

## Tahiti: Home of the Black Pearl(s)

by Dianne Cook, PassPorter Message Board Guide (Moderator)

Do you just love the quiet, relaxing tropical atmosphere of Disney's Polynesian Resort? Does the idea of romantic sunsets, turquoise coral reefs, bright sapphire lagoons, fragrant intoxicating aromas of native flowers and the feel of white coral sand beaches beneath your toes appeal to you? Then perhaps a vacation to the beautiful islands of French Polynesia is in order. With their magnificent waterfalls and lush landscape, Tahiti and the other, smaller islands that make up French Polynesia are as picturesque and breathtaking as you can imagine.

In our "BK" days, (before kids), my husband and I had the pleasure of spending three weeks on the beautiful islands of Tahiti, Bora Bora, and Moorea. Each island is unique in its own right, but I will focus on the main island of Tahiti here. Tahiti was actually the inspiration for the fictitious island in the movie "South Pacific."

The islands are believed to have been formed by underwater volcanic action in the Pacific, which created lava flows that eventually reached the surface to become lush tropical islands, such as Tahiti and Moorea. Other islands gradually sank, leaving huge lagoons surrounded by coral barrier reefs called atolls, such as Rangiroa and Manihi. The Polynesian Islands are truly a paradise for snorkeling, scuba diving, glass-bottom boats and many other activities.

Very little is known about the origins of the Polynesian people. However, the most common belief is that their ancestors came from Asia and ventured throughout the Pacific hundreds of years B.C. It is certain that they were a great seafaring people with extraordinary navigational abilities to guide them to their eventual settlements in Tahiti, New Zealand and Hawaii. The influence of the early Polynesians in language, music and dance can be seen throughout the South Seas, even today. The Polynesians are a calm, generous and loving people. As a matter of fact, tipping is not general accepted, as it is contrary to Tahitian customs of hospitality. The official languages of Tahiti are Tahitian and French; however English is widely spoke throughout the islands.

Tahiti is more than 1,000 miles below the equator and about 3,500 miles east of Australia as well as 4,000 miles from Los Angeles (about a seven and a half hour flight). The tropical weather is pleasant year round, averaging about 80 degrees. The average ocean water temperature is in the low 80s as well. Majestic peaks encircle the entire exterior of the island. The mountainous interior shelters deep valleys,

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clear streams and incredible waterfalls. The interior has very little population, as the flat coastline is home to the fields of tropical flowers. Tahiti is known for and most of the population, as well. The capital, Papeete, means, "water basket", as it is where Tahitians came to fill their calabashes with water. (A calabash is a gourd that is dried and used as a bottle.) Now Papeete hosts world-class resorts, spas, fine restaurants, nightclubs, and endless shopping!

Speaking of shopping, Tahiti is a shopper's paradise! We all know the name of Captain Jack Sparrow's ship, the Black Pearl. As magnificent a ship as it is, you really need to see Tahitian black pearls to understand the significance of the name. My husband and I spent hours just looking for the "perfect" pearls to bring home. Tahitian black pearls are black because the pearl is created in the womb of the black-lipped mollusk found in French Polynesian waters known as the "Pinctada Margaritifera", or black-lip mother-of-pearl, for short. This mollusk naturally secretes a black pigment, which, depending on the quantity, gives the resulting pearl a basic color ranging from black to gray. Their color is not tinted, but is natural. Generally, the darker the pearl, the more valuable it is.

So, if you really love Disney's Polynesian Resort, think about experiencing the splendor of the actual Polynesian Islands. You will fall in love with the people, the customs and the lush landscape. Venture inland to see the most magnificent waterfalls and tropical paradise. And of course, don't forget about those Black Pearls!

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Article last updated: 01/22/2010

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