



ESCAPE TO PARADISE: Overwater bungalows at Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora (left), and snorkeling in a lagoon (right)

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Fantasy Islands

Whatever your vision of tropical paradise, you'll find it in Tahiti. BY MAXINE ALBERT

An intoxicating mélange of aromas, sights and colors enveloped me the moment I touched down in Tahiti. As I took in the tropical foliage and fragrantly scented flowers, I wished I could suspend time and stand there soaking up the gorgeousness forever. Tahiti — which refers to the largest island in French Polynesia and her 118 sister islands — draws visitors from around the globe, attracted by breathtaking beauty, rich culture, warm climate and sensory delights. Think glorious light; silken white sand; dreamy lagoons; coconuts; pineapples; and easy-going, friendly people.

Tahiti cast her spell on me at an early age when I first saw Gauguin's paintings of exotic Polynesian women. Marlon Brando, one of the biggest movie stars on the planet, fell in love with Tahitian actress Tarita while filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* here. So romantically enchanting is this idyllic locale, he married her and bought the entire atoll of Tetiaroa with its 12 *motus* (islets). "My mind is always soothed when I imagine myself sitting on my South Sea island at night. If I have my way, Tetiaroa will remain forever a place that reminds Tahitians of what they are and

what they were centuries ago," mused the legendary actor.

The Brando, the namesake 5-star eco-lodge the star envisioned, opened last July exactly 10 years after his death. Here, 30 miles north of the island of Tahiti, you'll find Tetiaroa, a private atoll and former favorite retreat of Tahitian royalty, with talcum powder beaches, pristine nature and turquoise water teeming with marine life. This is where Tumi Brando, who now shows the property to guests, grew up fishing with her grandmother Tarita and her ponytailed, sarong-clad grandfather in between his movie shoots.

It's easy to see why the film star chose this for his personal refuge. Whether swimming, snorkeling in the jewel-like lagoon, sunbathing on your own private beach near your secluded villa or exploring exotic surroundings dotted with coconut palms, you feel like you are in paradise. The dazzling underwater kingdom includes rainbow parrotfish, spotted eagle rays and sea turtles. One *motu*, Tahuna Iti, offers a natural bird sanctuary, whereas Reiono preserved its original primitive rainforest.

If you have a fantasy of dancing like a sultry Polynesian, don a

grass skirt — lessons are provided. You can even learn to play the Polynesian *toere* drum between dips in Mermaid Bay. As for the food, savor extraordinary dishes such as grilled tuna with coconut vierge dressing. Pampering is an essential part of the Tahiti experience, so I dutifully luxuriated in the Varua Spa with soothing papaya treatments and coconut oil Polynesian massages. All this plus air-conditioning from seawater, just as Marlon Brando envisioned.

A Polynesian island with French cultural influence sounds like a match made in heaven. The island of Tahiti is regarded as the heart and cultural center of French Polynesia. In this land of smiles and song, the rhythm of life is slow and relaxed; you can take the time to enjoy the moment and just “be.” Visitors receive their first taste of Polynesian warmth and hospitality as islanders welcome them with leis of tiare flowers, Tahiti’s signature gardenia. Polynesians, both men and women, love the islands’ flamboyant flowers and need no excuse to wear them in their hair, around their neck or on top of their head as a wreath. Customarily, if a woman or man tucks the flower behind the left ear, she or he is taken; a flower placed behind the right ear means the person is available.

It’s hard not to feel lighthearted in such a floral paradise. Orchids decorated my breakfast tray of luscious tropical fruit. After lunching on the famed *poisson cru*, fresh fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk, I headed to the spa where a delicious soak with frangipanis was followed by a Tahitian vanilla massage. At night I fell asleep amid rose petals sprinkled on my bed. Welcome to Tahiti.

The small, vibrant capital, Papeete, with its lively streets and bustling harbor, is best explored on a walking tour. For Tahitian collectibles including monoi oil, vanilla beans and vivid pareos, head to the colorful market Le Marché, where you’ll meet throngs of locals. The waterfront promenade comes alive at night with the popular itinerant food trucks known as Les Roulottes. You’ll also see musicians strumming ukuleles and crooning Polynesian songs at Vaïete Square.

Take a leisurely car ride around the island and experience Tahiti’s real magic. You’ll find a diverse landscape with cascading waterfalls, verdant valleys, striking mountains, lovely black-sand beaches and rich archaeological sites including sacred petroglyphs.

LODGING

THE BRANDO

This lush eco-resort on private atoll Tetiaroa, with its vivid blue lagoon, delivers a fantasy island experience. Guests enjoy panoramic views of what seems like the entire South Pacific. *Tetiaroa, French Polynesia* \$\$\$\$

FOUR SEASONS RESORT BORA BORA

The swank overwater bungalow villas have it all: infinity-edged plunge pools, expansive decks with comfy loungers, massive interiors done in understated luxury and stunning vistas. *BP 547, Motu Tehotu, Bora Bora* \$\$\$\$

INTERCONTINENTAL TAHITI RESORT & SPA

The largest luxury hotel on the island boasts balconies offering great views of Moorea and the best water-sports center in Tahiti. *Tata’a, Fa’a’a, Tahiti* \$\$\$

