

ESCAPE ROUTE
Ultra-lux Polynesian resorts

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ShowBoats

International

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Jimmy Spithill's diary
as we count down to
the America's Cup

ELEMENTS OF STYLE

A displacement yacht with
Mangusta's signature
good looks

The ultimate
holiday gift
guide,
pg 37

THE ART AND SOUL OF MIAMI

Art Basel buying tips and survival guide

SALON ENVY

Furniture designer to the rich and famous, Frank Pollaro



ESCAPE ROUTE

With 118 islands in five archipelagos, French Polynesia has plenty of places to get away from it all. But which will best deliver you to paradise? Kara Murphy finds out.

EXCLUSIVELY YOURS

“Melted chocolate, butter, eggs and cream,” Chef Fabrice Detoc replies when I ask about the ingredients of my lunchtime dessert, a goblet of rich chocolate mousse decorated with chocolate shavings and fresh grated coconut. I’m not hungry – I’ve already devoured Detoc’s tuna carpaccio, homemade French fries and salad – but the mousse is so delicious, I decide it’s worth the five-plus miles I’ll need to run to work it off...when I return home.

There was one other unique item on my lunch plate: a *poisson cru*, made with raw parrotfish marinated in lime juice and mixed with diced vegetables and coconut milk. I had encountered the parrotfish while snorkeling the day before, making him my first-ever fish acquaintance to wind up on my plate. While spearfishing isn’t permitted within one kilometer of **Motu Teta** (also known as Motu Tetaraire), a private nine-acre island in the southeastern section of Rangiroa atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago, it is allowed outside of this zone, and guests can personally help secure their next meal.

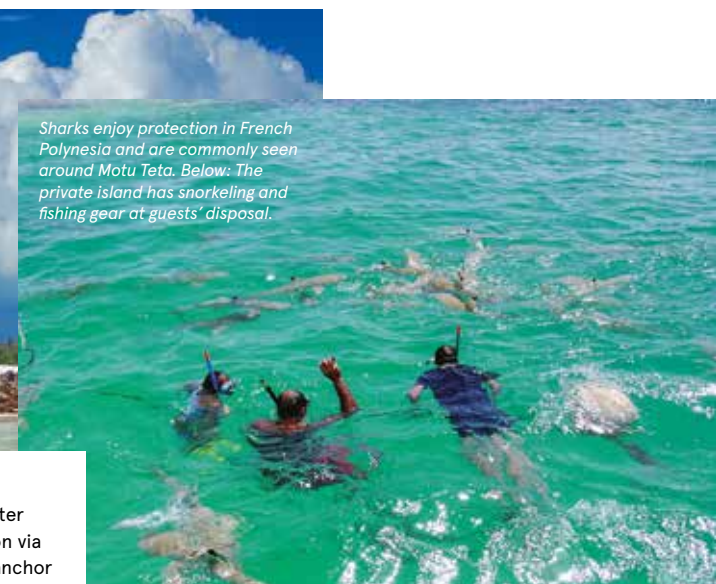
The most endearing feature of this remote, coconut palm-studded retreat, though, is its exclusivity. Book Motu Teta



FIND IT
Motu Teta is in the southeastern part of Rangiroa atoll. From Tahiti’s Faa’a International Airport, take a domestic flight (airtahiti.com) to Rangiroa Airport; a private boat will take you on the 60- to 90-minute trip to the island. www.yourdreamisland.com



A coral head near Motu Teta in Rangiroa



Sharks enjoy protection in French Polynesia and are commonly seen around Motu Teta. Below: The private island has snorkeling and fishing gear at guests’ disposal.

BY BOAT
Yachts can enter Rangiroa’s lagoon via Tiputa Pass and anchor off Motu Teta. The island’s jetty is accessible via tender. Papeete, Tahiti, is 189 nautical miles to the southwest.



and you and up to nine friends and family members have the entire island and its four staff members to yourselves, with four motorboats and myriad toys (kayaks, paddleboards, fishing and snorkeling gear, wakeboards, waterskis and more) at your disposal. Excursion guide Heiarii Estall will take you to nearby attractions whenever you wish – the pink-sand beach at Vahituri (“the elbow”) in the atoll’s far southeastern corner, the magnificently clear “Aquarium” snorkeling site or Ote Pipi island, home to the atoll’s longest beach. If you’re visiting for a week or more, you may decide to spend an hour-and-a-half traveling northwest to Tiputa, the nearest village, where you can drift snorkel with dolphins in nearby Tiputa Pass, one of two entrances to Rangiroa’s 618-square-mile lagoon.

