

# TRAVEL

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## TEARS OF JOY

Bora Mountain is just one of the breathtaking sights in French Polynesia.

JANE MUNDY/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

## French Polynesia's beauty can be overwhelming

**JANE MUNDY**  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

**F**rench Polynesia is just eight hours from Los Angeles — but ensconced in the Four Seasons BoraBora or the Brando resort, it's worlds away.

If the Garden of Eden's residents lived in bliss, here must be the modern equivalent. Although many visitors are honeymooners, this version of paradise appeals to everyone, including solo travellers. There isn't a singles scene and night-life is pretty much DIY in your luxurious villa, but there is so

much to do during the day, such as watching the sunrise.

You must stop over in Papeete, Tahiti's capital, before getting to the smaller islands. Overnight at Manava Suite Resort and go shopping. The public market is chockablock with decent handmade souvenirs. Stop by the fruit section — this is what it's supposed to taste like. For everything you need to know about black pearls, visit the Robert Wan Pearl Museum, and a five-minute walk from the hotel, food trucks sell excellent tuna sashimi and crepes. After that, get outta town.

I'm not the crying type, but my first sight of the Tetiaroa atoll

from the Brando Resort's private plane got me misty-eyed — it's meltingly beautiful. Thirty-five villas built on one of 12 small islands, known as motus, enclosing the inner lagoon are so well hidden among the foliage that we almost landed before seeing signs of life. Fifty kilometres north of Tahiti, Tetiaroa was once a retreat for Tahitian royalty. Marlon Brando bought the island in 1966 and for the next 30 years he was dedicated to its welfare.

Marie, one of 200 employees, escorted us to our villa and I got weepy again. She told us that some of their well-heeled clients order room service three

times a day and never venture out. I could understand that. A one-bedroom villa, with plunge pool and outdoor bath steps away from white sand beach, is \$4,000 a night and double that for a two-bedroom — all inclusive. Even when booked to capacity with 80 guests, you never see the neighbours: villas are far apart, separated by palm trees minus their coconuts — a safety precaution, nothing is overlooked.

We saw one person on our beach: an employee raking the sand.

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The villas at the Brando resort in Tetiaroa are pricey but spectacular.



JANE MUNDY/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

It's easy to enjoy the water in French Polynesia, whether dipping in a pool at the Brando resort, at left, or swimming through a coral reef, at right.

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"The No. 1 thing to do here is nothing," concierge Jean-Pierre said.

"One couple stayed for 10 days and they came to the restaurant twice. We organized private barbecues and Polynesian entertainment on their beach."

Rather than walk 10 minutes or order a golf cart, we pedalled bicycles to the casual Beachcomber Cafe. I had a foie gras and pineapple appetizer followed by grilled lagoon fish and coconut sorbet — for lunch. The more formal restaurant, Les Mutines, has a menu designed by chef Guy Martin of Le Grand Vefour, Paris' two-Michelin-star restaurant. Chef Bertrand executes each dish perfectly. Sidle up to Bob's Bar, stick your feet in talcum powder sand and order a cocktail with a black pearl attached to the swizzle stick (that's extra). Or take in the sunset and a view of the seldom-used pool from Te Manu Bar on the second floor.

Service is impeccable. Our server at Les Mutines that

evening knew I preferred still water and my companion liked sparkling. And our bikes were always tampered with. Mornings we found them facing outward so we didn't have to back up and turn around. One afternoon the water in our plunge pool was so warm we contemplated phoning room service for a wheelbarrow of ice. They would have delivered.

Getting pampered at the spa (daily treatments are included), and lingering over meals took up most of the day, but tours are also included. The Ultimate Tour of the atoll was first up.

We dropped anchor at an uninhabited island and headed inland, past hermit crabs scuttling around fallen coconuts and fluffy baby boobies perched on tree branches to a freshwater lagoon that serves as a lemon shark nursery.

"About 20 babies are here now because it is shallow and protected," Rohellec, a resident marine biologist, explained. "They try to leave, but the big sharks are waiting — maybe their mothers."

### If you go ...

**Air Tahiti Nui flies to Papeete and Bora Bora from Los Angeles**

#### Where to Stay:

**In Papeete:** manava-suite-resort-tahiti.com

**The Four Seasons:** fourseasons.com/borabora

**The Brando resort:** thebrando.com

For more information, visit [tahiti-tourisme.com](http://tahiti-tourisme.com)

Next stop we swam in a shallow part of the azure lagoon, aptly coined the Billionaire's Bathtub by Leonardo DiCaprio. Apparently the super-wealthy seek sustainable experiences. Our guide said many guests take the eco-tour that includes a visit to the Brando Project: a \$6-million plant that pumps deep sea water for air conditioning. