

## SOUTH PACIFIC

## Tahiti's 'carnival' atmosphere

Month-long bash shows these paradise islands know how to party too

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PAPEETE, TAHITI—You can cut the anticipation with a machete as the pot lights dim under a canopy of southern stars. All eyes in the French Polynesian capital of Papeete's waterfront amphitheatre are fixed on the stage. Tonight's audience is here to watch dozens of dancers, singers and musicians perform in Heiva Tahiti, a spectacular annual month-long celebration of traditional Polynesian culture.

Backstage, dancer Maire Teihotaata nervously adjusts her elaborate headdress. Her skirt is made of coconut bark and hibiscus flowers, with a wide belt decorated with mother of pearl, natural fibres, shells and colourful seeds slung low on her tall, lithe frame. Bathed in intoxicating tropical flower scents, jet-black hair flowing to her waist, this 37-year-old government communications specialist could have stepped out of a Gauguin painting.

Suddenly, slit and bass drums carved from hollowed-out tree trunks begin pounding sensual rhythms—the vocabulary of a timeless language. Floodlights bathe the stage in lavender, orange and emerald hues as Maire and other athletic young male and female dancers gyrate with astonishing speed, hips blurring as they acrobatically dance in unison to the frenetic beat. This is "otea", the ancient Polynesian dance that re-enacts a thousand stories, from interisland warfare to the flight of a butterfly.

Tonight's show features the most mesmerizing singing, dancing and drumming that this cluster of island archipelagos has to offer. French Polynesia — and especially its crown jewel island of Bora Bora — is best known as a honeymoon destination with sparkling, aquamarine atoll waters set against a towering backdrop of emerald mountains. Now, this ancient culture long suppressed by colonial masters is undergoing a revival, reflected in events such as Heiva, the Tahitian word for festival.

"Heiva is in my blood and not dancing is unimaginable," says Teihotaata. Her performing group, Te-maeva, which means "welcome" in Tahitian, has won numerous international competitions since forming in 1962. "I've also taught my daughter to dance, sing and play traditional instruments so she

won't forget where she came from."

Tahitian dance — Ori Tahiti — was a central part of Polynesian culture for centuries before European Protestant missionaries arrived. Finding such overtly "erotic" displays offensive, they managed to convert King Pomare II to Christianity in 1807, and he promptly banned Ori Tahiti. So this ancient art form went underground, along with the knowledge of how to make dance costumes from vegetable fibres, shells and flowers.

The French colonizers occasionally allowed sanitized versions of Tahitian dance to be performed as part of annual July 14 Bastille Day celebrations. But it wasn't until 1956 that Madeleine Mouta, a Papeete high school principal, spearheaded the true revival of Ori Tahiti by forming the dance troupe Heiva Tahiti. Renewed interest in costume design soon followed and dance eventually resumed its rightful place as a vibrant part of Tahitian culture.

Traditional culture also comes alive on the playing fields and in the harbours of many islands. Canoe racing is popular, as are traditional competitions such as javelin throwing and heavy stone lifting, which originated in the Austral Islands. Many communities also host an annual banana-bearers foot race, in which men sprint carrying large bunches of bananas tied to poles.

"Heiva of the Artisans" also runs concurrently with the main festival and features arts and crafts from French Polynesia's five archipelagos. Weavers and carvers use traditional materials such as pandanus, pearl shell and coral. Fantastic displays of the Polynesian art of tatau, or tattoo, also are on display.

Judging by the number of intricate motifs covering the muscular torsos of the male otea dancers on this night on Papeete's waterfront, the fine art of tattooing is doing booming business all over French Polynesia. As tonight's performance nears its ecstatic climax, dozens of dancers, their bodies drenched in perspiration, form a human daisy chain. Among them, Maire Teihotaata strikes yet another dramatic pose for the appreciative crowd, the cameras and most importantly, for her culture.

"Heiva is the most amazing show you'll ever see," Teihotaata says, catching her breath after the show. "Just as you would go to Rio to experience Carnival, you must come to Tahiti to see Heiva. It's unique, huge and marvellous."

Mark Sissons is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.



MARK SISSONS PHOTO FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Heiva Tahiti costumes are made of natural materials such as coconut bark, flowers and vegetable fibres.



## JUST THE FACTS

The annual month-long Heiva Tahiti Festival takes place each July, coinciding with France's Bastille Day celebrations. Air Tahiti Nui ([www.airtahitiniui.com](http://www.airtahitiniui.com)) flies non-stop daily from Los Angeles to Papeete. Air Tahiti ([www.airtahiti.com](http://www.airtahiti.com)) services the islands of French Polynesia. Both offer flight and lodging packages in hotels and family pensions throughout the country. For more information about Heiva Tahiti and other French Polynesian events and attractions, visit [www.tahiti-tourisme.com](http://www.tahiti-tourisme.com).

Elaborate headdresses and fancy costumes — for both sexes — are an integral part of the Heiva Tahiti festivities. Also popular is stone lifting, which originated amongst some very strong chaps on Rurutu, in the nearby Austral Islands of the South Pacific. Do not try this at home.



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