Rangiroa, one of the world’s largest atolls, is shaped like a whale, Estall points out on a map as we relax with wine before dinner in the breezy main villa the night of my arrival. Estall, who has worked on Motu Teta for 10 years, shakes his head when I ask if he sees whales around here. The lagoon used to be a humpback calving area, he explains, but Tiputa Pass is so popular with scuba divers now, the behemoths seldom come. The most recent whale sighting

was five years ago, but, he adds, we will see plenty of reef sharks. Sharks are protected throughout French Polynesia, and guests spot them just about every time they enter the water whether at the Aquarium, along the reef fronting the island or around the jetty.

After nearly licking clean the chocolate mousse, I spend the day snorkeling the house reef with sharks and eagle rays, indulging in a

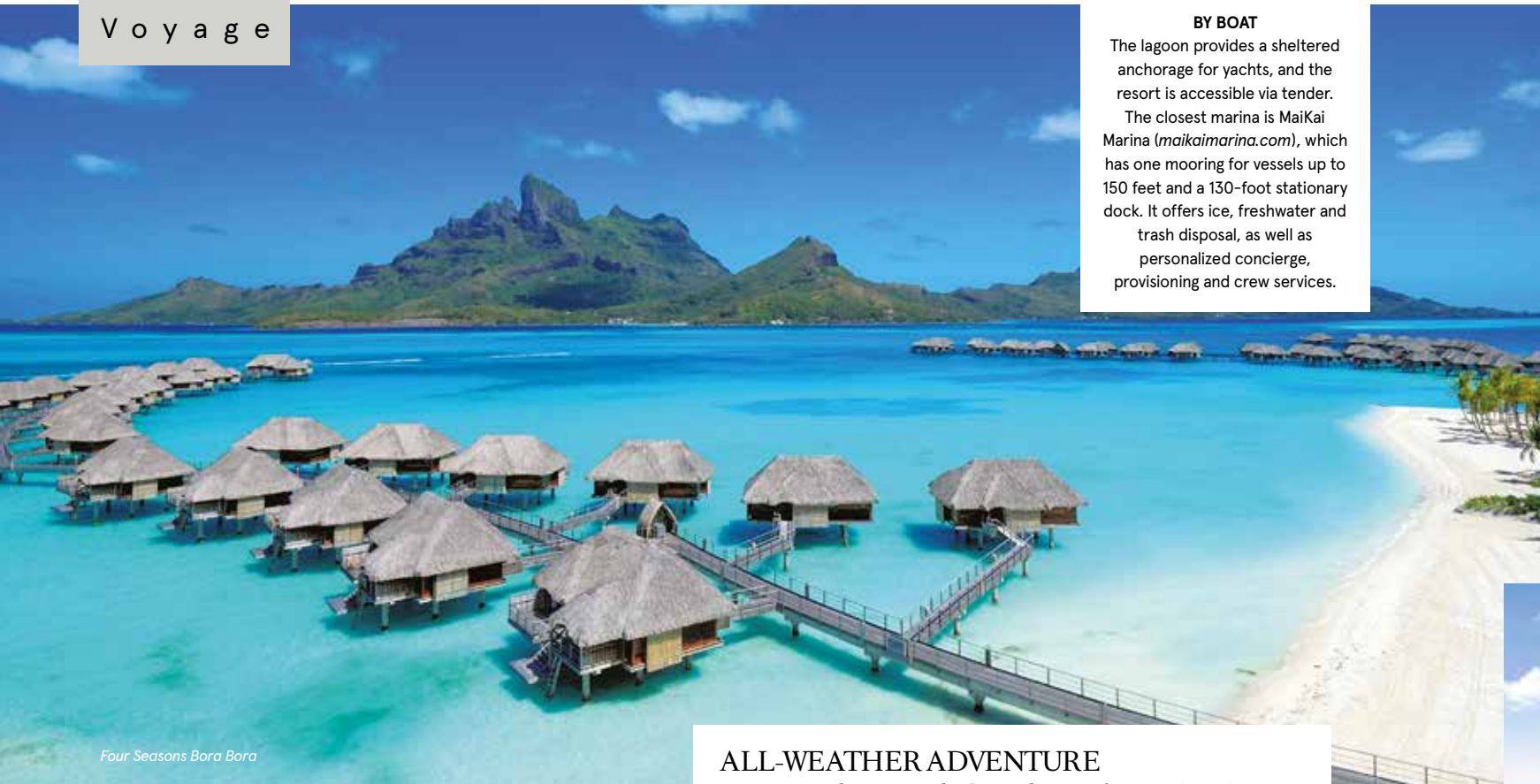
two-hour nap in my Balinese-crafted, sunset-view bungalow before wandering back to the main villa for fruity rum cocktails. Finally, I learn how to make shell necklaces, a traditional farewell gift. Dinner again features the parrotfish – this time pan-fried to perfection and served with a decadent vanilla-butter sauce, and I can’t stop myself from devouring it. I murmur a quiet thanks to the beautiful fish. You were delicious.

