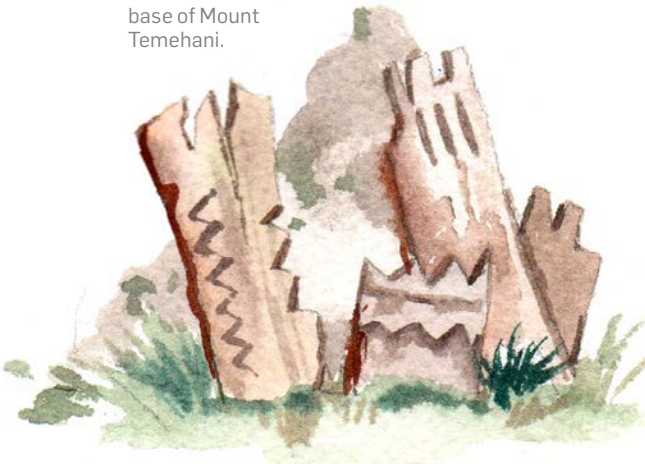


# National Treasure

Dense with jungle and surrounded by a single enclosed coral reef, the French Polynesian island of Raiatea is also home to one of the world's rarest blooms. Fighting blood, sweat and masculine pride, **Adam H. Graham** embarks on a grueling trek for a glimpse of the fabled flower.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RIETY

The ancient site of Taputapuātea *marae* lies at the base of Mount Temehani.



**I WAS ON ALL FOURS**, hoisting myself like a Neanderthal up a steep ridge of ankle-slashing brush on Raiatea's sacred, kilometer-high Mount Temehani. The woods were thick with Caribbean pine, candlewood trees and wet ferns. The humidity made it feel like 1,000 degrees. I'd only been hiking for 10 minutes, but I was already drenched in sweat and exhausted. My guide from **Polynesian Escapes** ([polynesianescape.com](http://polynesianescape.com); *Mount Temehani hike US\$700 for up to six people*), Tahi—who had told me the night before to wear pants and a long-sleeve shirt—walked ahead of me in shorts and knee-high socks, his arms inked in elaborate Polynesian tattoos. Within moments of what I had thought would be an easy and peaceful four-hour trek along sun-kissed trails fragrant with exotic tropical fruit, and manna-rich lagoons, I knew I was out of my league.

When you've hiked as much as I have in Switzerland—my adopted homeland—it's easy to assume that all other mountains are inferior and couldn't possibly be as challenging, especially in this edenic land of hibiscus and waterfalls not known for its Class 4 treks. But, to be blunt, Mount Temehani kicked my ass. I had chosen the hike because the sacred mountain on the small island—a 45-minute flight from Tahiti's capital Papeete—is the only place in the world to see the endemic *tiare apetahi*, one of earth's rarest flowers. The fragrant, white, five-petal blossoms make a cracking noise when opening every morning. According to Polynesian legend, the sound represents the breaking heart of young

Tiatau, a young girl in love with King Tamatoa. When Tamatoa died at sea, she plunged to her death from Temehani's summit, where the flowers still grow.

