

# TOURISM IN FRENCH POLYNESIA LAUNCHING A NEW CAMPAIGN



Tahiti and Bora Bora still have their appeal but tourism, which is at the center of Polynesian economics, is struggling. To entice travelers to the archipelago the local authorities are focusing on more than just the stunning landscapes and exotic beauty of these islands. The upcoming promotional campaign will focus rather on the cultural richness of the area.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 in the U.S., and the 2008 economic crisis, have severely impacted tourism in French Polynesia. The number of visitors - mainly Americans and French - dropped from more than 260,000 in 2000 to less than 160,000 in 2011. **By 2015, it has nevertheless risen to 183,000, with an additional 50,000 cruise passengers, according to Tahiti Tourisme, an economic interest group.** Still, it is a long way from the 500,000 goal for 2020 announced by local minister, Jean-Christophe Bouissou.

Nevertheless, tourists are a major boon for the archipelago, where they spend over 40 billion Pacific francs (335 million euros) each year, representing 3.5 times the amount from local exports, according to the French Polynesia Institute of Statistics. One of the difficulties lies in the price of airline tickets: during high season, a Paris-Papeete-Paris trip costs more than 2,500 euros. The other comes from competition from other South Pacific islands: 20,000 Cook Islanders welcome, year after year, almost as many tourists as Polynesia, and Fiji has four times as many hotel rooms, according to Tahiti Tourisme. Why is this? Many of these islands are less isolated, English speaking, and have a cheaper workforce enabling them to offer cheaper holidays.

To try and restore balance to the tourism in French Polynesia, the local government is relying on the construction of a 3,000 room hotel complex on the west coast of Tahiti. This project, the Mahana Beach, would double the hotel capacity (2,800 rooms), which, with the crisis, fell by 17% in 15 years. If the recovery in tourism continues, existing hotels will no longer have the capacity to host all of the guests, especially in the small islands.

However, tourists are still not content with Tahiti alone, the most urbanized of the islands, and to some extent even the turquoise lagoon of Bora Bora isn't enough. People want to dive in the Tuamotu, discover churches built from ground coral in the Austral archipelago, or ride alongside the descendants of the Aito (warriors) in the Marquesas.

Tahiti Tourisme wants to ride this wave and promote the diversity of French Polynesia, one that parallels that of Europe. Moving away from simply pointing out the idyllic landscapes and exotic beauties the islands offer, Tahiti Tourisme wants to highlight the archipelago's cultural assets. "Manna" (a word that in Tahitian mean "spirit", "energy" and "power"), will be the center of the **international campaign launched in North America and around the world, highlighting the islands' little exploited cultural assets; traditional tribes and population, intricate crafts and eco-tourism.** Indeed, the inlands of these islands offer exceptional hiking trails which have long been overshadowed by the glimmering lagoons.

The communication campaign is also focusing on smaller niches: scuba divers, hikers and sailing enthusiasts. They are also focusing on new source countries for tourists. Since having simplified their visa requirements, the number of Chinese tourists has increased rapidly. It went from 1,183

visitors in 2012 (0.7% of the total) to 4,635 visitors in 2015 (3% of the total). Hainan Airlines is even considering starting a direct Shanghai to Papeete flight.

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