INSIDER TIP

The main villa has three bedrooms (two kings and one queen), two bathrooms, a kitchen and a living room, while the bungalow has one king, one bathroom and a day bed. The main villa receives the benefit of the north-to-south trade winds and is definitely the cooler option; however, as all meals are prepared and served here, it’s not particularly private. For privacy and comfort, choose the bungalow and ask for the generator (which powers the fans) to remain on all night. Neither villa has air conditioning.



PHOTOGRAPHS: MOTU TETA (TOP, CENTER); KARA MURPHY (BOTTOM LEFT, BOTTOM RIGHT); OPPOSITE: MOTU TETA (4)



Four Seasons Bora Bora

BY BOAT
 The lagoon provides a sheltered anchorage for yachts, and the resort is accessible via tender. The closest marina is MaiKai Marina (maikaimarina.com), which has one mooring for vessels up to 150 feet and a 130-foot stationary dock. It offers ice, freshwater and trash disposal, as well as personalized concierge, provisioning and crew services.

INSIDER TIP
 Couples will likely prefer an overwater bungalow suite — ask for one with views of Mount Otemanu. Although all overwater suites include a sofa bed in the living area, families may be more comfortable in a two-bedroom overwater bungalow suite, which has a private plunge pool, or one of the seven all-inclusive beachfront villa estates. The three-bedroom, 5,382-square-foot Otemanu villa, for example, has its own private pool, beach and cabana and views of Mount Otemanu.

ALL-WEATHER ADVENTURE
 My massage therapist at the Spa at the **Four Seasons Bora Bora** uses her hands, forearms and elbows in dance-like *taurumi* Polynesian style to work and relax my muscles, as I breathe in the *monoi* oil she's rubbing on my skin, a combination of French Polynesia's signature flower — the Tiare — and coconut. On a table nearby, my husband, smelling of *kahaia*, the little white flower surrounding the spa that blooms at sunset and disappears at sunrise, emits an abbreviated snore, and I suppress a laugh before returning to daydreams of our adventures so far here today in French Polynesia's most revered island destination.

The morning began with coffee on the sun deck of our 1,080-square-foot overwater bungalow suite, with 2,385-foot Mount Otemanu, the castle-like remnant of an ancient volcano, spying on us from behind clouds that contrasted starkly with the ice-blue lagoon. A short spell in the oceanview fitness center followed by *poisson cru* and coconut juice from open-air Tere Nui's breakfast buffet and we were ready for our shark- and ray-feeding snorkeling adventure — an excursion that, thanks to unseasonal storms, proved more exciting than anticipated. Soon after our guide picked us up in a motorized outrigger canoe, the livid sky began sobbing, covering Mount Otemanu and the surrounding motus in a weighty veil and hurling electric bolts toward the island and lagoon with painful cracks and growls. This particular tour, considered a Bora Bora must-do, isn't affiliated with the resort and runs regardless of the sky's mood. Assessing the situation, our guide began plucking his ukulele — a spirited version of "You Are My Sunshine." He didn't manage to sing the clouds (or lightning) away for the first two snorkeling stops, but he did earn a few smiles. Thankfully, the storm disappeared temporarily when we reached the final snorkeling area, where a dozen shy and harmless blacktip reef sharks encircled us for

The Lagoon Service's motorized outrigger canoe is used for shark- and ray-feeding tours, where the guide entertains participants on his ukulele (below right).



