

# French Polynesia

## I INTRODUCTION

French Polynesia, overseas territory of France, located in the South Pacific Ocean, 3,000 km (2,000 mi) south of Hawaii and halfway between New Zealand to the west and South America to the east. The capital is Papeete, which is located on Tahiti, the largest island in the territory.



Nicholas Devore III/Photographers/Aspen/PNI

### **Tahiti**

The rich soils of French Polynesia's high volcanic islands support lush vegetation. Pictured here is the mountainous landscape of Tahiti, the largest island of French Polynesia.

## II LAND AND RESOURCES

French Polynesia consists of 35 volcanic islands and more than 180 low-lying coral *atolls* (ring-shaped islands with central lagoons) with a combined land area of 3,660 sq km (1,413 sq mi). The islands are part of a much larger area known as an "exclusive economic zone" that covers 5 million sq km (2 million sq mi) of land and ocean. The French government has control over fishing, scientific research, and environmental protection in that area.

The islands of French Polynesia are divided into five archipelagos: the Society Islands (which include Tahiti), the Tuamotu Archipelago, the Marquesas Islands, the Gambier Islands, and the Austral Islands. The Tuamotu Archipelago consists entirely of coral atolls and accounts for more than half of

the territory's islands. The other groups contain a few atolls but are primarily volcanic islands. Mount Orohena on Tahiti is the highest peak in French Polynesia, with an elevation of 2,241 m (7,352 ft).

The vegetation of the high-elevation volcanic islands differs from that of the low-lying coral atolls. The high islands have rich soils and support a variety of plant species. Atolls have poor soils and less vegetation. Rain collected in catchment systems is the only source of fresh water on the atolls. Coconut palms thrive throughout the territory, and the liquid from coconuts is a life-sustaining drink. Wildlife on the islands is limited to birds, insects, and lizards. On some of the high islands residents maintain livestock, including pigs and chickens. Marine life is abundant in the surrounding waters and provides an important food source.

French Polynesia has a tropical but moderate climate, with an average temperature of 27° C (81° F). There are two distinct seasons: a warm rainy season from November to April and a cool dry season from May to October. The amount of rainfall varies greatly throughout the territory. The Marquesas Islands are the driest, and the Austral Islands are the wettest. Cyclones occur throughout the territory but with less frequency than elsewhere in the South Pacific.

### III THE PEOPLE OF FRENCH POLYNESIA

French Polynesia had a population of 253,506 in 2001, yielding an average population density of 61 persons per sq km (158 per sq mi). Some 57 percent of the territory's inhabitants live in urban areas, with the largest population concentration in greater Papeete. Other towns include Faaa and Pirae, also on Tahiti.

Polynesians represent about two-thirds of the population of French Polynesia. Of the remainder of inhabitants, about 15 percent are of mixed Polynesian-European or Polynesian-Chinese descent, about 10 percent are of French origin, and about 5 percent are ethnic Chinese. Although French and Tahitian (a language of the Malayo-Polynesian family of Austronesian languages) are both official languages, French is the language used in government and commerce. Various other Malayo-Polynesian dialects are also spoken, particularly in the outer islands. Protestant Christians constitute more than half of the population and are mostly ethnic Polynesians. Roman Catholics constitute about a third of the people and include ethnic French and also Polynesians from the Marquesas and Tuamotu archipelagos.

Education in French Polynesia is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16. The government finances public education and also subsidizes a large number of private schools operated by churches. The literacy rate is high. The French University of the Pacific was founded in Papeete in 1987. A small number of French Polynesians attend colleges in France.

The way of life in French Polynesia varies depending on location. Papeete is a cosmopolitan city with a strong Western influence. Residents of the city enjoy French cuisine and eat mainly imported food. Most clothing and other goods are also imported, largely from France. By Pacific Island standards, the cost of living in Papeete and other urban areas on Tahiti is extremely high. On more remote islands, the lifestyle is much slower in pace. In these areas, people rely more heavily on subsistence activities and materials found locally.

