

A watery wonderland with emerald peaks, vivid turquoise lagoons have entranced South Pacific explorers for decades. *Sophia Wilson*

and multicoloured coral reefs, Tahiti and her islands becomes equally captivated by its tropical charms

The deep blue south

PHOTOGRAPHY © ANDREW SLOBODA

Raiatea, meaning "faraway heaven", is the second largest of the Society Islands, situated north-west of Tahiti





Marlon Brando with co-star (and future wife) Tarita Teriipaia filming *Mutiny on the Bounty* in 1961. Opposite page: The St Regis Bora Bora Resort

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Few maritime stories capture the imagination as viscerally as the mutiny on the *Bounty*. Acting Lieutenant Fletcher Christian set Captain William Bligh and 18 loyalists adrift in HMS *Bounty*'s open launch after Christian and the rest of the crew rebelled during a five-month stopover on the island of Tahiti. The men had settled in a little too comfortably to the paradise they had found and resented a return to the drudgery of naval life.

In 1961, when Marlon Brando came to play Christian in the film *Mutiny on the Bounty* here in French Polynesia –

more than 100 islands scattered across 2,000 kilometres of the South Pacific – he saw the allure of the seascape. And whereas Bligh chose to sail 3,500 nautical miles to safety, Brando decided not to leave – and secured a 99-year lease on the small archipelago of Tetiaroa.

Brando's love affair with French Polynesia (often referred to as the Islands of Tahiti after the largest in the French overseas territory) lasted a lifetime and he regularly returned to the 12 low-lying motus (islets) that were once the retreats of Tahitian high chiefs. "My mind is always soothed when I imagine myself sitting on my South Sea



VOYAGE

island at night,” he once said. Following his death in 2004, Brando’s family opened up his private paradise for others to explore. Less than 30 nautical miles or a 15-minute flight from Faa’a International Airport, The Brando is now home to 35 glass-fronted beach villas.

Arriving on the resort’s tiny landing strip to be greeted by a private traditional Tahitian dance performance and, of course, a Tahitian gardenia (put it behind your left ear if you are taken or right ear if you are available), it is instantly enchanting. The resort is luxury to the max – your fridge is stocked with complimentary champagne, the spa is an Eden set around a freshwater pond with an elevated bird’s-nest-inspired treatment room and it’s all surrounded by a spectacular lagoon, showcasing a kaleidoscope of blues.

The Brando is also a world leader in sustainable hotel development. It’s close to reaching its goal of being carbon-neutral and self-sustainable as well as being the first property to use seawater air conditioning to reduce energy demands. Its A-list guests, who have included Barack Obama, Leonardo DiCaprio and Pippa Middleton, leave without mosquito bites thanks to a sterilisation programme that avoids the use of fumigation. And, according to the smiling staff, even the bees that make the honey for breakfast don’t sting because they are just so damn happy.

Tempting as it is to stay cocooned in Brando’s Hollywood hideaway, one of the biggest draws for visiting superyachts is the vast cruising area that French Polynesia has to offer – it’s about the same size as the Med. Most superyachts split their time between either the Society Islands, a group of predominantly volcanic islands to the west of Tahiti, or the Tuamotus, a group of atolls to the east. “It depends on your guests,” says Claud Akers, captain of the Tahiti-based yacht *Askari* (available to charter through Fraser). “If they want to explore the islands and go hiking, you have to do the Society Islands. The Tuamotus are for people who want to get away. There are very few people, very few boats and it’s really a diving and snorkelling destination.”

One Society Island that is begging to be explored is Taha’a, which lies about 50 nautical miles from the capital city of Papeete on Tahiti. Home to just a smattering of hotels and homesteads, the flower-shaped island has a population of just over 5,000 and its primary industry remains the production of vanilla.

A drive safari is the best way to explore the island’s topography, which is reminiscent of the Caribbean’s rainforest islands and equally bursting with natural products – including

coconuts, Tahitian black pearls and, of course, vanilla. With a kilogram of vanilla selling for as much as £1,000, it remains a lucrative industry.

As it is much less developed for tourism than some of the other Society Islands, Taha’a is also a great place to get a more authentic taste of French Polynesia. I am invited for lunch with the owner of Poerani Safari tours and his wife at their waterfront home, which looks across one of the island’s deep inlets. I am treated to an unbelievable spread of dishes – including the Tahitian staple, poisson cru (raw tuna marinated in lime juice and coconut milk, and mixed with diced vegetables) – in a relaxed family setting; their three dogs jump in and out of the boats that are moored along the shoreline.

Less than 10 nautical miles separates Taha’a from the island of Bora Bora, but the latter has a completely different vibe. Bora Bora’s impossibly blue lagoon and five-star properties with overwater bungalows (Bora Bora invented them before the Maldives got in on the act) are regularly splashed across Western billboards and train carriages to act as catnip for honeymooners and exhausted city workers.

