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One of five inhabited islands in the Austral archipelago, Rurutu is situated a little less than 600 km southwest of Tahiti. With its numerous lofty limestone cliffs, dotted with caves, towering tens of meters above the sea, the island is unique, on more than one count. It is the northernmost island in the archipelago known as the *Tuhaa Pae* by its inhabitants. Rurutu has an area of a little over 30 km<sup>2</sup> and its highest point is 389 meters above sea-level. The temperature, comparatively cool, has an annual average of 23°C. In July, the very heart of the austral winter, it can get down to 12°C at night. The island's climate is said to be « subtropical temperate », ideal for cultivating food crops (principally taro). Rurutu, however, is also known for its coffee, lychees and citrus ... Once known by the name Eteroa, Rurutu is the result of a complex geological history, unfolding in several chapters. The initial volcano built an island out of the ocean, some 12 million years ago. The newly formed island then underwent millennia of erosion, slowly sinking back under the waves. A second period of volcanism, some two million years ago, « rejuvenated » the island, lifting it once more high out of the water.



## Treks

Rurutu's landscapes are rich and varied: ridgelines are blunt, exposed or planted with Caribbean pines, there are green valleys and orchards... Tracks and trails cross the island, allowing you to discover its riches, on foot or on horseback. The island's fringing reef is broken by a few narrow passes, and endowed with attractive white-sand beaches. The island tour can be done by car, or bicycle (for the adventurous, 30km of road with several impressive climbs) and you can explore the caves that overhang the shore. Be aware that certain caves are dangerous to access, and are best visited with a guide. ■



PLAGE AU DESSUS DU POINT DE VUE DE MATOTEA.  
SECLUDED BEACH, BELOW THE MATOTEA LOOKOUT.

The designated orero recites the history of his village, as they go around the island, teaching the significance of the sites visited (caves, summits, passes....) to the younger generation. At the beginning, and in each village visited during the tour, the hosting village's strongmen lift stones (*amora* *o'ai*), a traditional Rurutu sport and the means of displaying the physical prowess of their young men (and women). Three weekends in the month of May are reserved for the *Mē* – an essentially religious celebration – associated with raising funds for the Protestant church. Sunday's church services see women exquisitely dressed in their Sunday Best, sporting headwear that is nothing short of art. Finally, July welcomes the Heiva – two weeks of fierce competition between the three villages – in the realms of sport, music, dance, craft and agriculture. As for the marriages, *'aiai poipora'a*, a lively tradition continues, a ceremony of gift-offering (*umu 'ai*) lasts several days (traditionally all the family's sons marry at the same time, so there are usually several couples involved) including offerings of *pēu'e* (woven mats), *tifaifai* (Polynesian patchwork coverlets) live pigs, fish, taro and housewares..... It is an occasion to recite the genealogies of the families involved, and also to exchange hospitality, every family offering gifts is fed a meal cooked in the Tahitian oven. ■

## SOME GREAT REASONS TO GO !

- A beautiful island with captivating landscapes: steep cliffs, limestone caves, green-clad hills and superb beaches giving onto shallow pools of crystalline seawater.
- The climate, ideal for cultivating coffee, citrus (such as pomelo, orange and lime), lychees, taro etc., cooler and less humid than Tahiti
- The archeological (marae) and geological sites (the numerous caves, complete with decor of stalactites and stalagmites).
- The humpback whales, during the season (usually from the end of July to mid-October).
- The woven handicrafts (hats, mats, bags and other objects) and tifaifai (patchwork) specialties of the island.
- The colorful and picturesque villages.
- The vibrant culture: particularly apparent during the festivities held throughout the year (ask your hosts for the timing), notably including the « house visits», Tere (group island tour), Mē and large traditional weddings.
- A variety of excursions.

### GEOGRAPHIC COORDINATES (LATITUDE/LONGITUDE):

22°26 South and 151°21 West.

AREA : 32.7 km<sup>2</sup>

DISTANCE FROM TAHITI: 600 km south-west.

POPULATION: 2 322 inhabitants from the 2012 census.

AIR TAHITI FLIGHTS: Flights 4 days a week (between 4 and 6 flights)

### PRACTICAL INFORMATION:

- **Accommodation** : 5 small hotels/guesthouses.
- **Dining** : several snacks and a restaurant.
- **Commerce** : three grocery stores and a patisserie in Moerai, a few smaller stores in Avera and 'Auti.
- **Services** : The bank (Socredo) and Post Office both have ATMs / Internet, telephone and cell phone reception (incomplete coverage)

## Archaeological sites

The district of Vitaria, on the West coast, is the best place to trace ancient Rurutu history. In the 1960s, the archeologist Pierre Vérin uncovered an extensive village complex (with nearly 110 structures) and a *marae* there, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The vast majority of archeological artefacts (pestles, adzes) collected in Rurutu, in the 1960s, came from this site. ■



## The statue of the god A'a, relic of an ancient religion

With the arrival of Christianity in Polynesia, numerous sacred sites (*marae*) and objects (sculptures) linked to traditional beliefs were destroyed or burnt. Just a few objects that escaped the pillage were sent to Europe, a notable example is this statue of the god A'a – one of the last artefacts linked to Rurutu's ancient religious beliefs. The statue, as exceptional for its complexity as its form, was collected by Protestant missionaries at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and sent to the *London Missionary Society* (LMS) headquarters in London. Without doubt, one of the most striking pieces of surviving Oceanian sculpture, from that time, it is now part of the British Museum's prestigious collection. A plaster cast of the original is, however, on public display in the meeting rooms of the mayor's office, in Moerai. ■