



Overwater bungalows

The Essence of French Polynesia

Natural Beauty and Cultural Pride Abound in the Heart of the South Pacific

By Michelle Lyn and Brett Martin

When we first told people we were spending the holidays in French Polynesia, we were met with some blank stares. It sounds exotic, but few people knew exactly where it was and what images they should conjure up.

More commonly referred to as Tahiti, French Polynesia is the country comprised of five main island groups or archipelagos. An easy eight-hour flight from Los Angeles, it is just south of Hawaii in the South Pacific.

Made famous in the '60s by the classic film "Mutiny on the Bounty," Tahiti and "Her Islands" are the stuff dreams are made of. White sandy beaches, crystal clear water in every shade of turquoise imaginable and a relaxed pace of life that would make anyone think twice before stressing about the little things.

It has been said that "boredom is the feeling that everything is a waste of time; serenity, that nothing is." After visiting Tahiti and her islands, we wonder if the word boredom even exists in the Tahitian lexicon.

That being said, time doesn't even seem to exist, so it isn't likely that you'll be able to waste it when you're there. Serenity, however, is definitely in abundance. It is simply the Tahitian way of life and whether you go to relax or to seek adventure, serenity is one thing you will be immersed in.

Our journey began in L.A. on a nonstop flight via Air Tahiti Nui, the 15-year-old airline that recently announced plans for new cabin upgrades in Spring 2013.

Tahiti

Arriving in Papeete, (Tahiti's capital) close to midnight is much more lively than you would imagine. It appears to be the busiest time of day for the airport. Throngs of tour operators flank the arrival doors as you search the sea of name placards, only to be greeted with a

fragrant frangipani lei and a warm Tahitian smile welcoming you to French Polynesia. Heat and humidity combine with the hour to offer assurance that you are far from the drizzly winter weather at home.

Whether you're just stopping by on your way to another island, or beginning your vacation on Tahiti, the InterContinental Hotel is the perfect place to recharge your travel-weary bodies. Minutes from the airport, the InterContinental is lush, tropical and has the perfect combination of Polynesian authenticity and modernity.

Upon checking in, you're immediately welcomed with a refreshingly chilled glass of mango pineapple juice, complete with fresh pineapple and frangipani flowers. Exotic fruit and flowers are also thoughtfully placed throughout your room, creating an intoxicatingly tropical scent.

Overlooking an idyllic lagoon, the hotel directly faces the nearby island of Moorea, offering postcard perfect views to feast your eyes on while sipping rum and coconut cocktails poolside.

Arrange any transportation needs ahead of time through South Pacific Transport. Their team is professional, efficient and incredibly warm and genuine. Downtown, Papeete's Le Marche market is a must-see for anyone visiting Tahiti. The colorful market features a wide range of local fish and produce, as well as a rich selection of handicrafts that make perfect gifts and souvenirs.

You'll find an abundance of Tahitian vanilla beans and paste (the best in the world), as well as monoi and tiare oil (coconut oil infused with the fragrance of local flowers). The oils boast moisturizing properties good for skin, hair and nails ... not to mention the beautiful fragrance that will instantly transport you right back to the islands.

The neighborhood surrounding the market is heavy on black pearl shops. Stunning byproducts from the sea, the iridescent gems range in hues from silver to green and come in various shapes and sizes-

These precious jewels can be pricey, although slightly “irregular” pearls can be found at any budget.

Moorea

The Aremiti ferry runs several daily trips to Moorea in 30 minutes. Known as the “Magical Island,” Moorea is reminiscent of Hawaii, with its lush green landscape and laid back vibe. Hit hard by tourism in recent years, Moorea warrants a two- or three-day visit to indulge in some thrill seeking adventures, although even a day trip from Tahiti is worthwhile.

The Sofitel Moorea Ia Ora Beach Resort is situated on Temae beach (the nicest on the island), minutes from the ferry landing. If you want to be pampered, check in there and spend your days relaxing by the infinity pool or snorkeling in the lagoon on their beach.

