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la ora na!

Welcome to the September edition of Te Parau Api, where Tahiti and her Islands come alive with fun facts, mystique, and even a little history! If you thought the islands were interesting before, just wait until you read these stories - you may never see Tahiti the same again!

If you have an interesting story about or related to the islands of Tahiti, we would love to hear from you - email us at media@tahiti-tourisme.com. Who knows, you might see your story in the next edition of the Te Parau Api!

Lost Treasure of the Tuamotu

There is substantial and fascinating history associated with Tahiti, from the origins of its peoples to the development of its species. Likewise, there is a great deal of rich mythology that contemplates the origins of the islands themselves, explaining various customs and rituals. Somewhere in between is the story of the lost treasure of the Tuamotu, a tale fantastic enough to appear fictitious, yet factual enough to maintain a certain level of credibility.



As the story goes, during the war of the Pacific, somewhere between 1879 and 1883, four Australian mercenaries stole 14 tons of gold from a church in Pisco Peru. After burying most of the treasure in the Tuamotu Atolls, they continued on to Australia where two were imprisoned and the other two were killed by aborigines. However, just before the last surviving mercenary died, he told his story to a prospector by the name of Charles Howe. In 1913, Howe set out to find the Treasure, finally locating part of it 13 years later on an island near Raraka in the Tuamotu atolls. Howe reburied the treasure with the intention of coming back to retrieve it in secret. But before he could return to his treasure, Howe mysteriously disappeared...

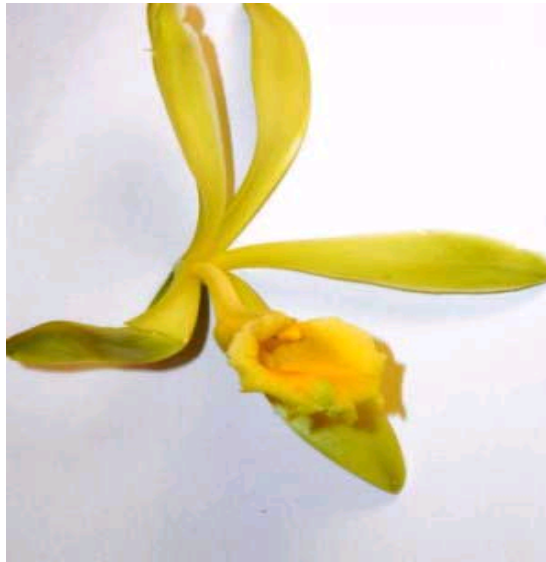
The story continues in 1934, when a diver named George Hamilton came across Howe's map and allegedly found the cached treasure in a pool but was unable to extract it. Hamilton abandoned his search after being attacked by a giant octopus and a moray eel, and the expedition dissolved. Years later in 1994, a descendant of Hamilton deduced from an old photograph that the treasure was located on the atoll of Tepoto. But hazardous weather conditions caused the younger Hamilton to evacuate the unsheltered atoll – he and his crew barely escaped with their lives. Around the same time of the 1994 expedition, the Discovery Channel arranged yet another expedition to search for the treasure, intending to film a documentary. But this expedition was also cancelled.

Rumor has it that the treasure was never retrieved. Yet others say that island natives, not wanting any more intrusions, or perhaps believing the treasure to be cursed, sought out the treasure and dumped it all out at sea. Whether or not the legend of the Tuamotu treasure is real or fabricated is yet to be proven...

Tahitian Vanilla

Take a trip to the islands of Tahiti and you'll discover an abundance of natural wonders, from the signature turquoise lagoons to the sloping peaks of Mt. Otemanu to the spectacular aquatic wildlife. But there is one thing in Tahiti, as you set foot on the island of Taha'a, which will take your breath away and make you want to breathe more deeply: vanilla. While most people are familiar with the scent and flavor of vanilla, often considered to be a "generic" flavor, most people have no idea how unique vanilla really is.

The vanilla plant is actually a species of orchid – the only edible variety of orchid in the world. And while there are roughly 150 different varieties of vanilla, only two types – Bourbon and Tahitian vanilla – are used commercially.



