

Nuclear Fallout

By Bertil Lintner in Papeete

So much for "Visit the South Pacific Year." French Polynesia had hoped for record tourist arrivals this year, and until August it seemed to be on target: First-half arrivals were up a year-on-year 17%, and July's total (19,151) was a monthly record. Some officials envisioned exceeding the full-year goal, 200,000.

Then came word that France would resume nuclear tests in the South Pacific 1,200 kilometres from Tahiti, the territory's largest island. Tahitians began to stage protests against the tests. In Papeete, the territory's capital, protests flared into riots on September 6, the day after the first of six to eight tests planned by May.

The violence, it seems, has been far worse for the territory's image than the testing itself: 4,000 to 5,000 cancelled visits; up to 26,000 lost hotel nights. Arrivals for September were down 10-20% from a year earlier, say tourism officials. The decline may be far worse: Many of the foreigners now present are journalists covering the unrest.

The drop-off has a huge impact on Tahiti's economy. Tourism accounts for

25% of the territory's \$3.74 billion GDP. Moreover, it is key to the government's plans to wean the economy away from French aid and activities linked to nuclear testing.

What now? Tourism officials plan to wait until the testing stops, then mount a worldwide campaign to restore the territory's image. The territory's president, Gaston Flosse, has asked Paris to help fund the campaign. Meanwhile, says Flosse adviser Alec Ata, "we are in the process of identifying the markets where we have suffered the worst losses."

The biggest no-shows are apparently the Japanese, source of 12% of the territory's tourist dollars (America accounts for 28% of tourist spending, France itself 24%, and the rest of Europe 19%). The Japanese are especially security-conscious and anti-nuclear. Air France cancelled several flights from Tokyo to Papeete in September and October.

Anti-nuclear activists, many of them members of a Polynesian independence movement, vow more protests if the tests continue. Officials hope they will remain peaceful. If not, French Polynesia's glittering tourist industry could be a long time recovering. ■

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