Or, do what we did and rent a private villa from Tahiti in Style. For a more personal experience, you can choose from a handful of their stunning properties and make yourself at home during your stay on the island.

Billed as a vacation rental agency that offers concierge services, Tahiti in Style can purchase and delivery groceries upon your arrival, make reservations for your activities and excursions, as well as offer in-home spa treatments.

Moorea itself is a small island that is easily explored. We rented a car and took a day to circumnavigate the island. It can be done in a couple hours, but you’ll likely want to take your time and make several stops along the way to take it all in.

Grab your camera and head towards the Belvedere lookout. Moorea’s most spectacular sites (such as Opunohu Bay and Cook’s Bay) are seen from this easily reached overlook. Located in the center of the island, this is a popular stop on any “circle-island” or 4x4 tour.

If you don’t have the kids with you, rent your own 4x4 buggies and explore the mountains, plantations (pineapple, coffee or sugarcane) and waterfalls. Albert Transport operates some of the most popular land and/or sea excursions on the island.

An abundance of marine life in clear shallow waters await you beneath the sea. The lack of strong currents combined with the many coral reefs within the turquoise waters of the lagoon surrounding Moorea provide enjoyable and accessible snorkel-

ing year-round.

The waves in Tahiti, although beautiful, are not always as friendly as the people. With world-class waves like Teahupoo on Tahiti and Haapiti on Moorea, experience is needed to surf most of the waves. You’ll also likely need a boat ride to avoid the long paddle across the lagoon, to arrive at the waves that break along the barrier reef.

Unless you specifically go to surf, you might want to reconsider taking your own boards. Depending on your itinerary, it may be best to rent a board while traveling as you may not be able to stow your board on the smaller inter-island flights.

On our trip, we were fortunate to befriend a young local named Jean Luc (also our driver from South Pacific Transport) who was kind enough to proffer up one of his own surfboards to use while we visited Moorea for a couple days.

A 10-minute conversation (in broken French and English) revealed a shared passion for riding waves and landed us at his house to pick up a board on the way to catch our ferry ... all before he even knew our names. We were surprised to find such unbelievable hospitality and generosity to be the norm on our trip.

When a local woman recommended a casual restaurant for lunch, the name “Snack Mahana” led us on the hunt for a little stand selling sandwiches. What we didn’t expect to find was a home converted into a restaurant, run by all the women in the family. Walking up to what looked like a counter out of the kitchen window, we were quickly waved on to the backyard to find a seat at one of their picnic tables.

Their backyard can’t possibly compare to any you’ve ever seen before. The small grassy plot extended straight into the cerulean lagoon. For miles, in every direction, you look out onto the sea and before you know it, you’ve lost yourself in a pleasant three-hour lunch experience, complete with the family’s dog and children hanging out at your table.

There is no rush at Snack Mahana. What there is, however, is freshly caught lagoon fish that is generously served in traditional preparations with coconut milk, and Tahitian poisson cru (raw seafood salad) heaped on your plate. With modest prices, the value of the meal and the experience is beyond compare.



Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort facing Mt. Otemanu

Bora Bora

Flying into Bora Bora on Air Tahiti is an enjoyable experience that lasts just under an hour (from Papeete). Make sure you settle in with a prime seat on the left side of the medium sized plane, as you stretch out and sip fresh pineapple juice.

The main island of Bora Bora is surrounded by several motus (small islands) that host many of the five-star resorts. If you'd like to go onto the main island to shop or dine, shuttle boats run back and forth, free of charge.

Situated on its own private island (Motu Tevairoa), the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa is a mere 10 minutes from the airport and directly faces the main island and the looming Mount Otemanu.

One of the nicer resorts in Bora Bora, the Pearl Beach Resort & Spa has done an excellent job of staying true to its Polynesian roots with traditional decor, architecture, materials and a near complete staff of locals.

"Ia Orana," the Tahitian way to greet one another is heard everywhere you go and the well-appointed rooms are enveloped by considerably placed aromatic tiare flowers.