FIND IT
 Four Seasons Bora Bora is on private Motu Tehotu, an outer motu on the eastern side of the Bora Bora atoll, 150 miles northwest of Papeete and three-and-a-half miles southeast of Bora Bora Motu Mute Airport. Access is via one of the resort's custom Andreyale yachts, a 15-minute ride from the airport. www.fourseasons.com/borabora



PHOTOGRAPHS: MOEVA DE ROSEMONI/FOUR SEASONS (TOP), KARA MURPHY (SECOND AND THIRD FROM TOP), BARBARA KRATZ/FOUR SEASONS (BOTTOM)

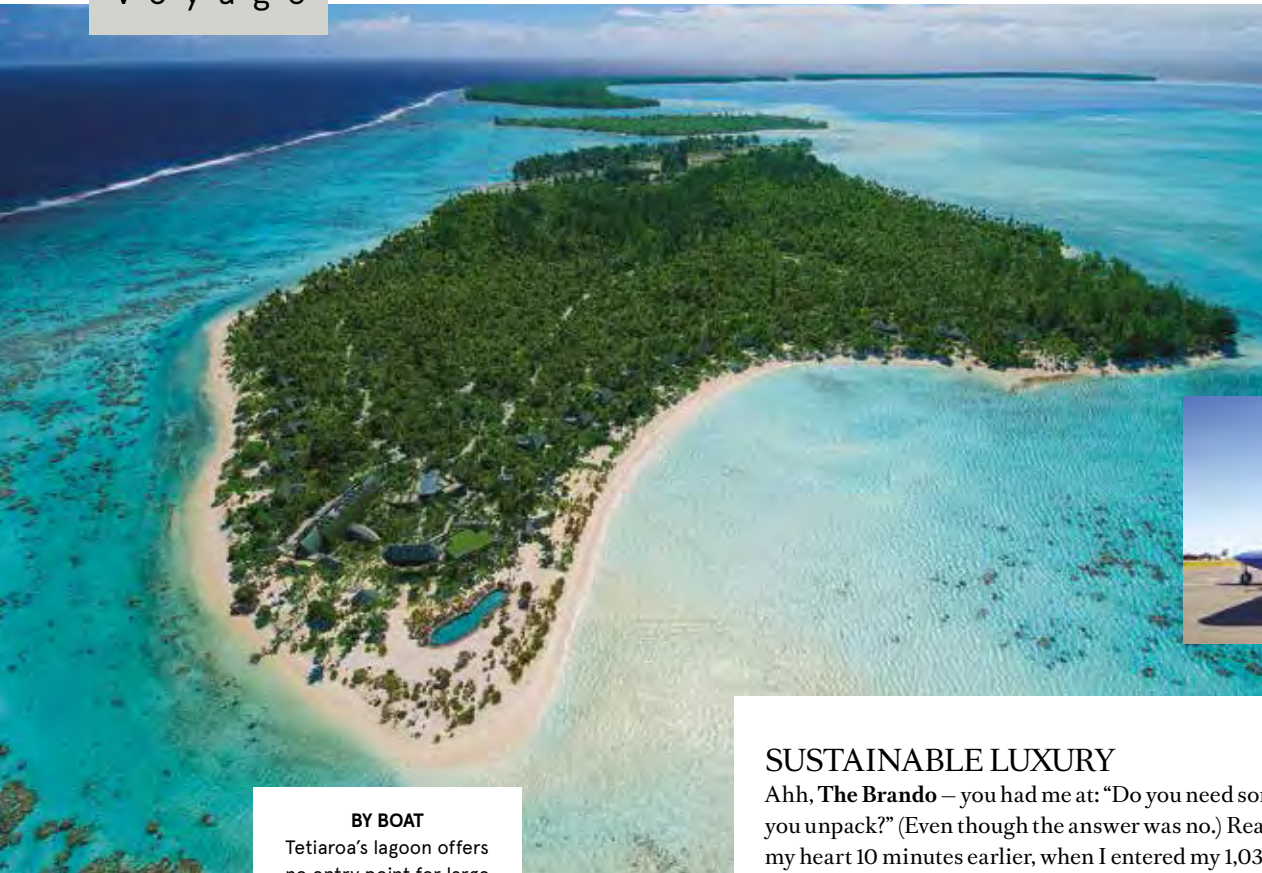
PHOTOGRAPHS: BARBARA KRATZ/FOUR SEASONS (TOP LEFT, BOTTOM RIGHT), KARA MURPHY (BOTTOM LEFT), ISTOCK/SCISITIALELO (TOP RIGHT), JOHN RUSSO/FOUR SEASONS (CENTER RIGHT)