French Polynesia celebrates French national holidays. Canoe racing and other water sports are popular. Tahitian music and dances have enthusiastic audiences.

## IV ECONOMY



Lepetit Christophe/Liaison Agency

### **Black Pearl Cultivation**

French Polynesia produces most of the world's cultured black pearls. These pearls are the territory's leading export.

Traditional subsistence agriculture—formerly the mainstay of French Polynesia's economy—was displaced in the mid-1960s by the growth of two very different industries: tourism and nuclear testing. Both of these industries provided new opportunities for high-wage employment in and around Papeete, and many people from the remote islands abandoned subsistence activities and moved to Tahiti. Since then, the economy has become more focused on consumer goods and more concentrated in urban areas. The cultivation of cultured black pearls is another growing industry. Production of these pearls more than doubled between 1990 and 1995, and in the mid-1990s French Polynesia was producing more than 95 percent of the world's supply. The economy of French Polynesia is also heavily dependent on economic aid from France.

In 1999 French Polynesia had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$3.8 billion, or \$16,450 per person. The service sectors provided 78 percent of GDP in 1997, with tourism alone accounting for about 20 percent of the total GDP. Industry supplied about 18 percent of GDP, and agriculture supplied 4.5 percent. Of the workforce in 1997, 68 percent were employed in services, 19 percent in industry, and 13 percent in agricultural activities.

Thermal power provides 60 percent of French Polynesia's electricity, and hydroelectric power supplies most of the remainder.

Papeete has an international airport, and several international airlines serve the city. The outer island groups have small air terminals. A number of shipping lines connect Papeete with Europe and Asia, as well as with other Pacific Islands. There are paved roads on Tahiti and many of the other Society Islands, and many people in these areas own motor vehicles. Papeete is well served by small local buses, and traffic congestion is common.

The French Polynesian government operates most radio and television stations in French Polynesia. Several other radio stations are privately owned. Print media in the territory include 4 daily newspapers with a combined circulation of 24,000 copies.

The value of imports in French Polynesia is typically several times the value of exports. Most of the territory's food is imported. Aside from food products, major imports include petroleum products and machinery. Cultured black pearls are French Polynesia's leading export, accounting for more than 50 percent of export revenues. Other exported products include coconuts, mother-of-pearl, and vanilla. French Polynesia's principal trade partner for both imports and exports is France, followed by the United States and Australia. The territory's unit of currency is the *CFP franc* (93 CFP francs equal U.S.\$1; 1998 annual average).

## V GOVERNMENT

The foundation of French Polynesia's present system of government was established in 1946, when French Polynesia became an overseas territory of France. At this time, the people of French Polynesia became citizens of France, and the territory established an elected territorial assembly to manage local affairs. In a 1958 referendum, French Polynesia chose to remain a French territory, subject to the French constitution, rather than become independent and lose French economic assistance. In 1977 the French government passed a statute that allowed for a greater degree of local autonomy in French Polynesia. Statutes passed in 1984, 1987, and 1990 gave increased autonomy to the territorial government in economic, social, and cultural affairs. A 1996 law gave the territory control over additional economic matters. The French government remains responsible for defense, foreign affairs, and justice in French Polynesia. The president of France is the head of state and is represented in French Polynesia by an appointed high commissioner. The territory elects two deputies to the French National Assembly and one representative to the French Senate.

French Polynesia's territorial government manages most local affairs, including the regulation of fishing, mining, and shipping activities; communications and broadcasting; taxation; and education. It also manages the territory's health care system, which is among the best in the Pacific Islands and is maintained largely through French financial assistance. Legislative duties are carried out by the single-chamber Territorial Assembly, whose 41 members are elected by French Polynesian voters every five years. The assembly elects a territorial president, who serves as head of the territorial government. The territorial president appoints a cabinet of ministers, subject to the assembly's approval. All individuals age 18 or older in French Polynesia are eligible to vote. French Polynesia is administered at the local level by 48 communes (municipalities), each with an elected mayor and council.