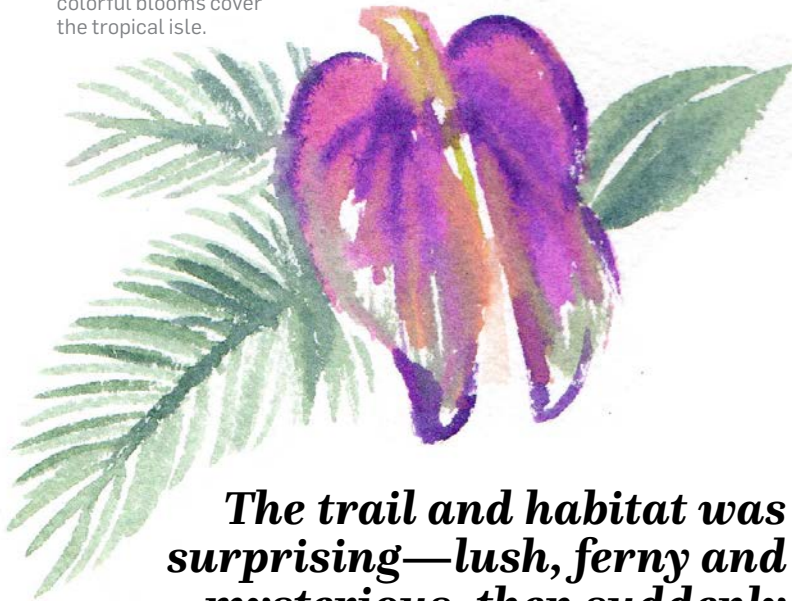
**MY HIKE-DAY STARTED OFF GREAT.** Tahi picked me up at my hotel, **Villa Ixora** ([fb.com/villaixora](http://fb.com/villaixora); *doubles from US\$110*), a smattering of bungalows strewn with hibiscus overlooking the lagoon near Uturoa on the northeast shore. I woke at dawn to watch the tips of Mount Temehani ignite in electric jade as the sun rose, and saw rainbow parrot fish, blue damselfish and a milky white octopus glide through the clear water. At 7 a.m. we drove to the mountain's base, bypassing the island's rush-hour mix of Polynesian soccer moms with flowers behind their ears and French kids skateboarding to school. Raiatea is home to a thriving vanilla-bean trade and Tahiti's only UNESCO site, the 1,000-year-old Taputapuātea *marae* complex, a sacred temple added to the list in 2017. But it's the least touristy of French Polynesia's main islands and, unlike in honeymooner-heavy Bora and Tahiti with its freshly lei'd tourists, morning rush here felt especially authentic and anchored to a modern and inclusive Polynesian way of life. As we blurred past it in Tahi's truck, I regretted not allowing for more time in town.

We pulled into the driveway of **Fare Ora Guesthouse** ([fareora.weebly.com](http://fareora.weebly.com); *doubles from US\$45*). On the lanai were Tahi's friends and our co-hikers Heirama and Vetea, wearing

The legendary *tiare apetahi*, known for its five petals and heady, sweet scent.



While the *tiare apetahi* is symbolic of Raiatea, colorful blooms cover the tropical isle.



## ***The trail and habitat was surprising—lush, ferny and mysterious, then suddenly arid and punishing***

board shorts and tank tops at a table littered with ashtrays and empty Hinano beer cans. They offered me coffee, papaya and *pain au chocolate* still warm in its baking tin. My Swiss hiking mornings are generally rushed and involve catching trains and gondolas and sticking to a strict schedule, but Fare Ora was extremely laid back, best described by the French Polynesian phrase *Aita pe'ape'a*, which means “no worries.” We all had flights to catch that evening, but nobody was overly concerned about our timing. Even my antsy, inner-Swiss angst was at ease.

We drove up a steep, winding dirt road, passing through jungle planted with mango, coconut and Tahitian lime. We stopped at a giant banana tree and Tahi handed me a machete. “Go for it,” he said. “It’s not as easy as it looks.”

I heard snickers from the truck as I braced myself under the three-meter-high banana tree. In one swift and satisfying whoosh, a sticky bunch of bananas fell hard onto my shoulder, their musty smell enveloping me. “One dollar each,” I joked, sending my guy tribe into laughter and quickly earning some respect. Ideas and rules about hiking might vary country to country, but hiking with other

guys is universal—there are always hidden challenges to test your mettle.

**WE STARTED THE HIKE** at a red-dirt pit at the base of a cliff. Instead of zigzagging up a switchback trail, the beginning was a vertical scramble so intense that I was breathless within minutes. There was no trail. Tahi, who had hiked this mountain more than 50 times, led us through jungle so dense there were no birds or flowers to see, and so quickly there was no time to see them even had there been any. His speed was unrealistic, even for advanced hikers. He tried all the tricks to quicken the pace, like lowering his voice while walking ahead, and claiming it got easier on the next leg. But we all struggled to keep up. Then, it was so steep at the top, he had to throw down rope to help me ascend the mud-slicked rock ledge.

