

# Gem of the South Pacific

THE GAMBIER ARCHIPELAGO IN A REMOTE CORNER OF FRENCH POLYNESIA  
IS HOME TO SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST BLACK PEARLS.

story **Becca Guillote**





Spearfishing in the crystal-clear lagoon water is a popular sport among both residents and visitors in the Gambiers. **Previous spread:** The climb up Mount Duff, the highest peak in the Gambiers, is formidable but the exertion is worth the stunning views over the archipelago.

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The four-and-a-half-hour flight from Tahiti to the Gambiers traces an arc over the teardrop atolls of the Tuamotus before touchdown on an airstrip only slightly narrower than the island itself, with colorful coral outcroppings and azure water in every direction.

It is the picture of paradise: secluded beaches, crystal-clear water, tropical temperatures, breathtaking sunsets and a mountainous backdrop. The Gambier Islands are perhaps the best-kept secret of the Pacific.

Tucked away in the southeast corner of the vast island nation of French Polynesia, the Gambier archipelago is a collection of 14 tropical islands that appear to float in a symphony of colors. The lagoon, pulsing with a thousand shades of blue, is protected by a diamond-shaped outer reef. Once known as the “forgotten islands,” the Gambiers seem to breathe relaxation with their swaying palm trees, vibrant coral and unhurried pace of life.

The four-and-a-half-hour flight from Tahiti to the Gambiers traces an arc over the teardrop atolls of the Tuamotus before touchdown on an airstrip only slightly narrower than the island itself, with colorful coral outcroppings and azure water in every direction. Credit cards won’t work here, and happy hour appears in the form of a refreshing coconut just dropped from a tree.

The islands have a colorful, multifaceted history. Polynesian mythology tells of the demi-god Maui lifting Mangareva, the largest and tallest of the Gambier Islands, from the ocean floor. The mountains on Mangareva still stand tall over their surrounding lagoon, the stoic guardians of the island chain.

On the other hand, geologists tell of a volcano that erupted more than six million years ago and that is in the process of eroding and sinking away into the sea. Eventually, they say, only the coral ring will remain, much like the atolls of the Tuamotus. In this regard, the Gambiers is in a geological sweet spot: a variety of mountainous islands enveloped in a protective coral ring.

The largest island is home to the archipelago’s only village and the majority of its 1,500 residents. This quaint and carefree village, Rikitea, has one main road, a few small shops, a handful of relaxed restaurants and a healthy population of free-range youth playing marbles in the street with discarded black pearls.

The residents rely on food grown and made locally, and stock up on staples only when the supply ship arrives from Tahiti every two to three weeks. Fruit trees are everywhere, drooping under the weight of their bounty; avocados, breadfruit, papayas and pamplemousse (like a grapefruit the size of a cantaloupe) are prolific. The whole town seems to smell like fresh-baked baguettes every morning when the bakery opens its doors. The local delicacy is poisson cru, a Polynesian take on the French dish featuring fresh-caught raw fish, freshly squeezed coconut milk and a few limes just plucked from a tree.

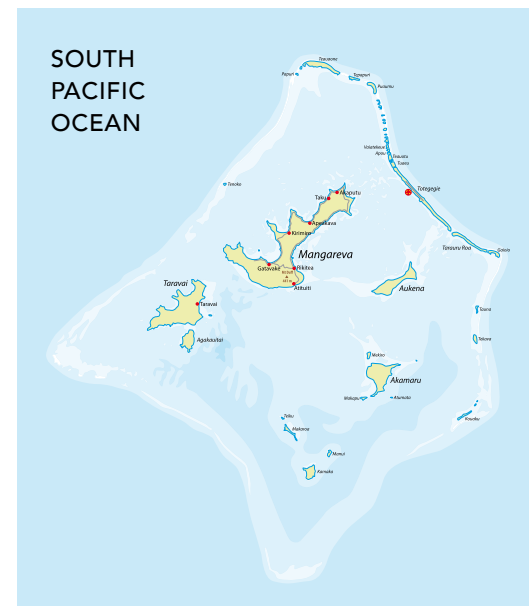
Standing proud and bullish at the south end of town, St. Michael’s Cathedral was the crowning achievement of the French priest Honoré Laval, who delivered Catholicism along with brutality to the native populations of the Gambier Islands in the early 1800s. It is the largest church in the South Pacific, with seating for 1,200 worshipers—more than the population of the entire archipelago when it was completed. Its main altar, adorned with hundreds of black pearls and mother-of-pearl shells, is a sight to behold.