It’s hard to imagine that the destination could actually live up to such expectations. However, flying in courtesy of Tahiti Nui Helicopters, it soon becomes clear that not only does this paradise exist but it is infinitely more beautiful in reality. A verdant ring of vegetation with strips of ice white sand encircles the bluest water I have ever seen. At its centre twin emerald peaks, the remnants of a long-extinct volcano, tower majestically over the scene.

The helicopter lands on a strip of sand to deliver us to the St Regis Bora Bora Resort, the property’s 18 hectares spread across three motus. Bicycles are provided to navigate the winding paths, scented by tiare flowers, that connect its thatched overwater bungalows with amenities that include a “lagoonarium”, an expansive saltwater pond protected by netting from the sea where you can swim and feed the tropical fish. Its glass-clad Lagoon Restaurant by Jean-Georges offers arguably the best views of the sun setting over Bora Bora’s great Mount Otemanu. Naturally these screen-saver-worthy views are accompanied by local produce with a touch of French flair – try the rice-cracker-encrusted tuna with a citrus and sriracha emulsion.

The resort’s sizeable jetty also means it is easily accessible by yacht and local charter 23-metre *Miss Kulani* is on hand to give me a taste of the cruising on offer locally. With a glass of champagne in hand (this is French territory after



Healing hands

Located by an inland lagoon, Le Taha’a Island Resort’s traditional spa is worth a stop-off. Try the Polynesian deep tissue massage, an integral part of ancient local medicine. It uses Tahitian monoi oils that are extracted by hand from coconut and then perfumed with flowers.



Blue fingered

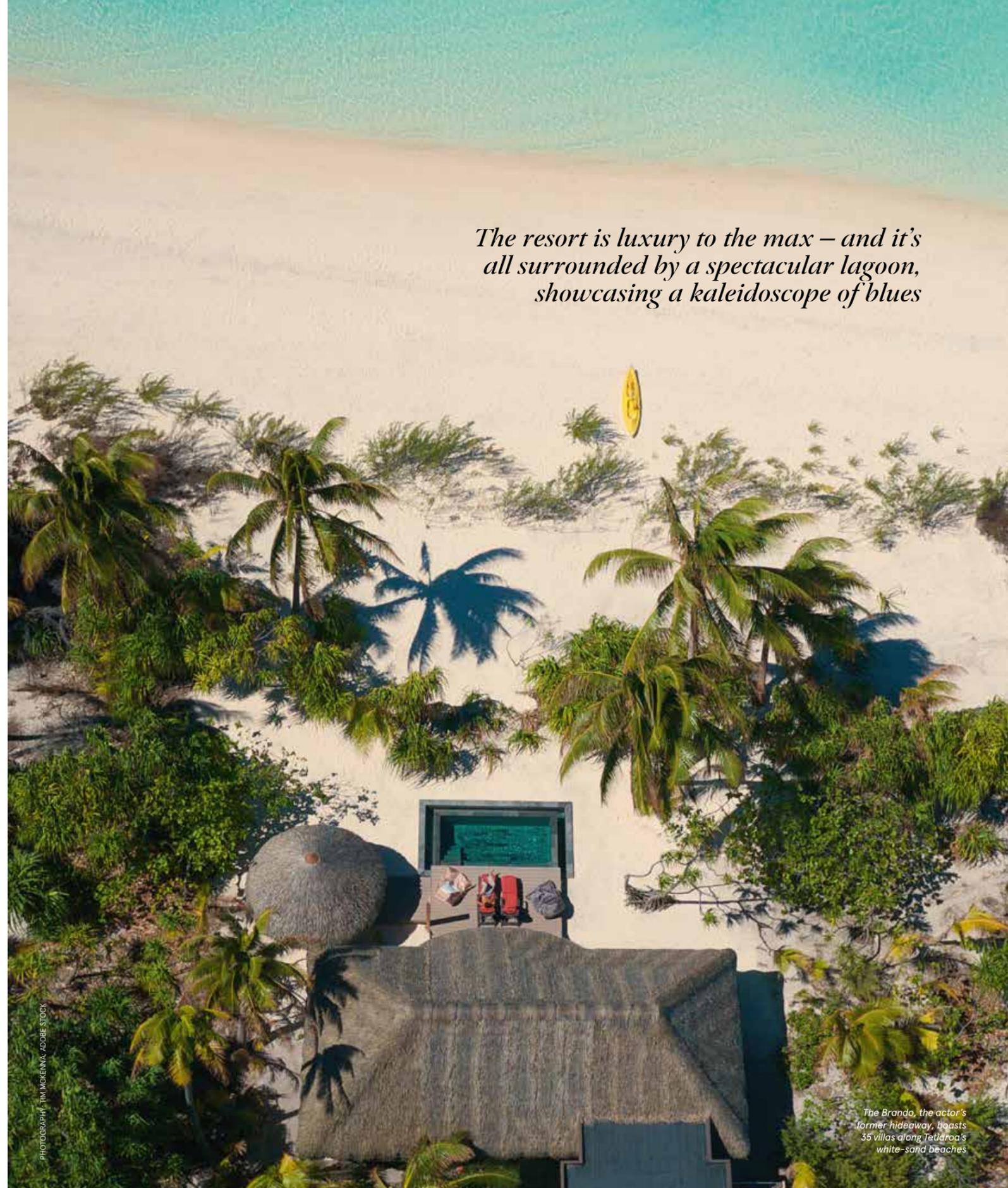
A group of young Tahitians are taking matters into their own hands in the fight against the demise of coral reefs. The Coral Gardeners – mainly 18- to 20-year-olds – are replanting coral fragments and spreading their message through social media (see *Eye Opener*, p34).