We reached the viewpoint and paused for a rewarding and breath-catching glimpse of the surrounding Taha’a, Huahine, Bora Bora and Maupiti Islands hovering over azure lagoons on the horizon like giant green humpbacks migrating out to sea. Atop, the trail was as wide as a logging road and true to Tahi’s words, looked easy. But the thigh-high, serrated razor grass belied the paradisiacal views, and sliced into what little ankle flesh I had exposed. Still, it was one of the most beautiful and lushest legs of the hike and we walked down the mountain past ferns embossed with Braille-like marks, red oaks, elaborate lavender flowers, and stringy orange moss bundled like saffron threads on the roadside. “Most of these plants were introduced in the 1950s. The whole mountain used to be covered in *tiare apetahi*,” Tahi said. “But there’s less every year and nobody knows why.”

Over the years, I’ve developed an instinct for landscapes. But my instincts were off on Temehani, and it was especially hard to tell what was around each bend. The trail design was baffling, and the habitat was surprising—lush, ferny and mysterious, then suddenly arid and punishing. There was no visible summit and little view of the trail ahead or behind you. Though the hiking was rugged, the heat and humidity were my biggest problems. After depleting my own water source within an hour, Heirama and Vetea, who seemed relieved that I was struggling, offered me some of theirs. “Are we close to those damn flowers >>

yet?” I growled half-jokingly, making sure to keep my machismo game strong. Even Tahi, 30 meters ahead of us, laughed.

**THE SUN BEAT DOWN** and the trail narrowed. For the next few hours, we scaled the bald Temehani Plateau, marked with red-berry shrubs; smooth, rust-colored volcanic stones; and acidic soil. We eventually reached a hollowed-out lava-tube stream where we refilled our water bottles. It was here Tahi delivered the bad news: “We won’t make it to the flowers if we want to catch our flights tonight.” It was only another 30 minutes on the trail, but we were already cutting it close and hadn’t even stopped for lunch yet.

I was awash in relief, but too disappointed to make jokes. Another universal hiking rule: accept your own limitations. But as I sat down to eat the sandwich I’d been toting, change out of my drenched T-shirt into a dry one, and cool down in the breeze, the depressing realization of not seeing the *tiare apetahi* crept in. “Hiking to the flowers requires a good six to seven hours,” said Tahi, who looked as dejected as

I was. “But you shouldn’t do this hike just to see the flowers. It’s more about the journey to this sacred mountain,” he said, offering some comforting words to help wash down my pride with my lunch.

Going down is often easy, but here it was a delight. The trail widened, became shaded in pine hollows, and offered cool ocean breezes. At the bottom was a concrete pool filled with mountain runoff water and floating hibiscus flowers, as if it had been prepared for us. Vetea cut four fresh coconuts from a nearby palm and sliced them open with his machete. The guys threw off their shirts and jumped into the pool. I removed my second T-shirt of the day, already soaked, and eased myself into the cool, clear water, sipping my coconut and replenishing what felt like a summer’s worth of electrolytes. And there, at the lapping shore amid the frangipani and heliconia, my mind drifted back to young Tiaitau, who was so despondent, she plunged to her death. Things could be worse, I thought, as I let my Swiss-self enjoy the timelessness of the moment and slowly felt my sense of paradise being restored. ☺

**GETTING THERE**

There are no direct international flights to Raiatea. **Air Tahiti Nui** ([airtahitinui.com](http://airtahitinui.com)), French Polynesia’s international carrier, flies nonstop to Papeete from Tokyo, Auckland, Paris and L.A. The airline’s domestic carrier, **Air Tahiti** ([airtahiti.com](http://airtahiti.com)), flies nonstop from Papeete and other French Polynesian islands to Raiatea multiple times daily.



The surrounding island views make the journey worth the trek.