DINING

LE COCO’S

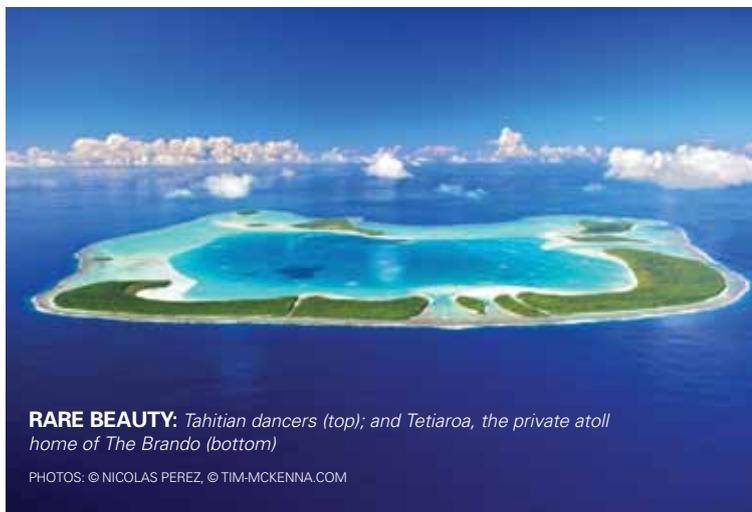
One of Tahiti’s most romantic restaurants with a lovely waterfront setting offers gorgeous views of Moorea and outstanding French cuisine made with fresh, local ingredients. *PK 13,200, Puna’auia, Tahiti* \$\$\$

LAGOON RESTAURANT BY JEAN-GEORGES

Renowned chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s South Seas outpost, suspended over the water, offers dreamy views and cuisine as sublime as the setting. Arrive before sunset for cocktails on the terrace. *The St. Regis Bora Bora Resort, Motu Ome’e, BP 506, Bora Bora* \$\$\$

TIARE

For the best show on the island, head to the Polynesian extravaganza at the InterContinental’s Tiare. Enjoy a buffet dinner of Polynesian specialties and Les Grand Ballet’s thrilling Tahitian dances. *InterContinental Tahiti Resort & Spa, Tata’a, Fa’a’a, Tahiti* \$\$



RARE BEAUTY: Tahitian dancers (top); and Tetiaroa, the private atoll home of The Brando (bottom)

PHOTOS: © NICOLAS PEREZ, © TIM-MCKENNA.COM



TROPICAL GEMS: Harvesting a black pearl (left), and a waterfall flowing into a river in a tropical forest (right)

PHOTOS: © GREGOIRE LE BACON, © MARK SKALNY | DREAMSTIME.COM

Off-land activities include surfing lessons, whale and dolphin watching, swimming in grottos, diving, canoeing and kayaking.

Tattoos have been an integral part of Polynesian culture since ancient times, so if you're thinking of getting one, this is the place. The word "tattoo" originated in French Polynesia, and about 60 percent of the people here have one. It is said that Tohu, the god of tattoo, described painting all of the oceans' fish in beautiful colors and patterns. Long considered signs of beauty in Polynesian culture, tattoos were once ceremoniously applied to those reaching adolescence. If you prefer less permanent but equally stunning adornments, choose black pearls. Stop at The Robert Wan Pearl Museum before purchasing Tahiti's renowned mystical gems. In addition to the fascinating history and mythology, you get to marvel at the world's largest Tahitian pearl.

Many consider Bora Bora, just a short flight away, the most spellbinding of the islands. Author James Michener, who wrote *Tales of the South Pacific*, called Bora Bora "the most beautiful island in the world." On this "Pearl of the Pacific," pristine sandy beaches rim a lagoon of opalescent blues and greens, with coral gardens, tropical fish and palm-crowned inlets. Majestic Mount Otemanu and Mount Pahia reign over the lush, verdant landscape. Long a favorite haunt of royalty, glitterati and all lovers of serenity, privacy and beauty, Bora Bora also attracts artists and writers to its spectacular aesthetic. It's not surprising cinematographers find the locale a picture-perfect

movie setting.

For those looking for the ultimate South Seas getaway, staying in an overwater bungalow is a must. French Polynesia's signature accommodation (it was invented here) offers an unparalleled experience and comes with every amenity you would expect from a 5-star hotel. From lounging on my terrace to taking a dip in the lagoon with direct access from my private deck, my luxurious overwater bungalow at the Four Seasons Resort did not disappoint. Set on one of Bora Bora's outer *motus*, the resort offers unobstructed views of towering Mount Otemanu and the open water, perfect for taking in a sunrise over the Pacific and sunset on the lagoon. I found dining alfresco on the balcony of my bungalow just as impressive, enjoying the tastiest mahi mahi with pineapple.

I highly recommend the signature two-hour Kahaia Haven Ritual at the resort's temple of healing, the spa. A soothing skin treatment using black pearl powder and native vanilla, followed by a volcanic hot stone massage and a holistic facial, will surely restore body, mind and spirit while activating a state of bliss.

While water activities abound, you can also explore Vaitape (Bora Bora's quaint town), hike Mount Otemanu and more. Many, however, choose to loll in the privacy of their thatched-roof overwater hideaway, sipping Mahana cocktails, contemplating the vast expanse of the blue Pacific and basking in nature's glory. You can do as little or as much as you want in this tropical oasis of coconut palms, legendary lagoons, secluded beaches and remarkable vistas.

INFO TO GO

Major airlines offer direct service from Los Angeles (LAX) to Tahiti at Fa'a'a International Airport (PPT) in Papeete. Air Tahiti operates regular service to all parts of French Polynesia from its hubs in Tahiti, Bora Bora and Rangiroa. Air Tetiaroa operates a 20-minute flight to Tetiaroa from Tahiti. A ferry also provides travel between islands. Transfer to your hotel by taxi or resort pickup car.

The Brando

thebrando.com

Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora

fourseasons.com

InterContinental Tahiti Resort & Spa

ihg.com

LAGOON Restaurant by Jean-Georges

starwoodhotels.com

The Robert Wan Pearl Museum

robertwan.com/en/museum.php

Tahiti Tourisme

tahiti-tourisme.com

Tiare

ihg.com

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