

Polynesian dreams

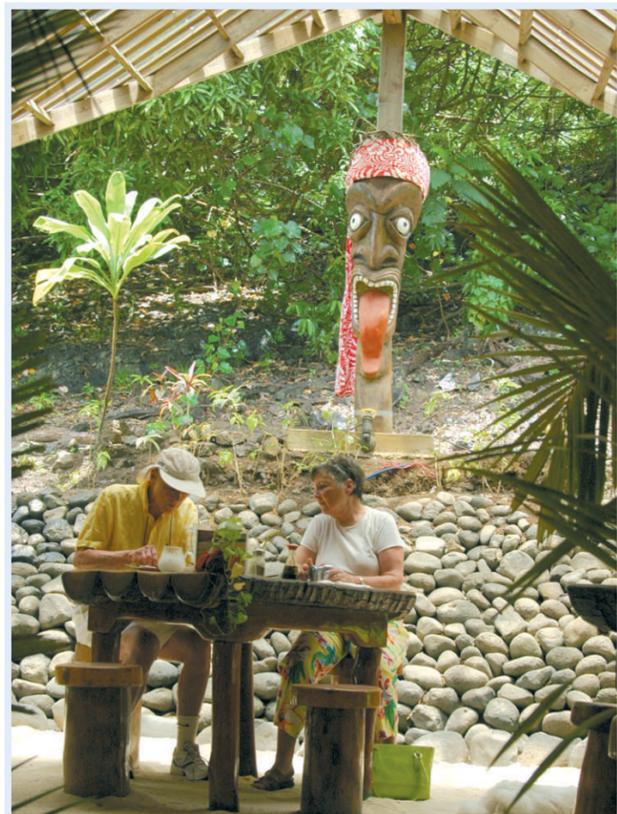
French islands in the South Pacific beckon those looking for an idyllic life

BY KATHY RODEGHIER

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“What is paradise?” Guide Paul Atallah poses the question as our group tours French Polynesia. To many of us, these South Pacific islands, with exotic names like Tahiti and Bora Bora, are our idea of paradise: a place to bask on palm-fringed beaches, gaze at emerald mountainsides, snorkel in turquoise lagoons and enjoy the company of friendly, beautiful people.

To the first European sailors who landed here in the 1700s, these islands probably seemed like paradise, too. After months of traveling rolling ocean on meager rations, “they got what they wanted and it wasn't hard: food, sunshine, young girls,” Atallah says. When the Polynesians attacked their ships with spears, the sailors responded with cannon fire, which the natives had never seen.



Bloody Mary's bar and restaurant on Bora Bora serves locally caught fish in a casual Polynesian setting.

Mesmerized, they thought these white men were gods and gave them anything they wanted, including their women.

No wonder Capt. Bligh's crew mutinied here.

“But paradise is a preconceived notion,” says Atallah, who owns Island Eco Tours on the island of Huahine. An American who studied anthropology at the University of Hawaii, he has lived in French Polynesia for more than a decade. He understands both the ancient and modern Polynesian way of life.

To ancient Polynesians, their islands were no paradise, not when people went around clubbing each other on the head and practiced human sacrifice and infanticide, Atallah says. “This was more Stephen King than Adam and Eve.”

French connections

French Polynesia consists of 118 islands in five archipelagos. Most of the population lives on the Society Islands, so named by Capt. James Cook in tribute to the Royal Society of London, which financed his voyage there. Tourism is the biggest source of revenue on the largest of these volcanic islands: Tahiti, Moorea, Bora Bora, Huahine and Raiatea.

Yet, compared to Hawaii, which gets 6 million visitors a year, French Polynesia is small potatoes with only 250,000 visitors, 42 percent from North America. One reason: the high cost. Almost all food and many other goods must be imported and incur high duties. Going out to eat is especially pricey.

“It's much like Hawaii” but so expensive, says Howard Hayes, a visitor from Wilmette who paid \$90 for the dinner buffet at the Intercontinental resort on Tahiti.

Yet the Polynesian people are not impoverished. As residents of a French Overseas Country with self-governing powers, they enjoy the social benefits of French citizenship: good schools, health care and a minimum wage of \$1,400 a month. They don't pay income tax or sales tax; they do receive aid from the French government (including economic support promised after nuclear testing ended here in the 1990s). We didn't see homeless people or panhandlers and peddlers didn't pester us on the street or beach.

“You're in a safe place,” Atallah says. “If people offer you a ride, take it. They are just being polite and curious.”

About 65 percent of the residents on the islands are native Polynesian, another 5 percent to 8 percent Chinese and the remainder mixed. The natives continue to own their ancestral land and can live on it tax free. Many on the outer islands live a simple life, supporting themselves by fishing or farming.

Sound like paradise? Ask the 60 percent of the residents who are under age 24.

