**People of French Polynesia**

**Daily Life**

     Tahiti is indeed the largest island in French **Polynesia**. Maybe that's why people use the name to refer to the whole region. Other islands include Bora Bora, Rangiroa and Hiva Oa. The largest city is the capital, Papeete. It's located on Tahiti. Concrete buildings and traffic jams are part of life in this busy port. It offers shops, restaurants and a colorful waterfront market called the Marche de Papeete. These scenes contrast with the quiet beauty of remote beaches and green volcanic mountains.

     Most French Polynesians descend from the original settlers. These first Polynesians arrived over 2,000 years ago, probably from Southeast Asia. Today they make up the largest and poorest group in the islands. Europeans, mainly from France, arrived in the 1700s. They make up a much smaller, wealthier group. In between is the middle class. It includes people of mixed races along with Chinese immigrants.

     Some early Europeans were missionaries. They stamped out many native traditions. One part of Polynesian culture that wasn't destroyed is family life. The Polynesian family, or *fetii*, goes far beyond parents and children. It includes cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, adopted children and close friends. People often spend leisure time with their *fetii*. They also enjoy surfing, soccer, horse racing and cockfighting.

     Schooling follows the French system. It emphasizes the French language and history. Those who do well in school receive a free university education. Unfortunately, most students drop out long before they reach that level.

**Language**

     Most people in French **Polynesia** speak French. A few speak a Chinese dialect called Hakka. Many people also know at least some English. The local language, Tahitian, is mainly spoken in the Society Islands. The Tahitian language was first written down by missionaries. Tahitian uses all five vowels, but only eight consonants: *f*, *h*, *m*, *n*, *p*, *r*, *t* and *v*.

**Food**

     Native French Polynesians traditionally cook their meals in a pit oven called an *ahimaa*. They dig a hole, line it with stones, then light a fire. They wrap the food in banana leaves before placing it on the stones. Then they fill in the rest of the hole with earth. It takes several hours for food to cook this way. The result is a feast called a *tamaaraa*.

     Other countries contribute to the variety. French, Italian and Chinese cooking are all popular. Vendors sell delicious snacks from *les roulottes*, roadside stands on wheels.

**Dress**

     Formal and informal Western clothes are common. But many people still wear a *pareu*. This traditional cloth can be tied in different styles, some for men and some for women. Its light weight and bright colors are suited to the tropical climate. For dances, festivals and other occasions, people still wear traditional costumes made with flowers, shells and grasses. Palm fronds are handy for making hats that block the intense sunshine.

     Women often wear hibiscus blossoms or *frangipani* in their hair. Men like tattoos. Intricate patterns may cover their arms, hands--even their fingers.

**Arts & Music**

     To accompany their famous dances, French Polynesians play instruments such as drums, flutes, guitars and ukuleles. People of the Australs once created huge stone carvings called *tikis*. Today's artists recreate that style in smaller drawings and woodcarvings.

     Westerners, too, have often been inspired by the people and places of French **Polynesia**. The most famous was French painter Paul Gauguin. Western books based on the islands include Herman Melville's *Typee*, Pierre Loti's *The Marriage of Loti* and Thor Heyerdahl's *Fatu Hiva*. James Michener wrote three books about the islands. The most famous is *Tales of the South Pacific*.

**Religion**

     Missionaries brought Christianity to the islands. These Catholics and Protestants often destroyed temples built to honor native gods. These days, over half the people are Protestant. Nearly a third are Catholic. A smaller number are Mormons or Seventh-day Adventists. An even smaller number follow the teachings of Buddha or Confucius.

**Holidays, Traditions & Folklore**

     French Polynesians enjoy beauty contests. They're held throughout the year. The finalists compete each July for the title of Miss Heiva i. Heiva i is a month-long celebration similar to Carnival or Mardi Gras. The people also have a passion for canoe racing. The most important event is a three-day, four-island race called the *Hawaiki Nui*. French holidays are also part of life in French **Polynesia**. For example, the people celebrate Bastille Day on July 14th.

**Fun Facts**

     Traditional Tahitian names often come from poetic expressions. For example, the name *Eeva* comes from *Te-fetu-eeva-I-te-po*. It means, "the star that rises at night." *Virtua* is short for *Viri-tua-I-te-moana-tapu*. It means, "rolling beyond the sacred sea."

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