offer half- and full-board options; in these cases the prices quoted will usually be per person. Prices in this book include the relevant taxes, but be aware that many places will quote you before-tax prices, only to surprise you with a rather hefty list of add-ons at the end of your stay. The most frustrating aspect of the taxation system is the *taxe de séjour* (accommodation tax), which is charged per person per night: if you are travelling as a family, this can really add up.

In this guide we place accommodation costing less than 8000 CFP a night in the budget category, 8000 to 20,000 CFP in the midrange category and over 20,000 CFP in the top end.

Camping & Hostels

There are camping options springing up around French Polynesia, but generally it's a matter of guesthouses having areas where you can pitch your tent and allowing use of the facilities; you'll pay anywhere from around 1000 to 2500 CFP per person. Camping is possible on Tahiti, Mo'orea,

Huahine, Ra'iatea, Bora Bora, Maupiti, Rangiroa, Tikehau and Mataiva. You may need to rethink camping if it's raining too hard. Also, make sure your tent is mosquito-proof or lather yourself in repellent. Some guesthouses have dorm beds ranging from 2000 to 3500 CFP per person per night.

Hotels

There is a glut of midrange hotels on the more touristy islands, but on remote islands it's sometimes all (five-star glamour) or nothing (rudimentary *pensions*). Most mid-range places are well situated and more comfortable than the *pensions*, and there's usually a restaurant on site. You'll typically pay from around 10,000 to 40,000 CFP per night for a bungalow; almost all places in this category accept credit cards.

Pensions

Pensions are a godsend for travellers who balk at the prices (and gloss) of the big hotels. These little establishments, generally family affairs, are great places to meet locals and other travellers. Brace yourself for cold showers, lumpy pillows and thin walls, but lap up the charm, interesting discussions and artistic touches that are often part and parcel of the *pension* experience. Many *pensions* have local-style bungalows, which usually have a quaint homemade feel to them (generally because they are homemade!); some of the more upmarket *pensions* have very comfortable versions of the bungalow.

Many *pensions* offer (and sometimes insist upon) half board (or *demi-pension*), which usually means breakfast and dinner. Full board means all meals are included. It can cost anything from 4500 to 9000 CFP per person per day, although prices vary widely from island to island. Young children are often allowed to stay for free, and children up to about 12 usually pay half-price.

Think ahead in terms of money, as most *pensions* do not take credit cards.

Resorts

If you are ever going to pamper yourself silly, French Polynesia is a great place to do it. The sumptuous luxury hotels often manage to blend their opulent bungalows into the natural setting. Some of the top hotels are on isolated *motu* (islets), and can only be reached by boat. Four- and five-star hotels are found on Tahiti, Mo'orea, Bora Bora, Huahine, Ra'iatea, Taha'a, Rangiroa, Hiva Oa, Manihi and Nuku Hiva. You can expect restaurants, bars, a swimming pool, a shop or two and a well-organised activities desk. Most of the bigger hotels put on a Polynesian dance performance, often with buffet meal, a few times a week. Glass-bottomed coffee tables, which look straight down into the lagoon, have become standard features of the over-water bungalows. The prices are just as dazzling: expect to pay from 45,000 to 150,000 CFP a night, not including meals.

PRACTICALITIES

- The weekly English-language tourist paper *Tahiti Beach Press* includes some local news coverage. If you read French, there are two Tahitian dailies, *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti* and *La Dépêche de Tahiti*.
- There are about 10 independent radio stations that broadcast music programmes with news flashes in French and Tahitian along with the occasional interview. Among the best-known stations are Tiare FM (the pioneer nongovernmental radio station), Radio Bleue, Radio Maohi, Te Reo o Tefana (a pro-independence station), Radio 1, NRJ and RFO-Radio Polynésie.
- Radio France Outre-Mer (RFO) has two television channels: Télépolynésie and Tempo. On the bigger islands, many places have CNN.
- The video format in French Polynesia is Secam, but videos made for tourists are generally also available in PAL and NTSC.
- French Polynesia uses 220V, 60Hz electricity, although some deluxe hotels may have 110V supply for electric shavers. Sockets are French-style, requiring a plug with two round pins.
- French Polynesia follows the international metric system.

