



SAVAGE ISLANDS OF THE SOUTH SEA HIVA OA - MARQUESAS ARCHIPELAGO

"Where is the grave of Paul Gauguin", I asked a muscled, dark tanned Maohi. "Walk up that steep path, you will find him under the frangipani trees. And Jacques Brel lies just next to him, his face is sculpted on his tombstone", he added in French.

A jagged mountain pointed towards the cloudless sky. The tarmac under my feet was blazing hot in the tropical sunshine.

Was it here he spent the last four years of his life? Drinking with the locals under the coconut palms. Watching the "vahine" on the savage beaches and insulting the French gendarmes and clergymen.

Was it in a "fare niau", a palm leaf and bamboo hut, where he painted the last of his famous canvasses? And did his Maohi neighbor bite Gauguin's head to assure the painter had passed away?

Dogs barked aggressively at first but soon rolled over in the grass; too hot to charge. A soft breeze chilled the sweat on my body.

Brightcoloured hibiscuses waved along the road. I stuck a red one in my hair and picked up a mango from under the enormous tree.

A sign indicated "cimetière". The sweet perfume of frangipanis floated the air announcing that the burial ground of Atuona was near.

Atuona is the capital of the island Hiva Oa, southern part of the archipelago "Te Fenua Enata", meaning "The Land of Men".

A group of fifteen volcanic islands is situated in the Pacific Ocean farthest from all continents and fourteen hundred kilometers northeast from Tahiti.

These were amongst the first isles to be settled by the Polynesians during their South Pacific migration. Archeological remains of stone platforms, temples and tikis - sculptures they worshipped, are silent witnesses of the past.

Up to around the year nineteen hundred the people were cannibals. They were numerous and food did not get wasted. In this époque a stroll in the neighboring valley could prove fatal. Human skulls and bones under the roots of the banyan trees tell true stories.

They were hunters and warriors, wearing their family history tattooed on their golden skin. They were artists, carving Polynesian motives and tikis in bone, wood and stone. Families braided intricate patterns with pandanus and coconut fibers and made tapa, cloth from the bark of a tree.

Men sang with savage voices and danced their masculine haka to attract the dark eyed women. Who on their turn chanted and danced gracefully as a bird to seduce their great men.

They were a proud people knowing to live with the laws of nature and they were bound to the values of their traditions.

Then Europeans and Americans sailed in and the archipelago was renamed “Marquesas” by the Spanish. They brought arms, alcohol and disease and the population of the islands declined rapidly.

The catholic mission brought Christianity and the forest hid the tikis and temples together with all ancestral ethics.

The French colonized “Te Fenua Enata” and “Iles Marquises” became part of “French Polynesia”

Today the Marquesans share family and land with predominantly French settlers. Contracted French people usually take the administrative jobs.

The 6 populated islands of “Iles Marquises” have a total of about 7500 inhabitants, of which 2000 live on Hiva Oa.

The size of Hiva Oa is about 320 square kilometers. The summit of the mountains, shaped as a dragon’s back, has an average of 800 meters height. Steep ridges come straight down and form lush valleys that flow towards the sea.

The capital Atuona, an orderly little town lies at the base of Mount Temetiu and Mount Feani- both over eleven hundred meters high. The tiny airport, half an hour drive from the village has daily flights connecting to other islands of the group and to Tahiti.

There are about 5 more villages, not counting some families in the valleys.

“Do you want to have a ride to Puamau”, asked Vaite, a round-faced woman with long black hair that touched her bottom. I climbed over the soft drinks and sat down on a crate of beer in the bin of the 4-wheel drive next to a gigantic Marquesan..

The wind was blowing dust in our faces, while the modern car bounced uncomfortably over the winding dirt road, towards the northeast. “It is only 40 kilometers”, I thought.

The vehicle climbed the track slowly. Ancient mango trees threw shadows on the road that was covered with yellow flowers of the “purau”. I smelled ilang ilang and jasmine. Ate juicy guavas, papayas and bananas. We crossed clear rivers and wild forests.

“No dangerous animals around”, I asked. “If you are scared of an eighty kilo wild boar”, laughed Teiki, my travel companion.

Most of his body was tattooed with Marquesan motives. He was wearing a necklace with two sculpted boar teethes, big enough to encircle my neck. “We hunt them in the mountains on our horse. Did you try their roasted meat with breadfruit in coconut milk?”.

Massive rock pillars rose out of the rugged landscape. The deep blue waters crashed in white foam on the black-sand beaches.

Two and a half hours later we arrived at Puamau, the valley that harbors the biggest tiki in French-Polynesia. I refreshed my battered body in the warm ocean. Fishermen were cleaning tuna's at the waterfront.

Takii towered over me. The two meter seventy tiki stood firmly on the temple site. It's austere mouth demanded respect and fear. I could hear the drums of the ancient as a universal heartbeat, creating a trance like rhythm. Doomed was the one who was led to the platform.

The graveyard offered a wide view over Atuona and its crater like bay. I could see sailing yachts arriving across the South Pacific. A boat whistle echoed on the cliffs. The famous white freighter "Aranui" came in, as each month from Tahiti to supply the islands.

The cemetery is a place of pilgrimage for fans of both Paul Gauguin and Jacques Brel, the famous Belgium singer who fell in love with "Les Marquises". Shell necklaces, poems and other gifts from fans were posed on their graves.

When I laid down the bouquet of fresh gardenias I had picked on the cool mountains it was in memory of all who had lived this beauty on Hiva Oa. For them who shared the passion and appreciated her savage nature. May the last paradise be preserved.