RACHEL SHANKLE





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The Gambier Islands produce some of the highest-quality black pearls in the world. The secret recipe blends cool, clear lagoon water and a balance of minerals with the absence of pollution and overfishing. More than 100 pearl farms dot the islands, almost entirely managed and staffed locally. Robert Wan's pearl farm on the Aukenu atoll dates to the 1970s and is still among the most productive operations in the Pacific.

Without the influx of tourism that locations such as Tahiti and Bora Bora support, the Gambiers have no major jewelry stores. Instead, a small co-op along the main road showcases local jewelry and art. Sometimes, the artists are there. Visitors can go back to the boat not only with a pretty piece of jewelry, but also with its whole story, and probably a new friend.

A visit to Mangareva is not complete without a trek to the top of the 1,447-foot (441-meter) Mount Duff. Originally named Manha Reva ("moving mountain"), it was renamed to honor Duff, a ship carrying missionaries in 1797. The climb is formidable—steep enough toward the top that the hike is not recommended after a heavy rain—but on a clear day, the exertion is well worth it. The mountain's height affords 360-degree views of the diamond-shaped lagoon, sapphire and luminous, dotted with deep green islands and complex coral structures.

The vibrant underwater world mirrors the above-water beauty in the Gambiers. Healthy coral hosts pulsing schools of fish, graceful eels, majestic manta rays and curious reef sharks. Snorkeling feels like flying over teeming underwater villages, mirroring the tropic birds soaring high over the islands, tracing their long, delicate tails through the sky. Beyond the diamond sanctuary, the deep blue of the ocean stretches to the horizon, unbroken in every direction. The view is a reminder of the majesty of this planet.



**Clockwise from top left:** Polynesian people are renowned for their generosity and joy; nowhere is that more apparent than in the Gambier islands; St. Michael's cathedral, the largest church in the South Pacific, stands proud at the south end of Rikitea; Residents in the Gambier islands rely on food made and grown locally; Fruit trees, like this one bearing papayas, are abundant; It is the perfect respite. The author enjoys a relaxing afternoon on one of the many secluded beaches in the Gambier islands.

JOHN GUILLOTTE





## Harvesting the Black Pearl

The Gambier archipelago produces the majority of high-quality black pearls in the world. “Tahitian pearl” is often a misnomer, as it is the cool, clear water of the Gambiers lagoon that offers the perfect growing environment for the black-lipped oyster, or *Pinctada margaritifera*. These perfect aquatic conditions, combined with the skill and care of attentive workers, yields ornate pearls. They are not truly black; they come in an array of colors from sleek silver to deep emerald, rosy gold and elegant sapphire.

The pearl farms here employ about 70 percent of the Gambiers’ inhabitants. To protect their interests and livelihood, the local farmers formed a co-op to keep prices fair, and to elevate their pearls to an international audience.

The production of black pearls is a labor of patience and tenacity. It takes four to five years of nurturing before an oyster produces its first pearl. As the oyster grows, it can produce larger pearls every 18 to 20 months for a few years, but the gem quality is never guaranteed. There is a palpable buzz of excitement in the open-air huts on harvest days, when workers see the outcome of years of hard work. A midsize farm might gather 20,000 to 30,000 pearls in a harvest, taking only the quality gems to large auctions in Tahiti.

In Mangareva, the main town of the Gambiers, pearls are as common as river stones. Children play marbles in the street with discarded pearls, and school-age girls sport impressive pearl earrings. On Sundays and festival days, the women are dazzling in vibrantly colorful pareos with flowers tucked in their hair and heavy strings of pearls draped casually around their necks.—B.G. ♦



Local artists in Rikitea carve intricate designs into mother-of-pearl shells. Facing page, clockwise from top left: The manager of a local pearl farm shows off some of her recent harvest; The cool clear water in the lagoon offers perfect growing conditions for black-lipped oysters, hosts for the illustrious black pearls.; A highly-trained grafter delicately removes a pearl from the oyster shell, inspecting its quality.

PHOTOS: JOHN GUILLOTE TOP RIGHT: RACHEL SHANKLE



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