

The Austral Islands

The Austral Islands include the high islands of Rurutu, Tubuai, Rimatara, Raivavae and Rapa, plus the low, uninhabited islands of Maria (or Hull) and the Marotiri (or Bass) Rocks. These islands lie on both sides of the Tropic of Capricorn, extending in a northwest-southeasterly direction across 1,280 Km (800 miles) of ocean. They are part of a vast mountain range, an extension of the same submerged chain that comprises the Cook Islands 960 Km (600 miles) further to the northwest.

The 141 square km (54 square miles) of land surface in the Austral Islands is home to some 6,500 Polynesians, who live peaceful lives in their attractive villages, where their houses and churches are usually built of coral limestone. Due to the rich soil and the cooler climate of the Australs, good quality vegetables can be produced, including taro, manioc, potatoes, sweet potatoes, leeks, cabbage and coffee, as well as apples, peaches and even strawberries.

Archeological diggings in these isolated islands have uncovered, habitation sites, council platforms and marae temples in the village of Vitaria on Rurutu, showing man's presence around the year 900 A.D. Tubuai and Rimatara also have the ruins of open-air stone temples and giant sized stone tiki have been found on Raivavae that resemble those in the Marquesas Islands and on Easter Island. On Rapa Iti there are the remains of seven famous pa fortresses on superimposed terraces, that were found nowhere else in Polynesia except New Zealand where the Maori People settled. Exquisite wood carvings, now in museums, tell of an artistic people highly evolved in their craft, who were also superb boat builders and daring seafarers.

Captain James Cook discovered Rurutu in 1769 and Tubuai in 1777. Fletcher Christian and his band of mutineers from the H.M.S Bounty tried to settle in Tubuai in 1789, but were forced to flee the island because of skirmishes with the men of Tubuai. Spanish Captain Thomas Gayangos discovered lovely Raivavae in 1775 and remote Rapa Iti was first sighted by English Captain George Vancouver in 1791. Rimatara, the lowest of the high islands, was not found until 1821, when Captain Samuel Pinder Henry of Tahiti arrived, returning the following year with two native teachers who converted the entire population to the Protestant religion. The Austral Islands are mostly Evangelistic today and all have flown the French flag since 1901.

European and South American crews aboard whalers and sandalwood ships during the 19th century brought epidemic diseases to the islands, which practically decimated the strong, proud and highly cultured Polynesian race that once existed in the Australs.

The Austral Islanders today have many of advantages of civilization, including electricity and telephone service and television. There is regular air service to Rurutu and Tubuai, and the Tuhaa Pae III cargo ship from Papeete brings supplies to all the islands on a frequent basis. The Australs are collectively known as Tuhaa Pae-five parts that make up the whole archipelago. Past and present blend in harmony in the Austral Islands today. Islands of quiet beauty, peace and pride, these are Polynesia's Temperate Isles.