Above: Snorkelers will encounter gentle blacktip reef sharks circling tour boats, waiting for a snack.

more than 30 minutes, awaiting a snack. Following a Polynesian lunch (grilled fish and meats, *poisson cru*, coconut bread and a delicious banana pudding) on an uninhabited motu, we returned to the Four Seasons. The fiery weather still wasn't conducive to doing laps in the 40-meter swimming pool or strolling the paths snaking around the 54-acre resort and out to the 100 overwater bungalow suites, which reach over the lagoon toward the main island like several octopus arms. Renting an outrigger canoe or snorkeling in the resort's Ruahatu ("God of the Ocean") Lagoon Sanctuary (a safe inner lagoon where marine biologist Oliver Martin has grafted coral onto 30 artificial structures) were off the table as well. What stormy weather is conducive to, though, is enjoying our accommodation's many luxuries. Following a steamy bath in the oversized tub, I opted for the cooler-weather, long-sleeved bathrobe instead of the Japanese-style yukata garment. Though the rain begged us to open a red wine, curiosity led us toward a bottle of Blanc de Corail, from Rangiroa's Vin de Tahiti, the only atoll vineyard in the world. And then we relaxed, playing music, awaiting fish sightings through the two slim floor windows, watching video-on-demand and devouring far too much of the special occasion cake that was here when we returned. There were also important dinner decisions to be made: sushi at the Sunset Restaurant & Bar or a more upscale experience at Arii Moana, which features a marriage of French and Polynesian cuisine? And then a buggy collected us and transported us to the spa. With sharks, storms and wine swirling in my head, I wonder what adventures the rest of the evening will bring.



The overwater suites at the Four Seasons Bora Bora offer a view of Mount Otemanu.



FIND IT
Tetiaroa atoll is 30 miles north of Tahiti. Access is via a 20-minute flight with Air Tetiaroa, which operates two eight-passenger Britten Norman aircraft and departs from a private terminal at Faa'a International Airport. www.thebrando.com



PHOTOGRAPHS: BRANDO IMAGE LIBRARY/MR. MIYOSHI (CENTER LEFT), KARA MURPHY (BOTTOM LEFT)
PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID LITTSCHWAGER/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC (CENTER RIGHT), BRANDO IMAGE LIBRARY/MR. MIYOSHI (BOTTOM)

SUSTAINABLE LUXURY

Ahh, **The Brando** – you had me at: “Do you need someone to help you unpack?” (Even though the answer was no.) Really, you won my heart 10 minutes earlier, when I entered my 1,033-square-foot one-bedroom villa and the first feature the greeter pointed out wasn't the complimentary mini-bar in the sitting room, the separate media room, plunge pool, terraced deck, view toward the lagoon, walk-through dressing area, outdoor bathtub or the macarons made with local honey resting provocatively beside a chilled bottle of French Champagne. Instead, he pulled open a drawer containing separate compost, recycling and rubbish bins, proudly explaining that recycling is one of many sustainable projects at this luxury eco-resort, which opened July 1, 2014, on the 10th anniversary of actor Marlon Brando's death.

Brando purchased Tetiaroa atoll – 12 small islands surrounding a four-and-a-half-mile-wide lagoon, 30 miles north of Tahiti – in 1967, after filming “Mutiny on the Bounty” here and falling in love with French Polynesian co-star Tarita Teri'ipaia, who became his third wife. One of the islands, Onetahi, had once served as a summer retreat for Tahitian royalty, and Brando lived here for several years with Tarita and their children, building and running a small inn as well as a research station that was never used as he'd hoped. Passionate about preserving the atoll's natural beauty, biodiversity and cultural richness, he partnered with Tahiti resident Richard Bailey, president and CEO of Pacific Beachcomber, to help him pursue his vision of creating a self-sustaining post-carbon resort.