Judicial authority in French Polynesia is vested in the president of France. Both the structure of the judiciary and its personnel are part of the French judicial system. The territory has courts of various levels, including a high court and a court of appeals.

Politics in French Polynesia is somewhat fluid, and a wide range of opinion is represented. An issue of particular importance to residents is the territory's level of political autonomy. Various political parties have formed to represent those individuals who support continued close relations with France, those who advocate political independence, and those who take positions in between. These parties are constantly changing both in number and degree of influence.

## VI HISTORY

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Marquesas Islands were settled by AD 300 by Polynesians from Tonga and Samoa Islands. The western portion of the Society Islands was probably inhabited by AD 800.

Significant European contact in the region began in 1767, when British explorer Samuel Wallis came upon what is now Tahiti. French navigator Louis Antoine de Bougainville followed soon after, and British explorer Captain James Cook arrived in 1769. Cook named Tahiti and called its surrounding islands the Society Islands after his sponsor, Britain's Royal Society.

The first European settlers in the area were members of the London Missionary Society who arrived in 1796. By 1815 Pomare II, a prominent local chief, had converted to Christianity, and the religion spread quickly through the Society Islands, the Austral Islands, and the Tuamotu Archipelago. In 1836 French Catholic missionaries arrived in the area but were driven out by Christian Tahitians. The expulsion of these missionaries, along with the desire to develop a naval base in the Pacific, heightened French interest in the region. In 1842 France made the Marquesas and Tahiti a protectorate. French colonization of the other islands followed. In 1880 King Pomare V, the last of the Pomare lineage, officially ceded his kingdom of Tahiti and Moorea to France. Beginning at this time, the islands were administered as part of French Oceania. The boundaries of French Polynesia became fixed with the annexation of the Austral Islands in 1900.

In the early 20th century the port town of Papeete grew as the main economic, administrative, and religious center for the region. During World War II (1939-1945) the island of Bora Bora, in the Society Islands, became a refueling station for United States forces. American influence helped inspire French Polynesian nationalism among Tahiti residents and the desire for more cultural, economic, and political freedom. In 1946 the colony became an overseas territory of France, and a territorial assembly was created to manage local affairs. In the late 1940s an independence movement emerged in the region, led by a carpenter and war veteran named Pouvanaa Oopa. Oopa's pro-autonomy party gained the majority of seats in the territorial assembly in 1953 and 1957. In a referendum held in 1958, island voters chose to remain a territory of France rather than become independent and lose French economic aid.

In 1963 an international airport opened in Papeete, spurring growth in tourism. Three years later, France began a nuclear testing program on uninhabited islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago,

establishing a large support facility in Papeete. The growth of tourism and nuclear testing transformed the basis of French Polynesia's economy from subsistence agriculture to services and increased the territory's foreign dependency. Movements for greater autonomy continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in several statutes that gave the territorial government more power.

In the early 1990s Tahiti's high prices and international antinuclear sentiment caused a serious decline in French Polynesia's tourism industry. The industry experienced some recovery in 1993, when France suspended nuclear testing in response to international and local criticism. However, this action resulted in a sizable loss of employment in the military and in services related to the military.

Nuclear testing resumed in September 1995, sparking full-scale riots that destroyed much of Papeete's business district and airport tourist facilities and resulted in a further decline in tourism. Although some participants may have been sincerely voicing concern over the environmental dangers of nuclear testing, many of the rioters were unemployed and disillusioned young men who were using the nuclear issue as a pretext to vent their frustrations.