Originally indigenous to Mexico, the plant was eventually brought to Tahiti where it was cross-pollinated with other varieties of vanilla, causing it to mutate into its own unique species significantly different from Bourbon or Mexican vanilla. The Totonaca people of the Gulf coast of Mexico are considered to be the first people to cultivate vanilla, considering it to be a gift from the gods. In the 1500's the Spanish brought vanilla to Europe, intending to use it for perfume. It wasn't until 1519 when the famous explorer, Cortes, learned that it was also a flavor. Tahitian vanilla is a relatively new species, only coming to the islands from Manila, Philippines in 1848, where it was initially planted in the Garden of the Governor in Papeete, gardens you can still visit today. Most of the Tahitian vanilla is grown on the islands of Taha'a (known as "The Vanilla Island") and Raiatea, with a few farms on Huahine and Moorea.

The cultivation of Tahitian vanilla is a delicate and painstaking process. To begin, natural pollination only occurs with a specific bee found in Mexico; therefore, Tahitian vanilla must be hand-pollinated. After being planted, the vanilla plant can take up to three years to flower, and then after the long, thin vanilla bean develops, it must remain on the vine for another eight to nine months before harvesting. For these reasons, vanilla is one of the most expensive spices, second only to saffron.



Aside from being delectable in smell and taste, vanilla was once considered to have healing and soothing properties. In earlier times, the uncured vanilla beans could be used as a poultice to draw out infections and as an antidote to scorpion bites. The spice also contains a substance called heliotropin, which studies suggest can calm nerves and alleviate anxiety.

The Whales of Rurutu

Lying inconspicuously in the South Pacific, hundreds of miles south of the

main island of Tahiti in the Austral Archipelago, Rurutu has something to offer that many other islands in Polynesia don't. Every year at the end of June, just around the time the Tahitian "Heiva" festival begins, the waters around Rurutu become a thoroughfare for migrating humpback whales.



Leaving their cold, rich feeding grounds in Antarctica, the humpback whales head for the warmer waters of Polynesia where mothers give birth and prepare their young for the long journey home in October or November. The waters around Rurutu are shallow and free of predators, and calm lagoons in the area provide a safe haven during potential winter storms. It is during this time that divers and vacationers have a tremendous opportunity to see these remarkable creatures close up. When observing them moving through the water, it is difficult to fathom their immensity, growing to an average of 16 meters (over 52 feet) in length and weighing approximately 65 tons! In addition to their size, humpback whales sing the most beautiful and complex songs, lasting upwards of half an hour and repeating for hours, or even days! A whale-watching excursion can be an exciting addition to an already spectacular vacation. Whether snorkeling or actual scuba diving, professional divers can guide you to a remarkable sub-aquatic show, where you can watch mothers play with their young calves or listen as the haunting songs reverberate across the coral sea beds.

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Excerpt from Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson Vol 2

Robert Louis Stevenson, prolific writer of novels such as *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, frequented the South Pacific toward the end of his life, visiting many Tahitian islands including Tahiti, Moorea, and the Marquesas. Some believe these islands to be the inspiration for his masterpiece, *Treasure Island*. He recorded his extensive travels and experiences in a series of journals, now published as *Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Here is an excerpt depicting a nineteenth-century Tahiti Iti, then known as the island of Tautira.



14TH JANUARY, 1889. "...We were kept two months at Tautira in the house of my dear old friend, Ori a Ori, till both the masts of this invaluable yacht had been repaired. It was all for the best: Tautira being the most beautiful spot, and its people the most amiable, I have ever found. Besides which, the climate suited me to the ground; I actually went sea-bathing almost every day, and in our feasts (we are all huge eaters in Tairapu) have been known to apply four times for pig. And then again I got wonderful materials for my book, collected songs and legends on the spot; songs still sung in chorus by perhaps a hundred persons, not two of whom can agree on their translation; legends, on which I have seen half a dozen seniors sitting in conclave and debating what came next. Once I went a day's journey to the other side of the island to Tati, the high chief of the Tevas - MY chief that is, for I am now a Teva and Teriitera, at your service - to collect more and correct what I had already. In the meanwhile I got on with my work, almost finished the MASTER OF BALLANTRAE, which contains more human work than anything of mine but KIDNAPPED, and wrote the half of another ballad, the SONG OF RAHERO, on a Tairapu legend of my own clan, sir - not so much fire as the FEAST OF FAMINE, but promising to be more even and correct. But the best fortune of our stay at Tautira was my knowledge of Ori himself, one of the finest creatures extant..."

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