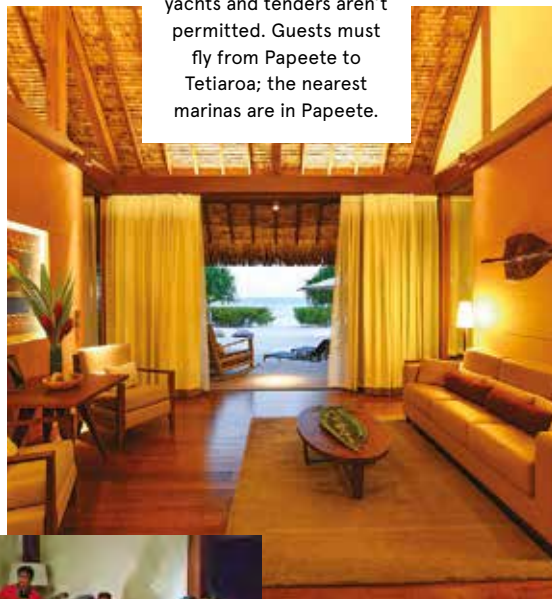
Brando died several years before construction began, but the resort's sustainability focus reflects his wishes. In striving to achieve carbon neutrality, The Brando uses a number of projects, including seawater air conditioning (SWAC), which harnesses the cold of the ocean's depths (3,050 feet) and converts it into air conditioning. The Brando's sustainable development coordinator, Alban Perret, explains that French Polynesia's resorts spend an estimated 60

percent of their energy consumption on air conditioning; SWAC reduces these energy demands by 90 percent. Brando had heard of the principle and suggested it to Bailey, whose company then conceived, developed and installed the world's first private air-conditioning system (at another resort in Bora Bora) using SWAC.

Other technologies include 4,000 photovoltaic solar panels along the airstrip, which provide 70 percent of the resort's energy needs; six generators that use locally produced coconut oil, creating the remaining 30 percent; and solar water heater panels above each dwelling, which fulfill most hot water requirements. All food waste is turned into compost, cooking oils are redistributed to companies that make biofuel, a desalination plant creates drinking water, rainwater is used for swimming pools, laundry and more, and treated wastewater is used for irrigation.

The resort also established an Ecostation on Onetahi and gifted it to the Tetiaroa Society, a nonprofit founded by the Marlon Brando Estate (which owns the atoll) and the Pacific Beachcomber and committed to inspiring sustainable interdependence between mankind and nature. With wet and dry laboratories and researcher accommodations, the Ecostation focuses on conservation (preserving the atoll's biodiversity and cultural heritage), research, education and outreach. Some of Brando's family members are involved: his son Teihotu, a longtime Tetiaroa resident and representative of the company that owns the island, is on the Society's Conservation and Sustainable Use Plan Committee; his granddaughter Tumi works here as an eco guide; and his

BY BOAT
Tetiaroa's lagoon offers no entry point for large yachts and tenders aren't permitted. Guests must fly from Papeete to Tetiaroa; the nearest marinas are in Papeete.



Top: A one-bedroom villa at The Brando. Above: Staff members of The Brando perform a Polynesian show in Te Manu Bar. Right: Indulge in a massage at the resort's spa.



INSIDER TIP

The best snorkeling from the beach is along West Turtle Beach (villas 201 to 222).



grandson Manea is part of an onsite team working to control the island's mosquito population.

Blending into the natural environment, the resort's 35 villas (30 one-bedroom, four two-bedroom and one three-bedroom) and other buildings have been designed to be sustainable and use local materials such as ironwood trees and miki miki branches. You'll find no construction venturing over the water here.

Although ordering room service (which, like the resort's other dining options, features the cuisine of Guy Martin of the Michelin two-star Le Grand Véfour in Paris) is tempting, walk, bike or ask for an electric cart to take you to the main resort area – at least occasionally. Sip a Marlon Mojito at open-air Te Manu Bar, in a building that feels like a tree house, or a Godfather of Tetiaroa at casual Bob's Bar, named for Brando's assistant on film sets. Order the scallops trilogy and the crab cake for starters at the Beachcomber Café, then, another evening, relax in the dreamy Les Mutinés, the fine-dining venue that resembles an upside-down ship hull, a nod to “Mutiny on the Bounty.”

Let your cares drift further away by indulging in an Oriental massage in Varua Polynesian Spa's spherical Fare Mana (“the birdhouse”) suite, which sits among the treetops, about 20 feet above the ground.

As for nods to Brando's career, you won't find many. The resort is working to secure rights to have some of his movies available for guests; however, photos of the famous actor on site are hardly excessive. Rather, the resort quietly accentuates a side of Brando separate from his Hollywood persona – a man who cared deeply about Tetiaroa and the people he left behind who love it as well. ☐