Nuclear testing was halted again in early 1996, shortly after the French government confirmed scientific reports that radioactive isotopes had leaked into the waters surrounding islands where testing had occurred. Although France denied that the isotopes posed a threat to the environment, in March 1996 the French government signed the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty, which banned nuclear testing in the region. The halting of testing caused widespread unemployment in French Polynesia, and France promised to contribute substantial economic aid over a period of years to help the territory diversify its economy.

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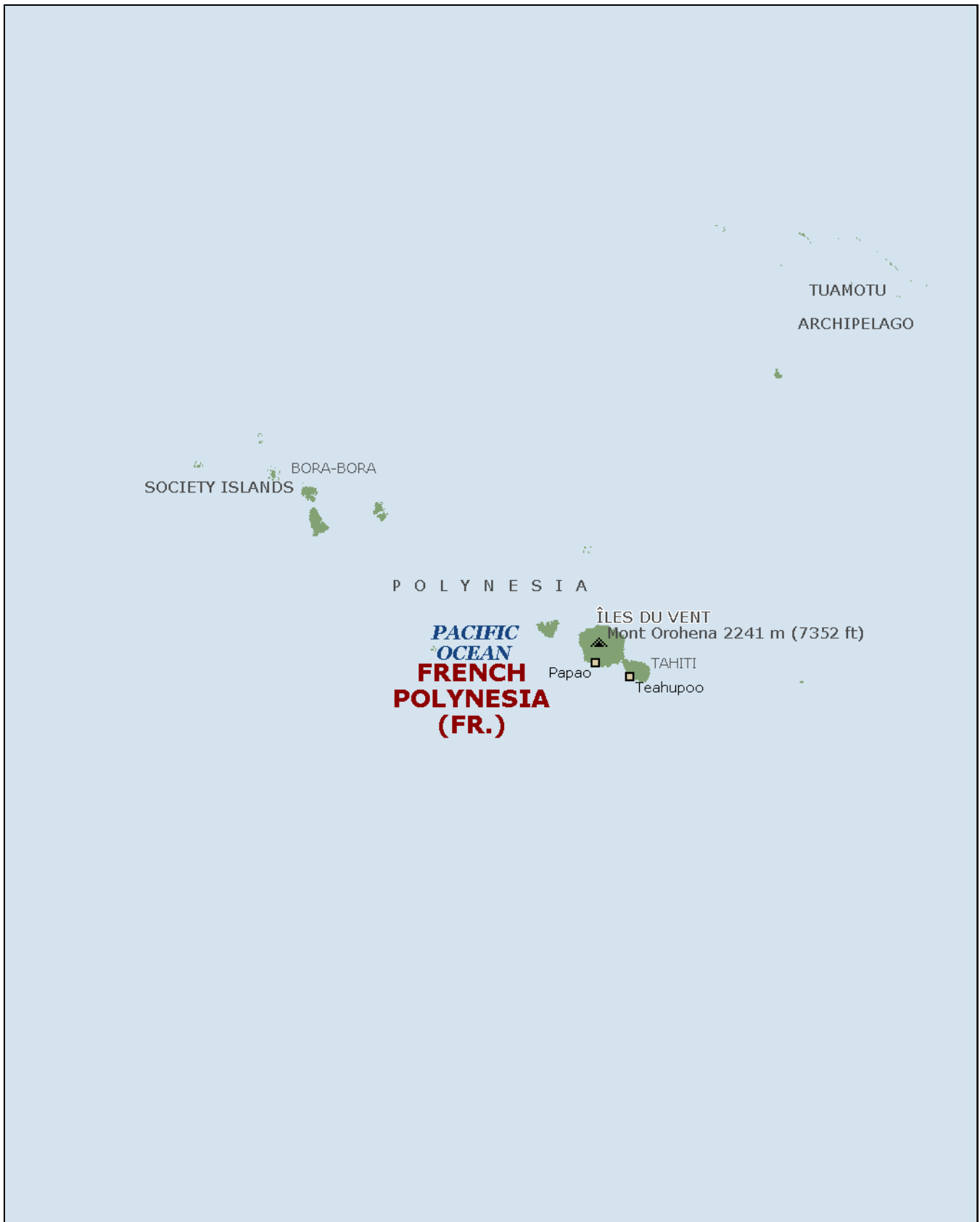
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17°39'15.06" S 149°27'00.02" W

elev 3526 ft

Eye alt 52.81 mi



POLYNESIA

PACIFIC OCEAN

**FRENCH POLYNESIA (FR.)**

ÎLES DU VENT  
Mont Orohena 2241 m (7352 ft)