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You'll have a chance to swim or snorkel with manta rays on several of the islands. The gentle creatures move through the water in a graceful ray ballet.



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/krodeghier@dailyherald.com

Purchase native goods at the market in Papeete, Tahiti.

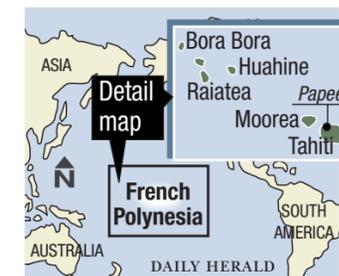


French Polynesia

GO: If French Polynesia is your idea of paradise

NO: If you are on a tight budget or can't tolerate heat or humidity

If you go



Getting there: Tahiti is about halfway between Los Angeles, Calif., and Sydney, Australia, and is in the same time zone as Hawaii. Air Tahiti Nui, Air France and Air New Zealand fly nonstop from Los Angeles to Papeete in a scheduled time of less than nine hours.

When to go: Average daytime highs are in the 80s year-round, but humidity is slightly lower in June and July.

Cruises: Because the price of food and lodging is high in French Polynesia, a cruise can be an economical way to see the islands. Your cabin, meals and transport between the islands are included in the cost. Cruise lines operating this year in French Polynesia are Princess Cruises (www.princess.com, (800) 774-6237) and Regent Seven Seas Cruises ((877) 505-5370, www.rssc.com), as well as the passenger/cargo vessel Aranui ((800) 972-7268, www.aranui.com).

Where to stay: Lodging ranges from small guesthouses to luxury resorts. Overwater bungalows, with breakfast delivered by outrigger canoe, are all the rage, but pricey. Top resorts include those operated by the Intercontinental chain, which has properties on Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora ((800) 496-7621, www.intercontinental.com).

Where to eat: Fresh fish often appears on menus and poisson cru, fish marinated with lime and coconut, is a local specialty. If you're watching your budget, consider patronizing Les Roulottes, catering trucks that roll out in public areas after dark and serve a wide range of entrees.

If you want a restaurant meal consider: Le Lotus in the Intercontinental Resort Tahiti. Europe's top chefs rotate into this lagoon-side restaurant that serves French and continental fare. ((011) 689 86 51 10)

Bloody Mary's on Bora Bora was established in 1979 and is as much a tourist destination as a bar and restaurant. Lunch is sandwiches and salads and dinner features the daily catch of local fishermen. For dinner, transportation is provided from various points around the island. ((011) 689 67 72 86)

Le Belvedere on Tahiti has a view of the island and Moorea from 2,000 feet above Papeete. Transportation from your hotel on a narrow, winding road is provided. Time your reservation for sunset. ((011) 689 42 73 44)

Tipping: Not customary. **Currency:** U.S. dollars are readily accepted, though the local currency is the French Polynesian franc: \$1 equals about 79 XPF.

— Kathy Rodeghier

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Tahiti Tourisme, (877) 468-2448, www.tahiti-tourism.com

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The population has boomed in the past 20 years, a period that brought computers, cell phones and satellite TV to the most developed islands. "A lot of young people don't like the outer islands," Atallah says. "They are searching for the modern world."

They want to go to Tahiti and the capital city, Papeete, where 100,000 of French Polynesia's people live. "To me it's congested, it's polluted, it's Tijuana without burritos," Atallah says. To the young people, Papeete has night life and more people their age. They go and don't come back.

First migrations

The itch to leave home and search for paradise might have been the reason for the settlement of French Polynesia, since the DNA of today's Polynesians can be traced to China, Atallah says.

Around 4000 B.C., a great migration from Southeast Asia began, with outrigger canoes eventually fanning out across the South Pacific. More than 1,000 years ago, they reached what is now the Society Islands, where the island of Raiatea became the cradle of civilization.

Open-air stone temples, known as marae, became sacred places for tribal meetings. On Raiatea, Taputapu-atea Marae, ranks as the second-most important archeological site in all of Polynesia, after Easter Island. Chiefs from allied kingdoms traveled long distances by canoe to gather here, and it is thought early Polynesians set out from this spot to settle Hawaii and New Zealand.

Archaeologists excavated Raiatea's marae in the 1960s and found thousands of skulls, the remains of human sacrifices. As we wander around the site, we learn the victims were drugged, tied to a banyan tree and struck on the head with a hammer made of iron-wood. We walk past ceremonial stone backrests where the noble chiefs sat, and the high altar fronting on the pounding surf of the Pacific.

Raiatea and adjacent Tahaa also are known for their production of Tahitian vanilla, the most expensive spice after saffron. The vanilla bean is the fruit of an orchid vine that climbs 25 feet or more. Only 1 percent of the world produc-



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/
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Relax on white-sand beaches and turquoise lagoons, above. Ancient Polynesians wore elaborate tattoos, but the practice ended after the arrival of missionaries. The art has since had a revival on the islands, right.

tion of vanilla comes from French Polynesia and most of it is marketed to gourmet chefs, though we are able to buy it in local stores and on tours of plantations.