Lovely bubbly

Located in the centre of Maharepa, the Moorea Beach Café offers a taste of Saint-Tropez – including Veuve Clicquot orange parasols – with Tahitian views. Parisian owner Bruno Jamais, who formerly worked for Alain Ducasse, serves up fusion dishes and plenty of bubbles.



The resort is luxury to the max – and it’s all surrounded by a spectacular lagoon, showcasing a kaleidoscope of blues



The Brando, the actor’s former hideaway, boasts 35 villas along Taha’a’s white-sand beaches



The Oasis pool at the St Regis Bora Bora Resort

Eight days exploring French Polynesia boatint.com/French-Polynesia



Stars in their eyes

Under the guidance of executive chef Marc Lintanf, Le K restaurant at the Sofitel Moorea la Ora Beach Resort is pushing for Tahiti's first Michelin star. Work your way through the five-course tasting menu with wine pairing – highlights include roasted scallops with almonds and Black Angus beef fillet – with your toes in the sand below the white tablecloths.



Word on the street

In a small park alongside the port in the capital city of Papeete, dozens of *roulottes* (French for caravans) cook up a culinary storm every evening as the sun sets. The tiny cash-only stalls create dishes from all over the world, from pad thai and thin-crust pizza to traditional poisson cru and Nutella crêpes.



HOW TO GET THERE

Flight Air Tahiti Nui flies from Paris, Los Angeles, Tokyo and Auckland to Tahiti. Connecting flights are available from London with airline partners

Fares London-Papeete via Los Angeles: from £6,395 business class (all taxes included)

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all) we sail up the calm waters before dropping anchor away from the luxury resorts that line the lagoon's north-east side. There is not another yacht in sight as I dive off the aft deck and, while indulging in lunch back on board – including fresh tuna ceviche and spicy reef fish – it's hard to think of a more idyllic yachting location.

Of course, beyond stunning scenery and the ability to quaff French wine and food, Tahiti is most famous for its underwater attractions. Humpback whales fill its waters between mid-August and October and sharks are permanent residents. "I often have guests who come to Tahiti and say they want to dive or snorkel but they don't want to see sharks. I have to tell them that won't be possible," says Tahiti Private Expeditions' Rodolphe Holler as we meet on board 32.9-metre *Askari* at her base in Cook's Bay off the island of Mo'orea.

Like many of the superyacht guests that Holler deals with I'm not thrilled about the prospect of sharing my swimming space with sharks. However, after a brief presentation in *Askari*'s classically styled main saloon – where Holler points out that sharks kill about 20 people a year whereas coconuts kill 2,000 – we tender out to the lagoon for my first taste of shark swimming. In a beautifully clear patch of water we jump out of

the tender and stand surrounded by dozens of stingrays and blacktip sharks. The main point of this experience is to show that while the stingrays play, beg and nuzzle up to you like playful puppies, the sharks leave us entirely alone, simply snatching the odd bit of food from the floor. It does feel a little bit zoo-like so Holler recommends we head on for the real deal.

Outside one of the breaks in the reef that encircles Mo'orea, Holler heads into the water first to see if he can attract any toothy friends. After a few minutes we are rewarded as two 1.5-metre-long lemon sharks circle gracefully beneath us before darting back into the shadows as soon as they spot human company. I am not entirely comfortable, but there is something undeniably majestic about seeing these creatures in their natural environment.

This trip has given me only a snapshot of what the Islands of Tahiti have to offer but I can see why the sailors of the *Bounty* in 1789 – and Marlon Brando 170 or so years later – were so intoxicated by its shores. Today it offers a heady mixture of Polynesian hospitality, natural beauty and a touch of French je ne sais quoi (and foie gras). It's only a matter of time before more superyachting visitors experience a similar love affair with the South Pacific. ■