Papao

TAHITI  
Teahupoo

0 km 50 100 150 200 250

Îles du Vent  
French Polynesia (Fr.)





Nicholas Devore III/Photographers/Aspen/PNI

### **Tahiti**

The rich soils of French Polynesia's high volcanic islands support lush vegetation. Pictured here is the mountainous landscape of Tahiti, the largest island of French Polynesia.

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## United States

Alaska  
Great Plains  
Hawaii  
Mid-Atlantic  
Midwest  
Northeast  
Rocky Mountains  
South  
Southwest  
West

## World Map

## Continents

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Asia  
Australia  
Europe  
Middle East  
North America  
Oceania  
South America

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A B C D E F G  
H I J K L M N  
P R S T U V W  
Y Z

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Outdoor  
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## French Polynesia

Average temperature, rainfall and snowfall information is available for the following climate stations in French Polynesia

- [TAHITI ISLAND](#)
- [RIKITEA](#)

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Official name:          | Territory of French Polynesia  |
| Capital:                | Papeete  |
| Area:                   | total: 4,167 sq km (118 islands and atolls)<br>water: 507 sq km<br>land: 3,660 sq km                       |
| Climate:                | tropical, but moderate   |
| Location:               | Oceania, archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean, about one-half of the way from South America to Australia |
| Geographic coordinates: | 15 00 S, 140 00 W  |
| Comparative Area:       | slightly less than one-third the size of Connecticut   |
| Land boundaries:        | 0 km   |
| Coastline:              | 2,525 km   |
| Terrain:                | mixture of rugged high islands and low islands with reefs  |
| Elevation extremes:     | lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m<br>highest point: Mont Orohena 2,241 m                                     |