Cultural changes

Vanilla also is produced on the island of Huahine, but the island is best known for its marae, which ranks just behind the marae in Raiatea in importance.

On his tours of the site, Atallah gives us an in-depth explanation of French Polynesian history. "This is a living laboratory for the study of cultural evolution," he says, as he describes the changes that followed the arrival of explorers, including Capt. Cook, and then Protestant missionaries who taught their religious beliefs and enforced their moral code.

The missionaries had their work cut out for them. Some of the native dances were so explicitly sexual that warriors publicly deflowered a virgin during a performance. Small wonder that the Polynesian word "taboo" worked its way into the English language, as it must have been used quite frequently by the puritanical missionaries.

Another English word, tattoo, is derived from the Polynesian word "to hit." These elaborate designs covered the natives' naked bodies and symbolized a rite of passage for adolescents — and a

painful one at that. The ink was made from burned candle nut, applied to a rake or comb made of shark's tooth or moth-

er of pearl and pounded into the skin with a mallet.

This is paradise?

After the missionaries deemed nudity taboo, tattoos were covered with clothing, became pointless and the tradition faded away. The art form has since revived and many people on the islands now display them.

Some U.S. sailors no doubt sported tattoos when they landed on Bora Bora during World War II. An American naval base operated on the island between 1942 and 1946 and visitors can still see military huts, bunkers, piers and cannons.

Was Bora Bora paradise for these servicemen? One of them, Lieut. James Michener, turned his experience into his first book, "Tales of the South Pacific" and won a Pulitzer Prize.

Motus and manta rays

Michener has called Bora Bora the most beautiful island in the world. Certainly, the landscape is gorgeous: jagged peaks covered in green vegetation, white sand beaches and a turquoise lagoon dotted with islets, or motus.



The island covers 27 square miles, but its lagoon is nearly three times as large, enclosed by a barrier reef formed by a collapsed volcano. Here we scuba and snorkel, sail on catamarans and view tropical fish on

glass-bottom boats.

Lagoon excursions also occupy us in Moorea, a heart-shaped island where the most recent retelling of the "Mutiny on the Bounty" story ("The Bounty" starring Mel Gibson) was filmed.

We took a boat to a motu for a picnic on the beach while serenaded by a ukulele band, and swam with manta rays. These harmless creatures leisurely "wing" their way through the water, coming close enough to touch.

Tours on Moorea often lead to the Belvedere Lookout for one of the best views in French Polynesia. From this vantage point you can see both Opunohu and Cook bays separated by Mount Rotui, sacred mountain of the ancient Polynesians. You can also see Tahiti, just 12 miles away.

The most developed island, Tahiti has an international airport, shopping malls and a large public market where you can buy vanilla, local crafts and pareus — colorful lengths of cloth that can be worn as a dress, beach cover-up or shawl. You can also buy black pearls here, though those of the best quality are found in

jewelry stores.

Cultured black pearls are Tahiti's largest export and take their name from the black-lipped oysters that produce them on pearl farms scattered around French Polynesia. The pearls themselves are not black, but varying shades of gray, sometimes with a pink, blue or green cast. Their size, shape, luster and color determine their value.

We escaped the traffic of Papeete for excursions into Tahiti's countryside. On the outskirts of the city, long boxes resembling mailboxes sat outside houses. They aren't for mail, though, but baguettes delivered fresh twice a day.

A four-wheel-drive excursion took us into the Papenoo Valley for views of mountains and waterfalls and for swimming in natural pools. A fellow visitor remarked that "it looks like something out of 'Jurassic Park.'"

Another excursion took us to Point Venus, where Capt. Cook observed the transit of the planet Venus in 1769, and to the home of James Norman Hall, co-author of "Mutiny on the Bounty." A World War I army pilot, Hall lived most of his life on Tahiti and his family now manages his home, which is a museum of his military and literary life.

Of course, the most famous expatriate in French Polynesia remains Paul Gaughin, who left his wife and six children in France to free himself from the bonds of civilization and so inspire his art. You won't find much of his work in the Gaughin Museum in Tahiti, though, unless you happen to catch a show on loan from another museum. Most exhibits relate to his life on the island.

Gaughin lived first in Tahiti and later in French Polynesia's Marquesas Islands where he died in 1903. Along the way, he took several native teens as his mistresses and they often became the subjects of his paintings.

Had Gaughin found paradise? As always, the concept is subject to interpretation.

Gaughin was at odds with the Catholic Church and the French government, which by then was running the colony, and was imprisoned. He became an alcoholic and opium addict. His paintings never sold for much and he died penniless, probably of syphilis, at age 54.

• Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by Princess Cruises.