According to the general manager, the owners of the property were the first to build a resort on any of the motus in Bora Bora, so they had first choice. Motu Tevairoa was selected as it had the best beach of all the islands. The smooth stretch of white sand feels like powder and extends onto the floor of the translucent lagoon.

Snorkeling gear, kayaks, canoes, pedal boats and stand up paddle boards line the beach for your complimentary use, while a coral nursery beckons your inspection.

To further explore under the surface, (whether you are PADI certified or not), TopDive is the local expert dive operator on several of the islands. The crew at TopDive Bora Bora does a fabulous job coordinating and guiding dives for dive aficionados and first time divers alike. During our experience, we were greeted by curious black tip reef

sharks, 15-foot long lemon sharks, moray eels and teams of fish.

While staying at the resort, we experienced the garden bungalow with a private pool, enclosed garden and outdoor shower, as well as the overwater bungalow. While the garden suite was quite comfortable, spacious and private, the overwater bungalow is an experience you simply must enjoy once in your life ... if possible.

The paradisaical "huts" are the definition of romance and exclusivity all in one. Shuttered windows crank open to reveal the crystalline lagoon beneath you, as does the glass enclosed "coffee table." In the best of the bungalows, the beds and private balconies have an unobstructed view of Mount Otemanu.

Each balcony has its own stepladder that eases you into the lukewarm, waist deep lagoon that gently laps against the stilts supporting it. For a special treat, order room service for breakfast and have it delivered via floral laden canoe.

While the dining options at the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort are quite lovely, it is well worth the 15-minute shuttle to the main island to explore beyond.

Bloody Mary's is an institution on Bora Bora, as evidenced by their wall of "fame" of celebrities who have visited since its inception in 1979. The restaurant itself is a more polished version of a big Fare Tiurai (the carnival type hut built for the Heiva Dance Festival each July). The thatched roof, open sides, white sand floor, wooden slab tables and stools made of coconut stumps represent old Tahiti.

A unique experience, you are led to a large iced display of fresh fish and meats upon entering. The fresh catch of the day is described to each guest, as they point to their selection before moving on to their tables.

Amiable owner Dexter Hewitt takes great pride in the fact that he employs a large contingency of locals and openly boasts that he doesn't take any profit from the restaurant — he puts it all back into the local community.

For another authentic experience, book a lagoon excursion with Maohi Nui. It is a locally owned and operated company with some of the most personable and knowledgeable guides on the island. They pick you up in a traditional outrigger canoe and provide a memorable day exploring their "home."

Our guide, Rapa, greeted us with a warm smile while strumming on his ukelele. Offering group or private tours, their approach is gentle and respectful, keeping in mind the preservation of nature.

Rapa first took us out to the edge of the lagoon where we could feed the fish and sharks. He then told us to throw on our snorkel gear so we could see the sharks up close and personal—no cage in sight. Daunting at first, the sharks proved to be docile enough and kept their interest on the chum that was tossed their way.

A stop in a shallow area of the lagoon found us standing in the water, surrounded by giant sting rays gently tickling us with their undulating bodies. Part slippery, part scratchy, they were good-natured, albeit a bit brazen.

To finish the day long tour, we pulled up to a secluded island where Rapa prepared a Polynesian feast on a private beach. He himself had caught some fresh lobster, tuna, and lagoon fish that he grilled over palm fronds. He also brought taro, pineapple and bananas that he had grown on his property.

After pulling a picnic table into the water for our incredible meal, we really got to know this humble man with seven children, who had lived all over the world and didn't think twice about inviting us to his home for dinner the next night.

One of the most beautiful places we've ever been, French Polynesia captivated us with its natural beauty, disarmed us with the warmth and generosity of its people, and left us with a new appreciation for Mother Earth, which one wise Tahitian woman reminded us, is simply on loan from our children.



Garden suite bungalow-daytime Pearl Beach



Snack Mahana



Sting Ray visit with Maohi Nui