## Map of French Polynesia

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## French Polynesia

### Administrative units

| subdivision(s)<br>commune(s) | capital   | area (sq.km.) | population           | population           | population           |
|------------------------------|-----------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              |           |               | 1996-09-03<br>census | 2002-11-07<br>census | 2007-08-20<br>census |
| Îles-Sous-le-Vent            | Uturoa    |               | 26,838               | 30,221               | 33,184               |
| Bora-Bora                    |           | 22            | 5,767                | 7,295                | 8,927                |
| Huahine                      |           | 82            | 5,411                | 5,757                | 5,999                |
| Maupiti                      |           | 11            | 1,127                | 1,191                | 1,231                |
| Tahaa                        |           | 91            | 4,470                | 4,845                | 5,003                |
| Taputapuatea                 |           | 88            | 3,625                | 4,156                | 4,614                |
| Tumaraa                      |           | 63            | 3,017                | 3,409                | 3,632                |
| Uturoa                       |           | 36            | 3,421                | 3,568                | 3,778                |
| Îles Marquises               | Nuku-Hiva |               | 8,064                | 8,712                | 8,632                |
| Fatu-Hiva                    |           | 78            | 631                  | 584                  | 587                  |
| Hiva-Oa                      |           | 318           | 1,837                | 2,015                | 1,986                |
| Nuku-Hiva                    |           | 345           | 2,375                | 2,652                | 2,660                |
| Tahuata                      |           | 71            | 637                  | 677                  | 671                  |
| Ua-Huka                      |           | 82            | 571                  | 584                  | 571                  |
| Ua-Pou                       |           | 112           | 2,013                | 2,200                | 2,157                |
| Îles Tuamotu-Gambier         | Papeete   |               | 15,370               | 15,862               | 16,847               |
| Anaa                         |           | 56            | 657                  | 639                  | 827                  |
| Arutua                       |           | 46            | 1,277                | 1,436                | 1,759                |
| Fakarava                     |           | 110           | 1,326                | 1,516                | 1,578                |
| Fangatau                     |           | 14            | 254                  | 275                  | 252                  |
| Gambier                      |           | 46            | 1,087                | 1,097                | 1,337                |
| Hao                          |           | 65            | 1,666                | 1,512                | 1,342                |
| Hikueru                      |           | 15            | 199                  | 205                  | 268                  |
| Makemo                       |           | 100           | 1,061                | 1,454                | 1,422                |
| Manihi                       |           | 25            | 1,146                | 1,230                | 1,379                |
| Napuka                       |           | 12            | 384                  | 307                  | 315                  |
| Nukutavake                   |           | 12            | 328                  | 278                  | 319                  |
| Pukapuka                     |           | 8             | 175                  | 197                  | 157                  |
| Rangiroa                     |           | 144           | 2,624                | 3,071                | 3,210                |
| Reao                         |           | 18            | 518                  | 553                  | 567                  |
| Takaraoa                     |           | 35            | 1,100                | 1,524                | 1,577                |
| Tatakoto                     |           | 7             | 247                  | 255                  | 227                  |
| Tureia                       |           | 19            | 1,321                | 313                  | 311                  |
| Îles Australes               | Tubuai    |               | 6,563                | 6,386                | 6,310                |
| Raivavae                     |           | 20            | 1,049                | 995                  | 905                  |
| Rapa                         |           | 41            | 521                  | 497                  | 482                  |
| Rimatara                     |           | 9             | 929                  | 811                  | 785                  |
| Rurutu                       |           | 33            | 2,015                | 2,104                | 2,088                |
| Tubuai                       |           | 45            | 2,049                | 1,979                | 2,050                |
| Îles-du-Vent                 | Papeete   |               | 162,686              | 184,224              | 194,623              |
| Arue                         |           | 20            | 8,899                | 9,300                | 9,458                |
| Faaa                         |           | 34            | 25,888               | 28,339               | 29,851               |
| Hitiaa O Te Ra               |           | 218           | 6,937                | 8,286                | 8,683                |
| Mahina                       |           | 52            | 11,640               | 13,334               | 14,369               |

source: INSEE.

source: ISPF.

note: The 2007 results reflect municipal totals. The total population, with some double counts, is 196,520.

note: The island Tahiti is about 1068.8 sq.km.

| subdivision(s)<br>commune(s) | capital | area (sq.km.) | population           | population           | population           |
|------------------------------|---------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                              |         |               | 1996-09-03<br>census | 2002-11-07<br>census | 2007-08-20<br>census |
| Moorea-Maiao                 |         | 132           | 11,965               | 14,550               | 16,490               |
| Paea                         |         | 64            | 10,281               | 12,276               | 12,084               |
| Papara                       |         | 92            | 7,934                | 9,505                | 10,615               |
| Papeete                      |         | 17            | 25,553               | 26,181               | 26,017               |
| Pirae                        |         | 35            | 13,974               | 14,499               | 14,475               |
| Punaauia                     |         | 76            | 19,524               | 23,706               | 25,441               |
| Taiarapu-Est                 |         | 218           | 8,815                | 10,315               | 11,549               |
| Taiarapu-Ouest               |         | 104           | 5,024                | 6,093                | 7,002                |
| Teva I Uta                   |         | 120           | 6,252                | 7,840                | 8,589                |
| <b>total</b>                 |         | <b>4,167</b>  | <b>219,521</b>       | <b>245,405</b>       | <b>259,596</b>       |

source: [INSEE](#).

source: [ISPF](#).

note: The 2007 results reflect municipal totals. The total population, with some double counts, is 196,520.

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