ACTIVITIES

French Polynesia's exceptional natural heritage lends itself to a range of leisure activities. Scuba diving and snorkelling are the main activities, but sailing is also very popular. Increasing numbers of surfers are sampling the islands' excellent reef breaks, while the jagged relief of the high islands makes for some absolutely superb walking and horse-riding.

Cycling

On many islands it is possible to rent bicycles, which are the perfect means to get around. The rough roads leading into the interior are great for mountain bikes, should you decide to bring one with you from home.

Diving & Snorkelling

French Polynesia is a diver's wet dream. The warm, bright waters, the lack of plankton (which ensures water clarity) and the myriad tropical fish will entice you from the shore.

All dive certifications are recognised, including CMAS, PADI and NAUI, and there are professional dive centres on Tahiti, Mo'orea, Ra'iatea, Huahine, Bora Bora, Rangiroa, Tikehau, Manihi, Ahe, Nuku Hiva and, from July to September, Rurutu. Bring your certification card and dive log. For more on diving see the Diving chapter, p54.

The coral reefs and outcrops that are dotted around the lagoons are perfect for snorkelling. You can join a lagoon tour, rent an outboard-powered boat or just grab your gear and head out to explore the lagoon yourself.

Hiking

The high islands offer superb walks but the tracks are sometimes unmarked and are hard to follow: it's often necessary to hire a guide. Tahiti and Mo'orea are the main islands for walking, but there are also good walks on Ra'iatea, Bora Bora and Maupiti. The Marquesas have huge, untapped potential; currently the only popular walking trail is on Nuku Hiva. The ideal time for hiking is April to October. During the rainy season (November to April) the paths can be dangerous and even impassable.

Horse-Riding

There are equestrian centres in the Society Islands on Tahiti, Mo'orea, Ra'iatea, Huahine and Bora Bora. Most places offer short jaunts and longer excursions that explore the island interiors. Horses are an important part of life in the Marquesas, and there are various places to rent them, with or without a guide; you can also horse ride on Rurutu in the Australs.

Surfing

Polynesia was the birthplace of *horue* (surfing), and in recent years there has been a major resurgence of local interest. Tahiti in particular has surf shops, board shapers and a local surfing scene. The island is home to Teahupoo, one of the most powerful waves in the world and the site of the Tahiti Billabong Pro competition each year. Tahiti, Mo'orea and Huahine are the three main islands for surfing, but Rangiroa and Tikehau in the Tuamotus also have good surfing spots.

In general, there are good conditions on the north and east coasts from November to April and on the west and south coasts for the other half of the year – but these distinctions are really theoretical. In practice it is the direction of the swells that makes a spot good at any given time.

Access to the shore breaks is generally easy from the coast roads. You may need to find a boat to take you out to the reef breaks, or resign yourself to doing a lot of paddling. For more information on surfing in French Polynesia, check out www.surfingtahiti.com.

Always check the weather reports and ask the locals about the conditions. Like surfers anywhere in the world, French Polynesians can be very possessive of *their* waves. If you want to enjoy the surf, observe all the usual rules of surfing etiquette and give way to local surfers.

There are several surf shops in Pape'ete. Elsewhere, the local surf shops all have boogie-board equipment as well as short boards and traditional surfboards. You certainly don't need a wetsuit in the warm waters of French Polynesia, but a T-shirt or Lycra vest will protect you from the sun.

On Tahiti, the **Tura'i Mataare Surf School** (☎ 41 91 37; surfschool@mail.pf; PK 18.3) offers 10 half-day lessons for 27,000 CFP. The courses