

## **Diving in French Polynesia**

Scattered like twinkling sapphires in the turquoise sea, the islands and atolls of French Polynesia are as romantic as they come. Scuba divers be warned, you may never want to leave!

### **Quick facts**

Wherever you go throughout French Polynesia, from the low-lying coral atolls of the Tuamotus to the steep green mountains and waterfalls of the Society Islands, you are never going to be far from some spectacular diving. The narrow channels and passes leading to the inner lagoons from the open ocean teem with life. Marine creatures cluster near these focal points and make the most of the bounty the current brings. In some spots, divers can legitimately expect to see literally hundreds of fish and other marine species as they drift through the underwater canyons. Topside, there's no better place on earth to snorkel in the sun-dappled shallows or enjoy a well-earned rest for a few hours on one of the many stunning beaches.

Of the 118 islands of French Polynesia, 11 currently boast diving centers.

Head to Moorea to dive with sharks. You can see reef sharks and lemon sharks here.

Bora Bora has a breathtaking lagoon where you can swim alongside manta rays and sharks on a coral wall. There are reefs completely encircling the island, so there is no shortage of dives to partake in.

Taotoi has a fun-filled Stingray World, and drift divers will want to make Rangiroa their first stop. Here the Tiputa and Avatoru Passes will blow

you away... literally. Barracudas and sharks school here, paying you little head as you drift past them.

### **When to go**

French Polynesia has a tropical climate. November to April is warm and rainy, while May to October is cooler and drier. Although you can dive year-round, November to April is considered the best season thanks to an influx of pelagic-attracting plankton. Water temperature averages about 25°C/76°F in winter and 30°C/86°F in summer, and visibility is frequently stunning, often in excess of 40 metres/130 feet.

### **Best dive sites in French Polynesia**

\* Tahiti, The Wrecks - In less than 18 metres/60 feet of water on the sandy sloping seafloor of Faa'a Lagoon lie the remains of a WWII minesweeper that used to work as an inter-island ferry before being deliberately sunk in 1967. The wooden ship is well broken up but also well populated with fish and, as a bonus, an old Catalina seaplane lies nearby.

\* Moorea, Tiki - This is a very popular site for underwater image makers, and for good reason. The place is a veritable hive of fish activity. The predators are on to this too. Black tip, grey and lemon sharks up to 3 metres/10 feet long prowl the crystal clear waters and delight divers who may also spot dolphin or even whales when conditions are right.

\* Moorea, Rose Garden - For those with a few dives under their belts, this spectacular site off Moorea's north coast has a lot to offer. The reef is carpeted with flower-like montipora coral. Those who can peel their eyes away will be rewarded with dramatic shark-filled underwater seascapes. Depths are on the 30 to 40 metre/100 to 130 foot range.

\* Tetiaroa, The Canyons - At about 20 metres/65 feet divers come across a series of canyons, caves and overhangs in the coral base of the

atoll. These are well populated with local reef dwellers such as giant humphead wrasse, white tip sharks and lionfish. Large schools of spotted eagle rays are known to pass by too, but you'll have to keep an eye on the open water to spot them.

\* Fakarava, Garuae Pass - Located in the north of Fakarava, a UNESCO biosphere, the Garuae Pass is the largest pass in French Polynesia that provides incredible dive experiences. Diving on the beautifully biodiverse reef is available for less experienced divers where more experienced divers can also enjoy drift dives. You may be presented with a wall of grey reef sharks, hundreds of other fish species such as tuna, barracuda, parrot-fish, turtles, napoleon fish and the much-loved manta ray.

\* Bora Bora, Anau - With depths up to 30 metres/100 feet the focus here is on the manta ray ballet. Divers are likely to encounter between five and 10 of these gentle giants in the deeper parts of the lagoon. Best time to visit this "Manta Ballroom" is May through December. Snorkeling is also popular in the shallows.

\* Bora Bora, Tupitipiti - Divers ready for a bit of a boat ride are well advised to head to the southern extremity of Bora Bora's barrier reef. With depths from 6 metres/20 feet to 45 metres/150 feet, this world-renowned dive is among the best in the region. Coral boulders form a magical grotto replete with overhangs and swim throughs and end with a dramatic wall. If the weather allows, this is a must see site.

\* Rangiroa, Tiputa Pass - Great visibility, strong currents and hundreds of sharks await divers at Tiputa Pass. From December to March, hammerhead sharks and manta rays frequent the area.

\* Tikehau, Tuheiva Pass - With depths maxing out at 30 metres/100 feet and strong tidal currents, Tuheiva Pass is home to vast schools of barracuda and other pelagics including tuna, manta rays, grey and lemon

sharks. Jacques Cousteau considered the Tikehau lagoon to have some of the richest fish life he had seen. That's an endorsement worth following up o

### **What to see**

Sharks are undeniably abundant in French Polynesia, and most are fairly used to humans. Blacktip, silvertip and whitetip reef sharks, as well as gray, hammerhead and lemon sharks will be your regular dive buddies.

In addition, exceptional schools of barracudas, eagle rays and manta rays will get your heart racing as will the beautiful wrasses and jacks.

Dolphins and whales also visit many regions during the season. Whale season is from August/September to October/November, and the best chance of seeing them is in Tahiti and Moorea.

### **Country**

Situated in the middle of the South Pacific, French Polynesia is about as far away from it all as it's possible to get. The numbers speak volumes: 2.5 million square kilometres/950,000 square miles of ocean, 4000 square kilometres/1500 square miles of land, 118 islands and five archipelagos make for one outstanding dive destination. The names of the lush volcanic peaks of Tahiti and Bora Bora are synonymous with archetypical tropical islands. Fringing coral reefs protecting calm lagoons are the norm. The crystal clear water redefines blue, and the pure white beaches are set against a backdrop of coconut palms, not high rises.

The country is divided into five distinct island groups, the largest and most well visited being the Society Islands. Surprisingly for such a gorgeous region, French Polynesia was one of the last places on the globe to be settled by human beings. Native Polynesians arrived in the region in 200 BC and further settled nearby islands until AD 300. Europeans sailed by the islands, but didn't form settlements until the 1800's, taking over many of the

areas formerly housing the indigenous population. France still lays claim to the islands.

Islanders today rely heavily on both tourism and the sea. Exports are few, but the famed Tahitian black pearls make up most of the country's income from overseas distribution.

### **Other attractions**

Once away from the turquoise sea and white sand beaches, climb some of the lovely mountains on the islands. Magic Mountain and Mount Otemanu are two excellent hikes that offer up unforgettable views.

In Uturoa, the fascinating Anapa Pearl Farm will teach you all about pearls and pearl farming, a highly instructive experience.

Guided historical tours are highly recommended as is shopping in markets scattered across the islands.

### **Getting there**

It's easiest to fly into Faa'a International, which is about 3 miles/5 kilometers west of Papeete on Tahiti. Then to take a ferry or two to your island of choice. Utilize the seaside roads to get between towns. These are generally well maintained.