

A JAMES SAMUELA TATTOO on MOOREA

Illustration by Antti Kalevi



Between the 15th and 18th centuries, when Europeans set out to far-off lands like French Polynesia in search of new trade routes, they encountered natives whose bodies were decorated with intricately designed symbols. While the practice of inscribing one's body with ink likely didn't originate in the South Pacific (the first records of the art point to the Egyptians), Polynesians were responsible for introducing tattoos to the sailors, who eventually took the custom back home to the West. Today on Moorea, one of the Society Islands, the practice of traditional tattooing remains strong, and James Samuela is its leading artist. At his

studio, Moorea Tattoo (mooreatattoo.com), he uses a tool made of wild-boar tusk, which he taps into the skin with the help of a "stretcher"—an assistant who holds the skin flat. "When I carve the tools, everything I do is by hand, as my ancestors once did. It's a way to remain close to them," Samuela says. The design and location of each tattoo have specific meanings, and differ widely among Polynesian communities. "For example, the symbol of the shark is the triangle, but even within Tahiti, it can vary between archipelagoes." All of Samuela's designs are one of a kind, and his customers book appointments months in advance. The only thing he won't tattoo? "Anything stupid." —ADELINE DUFF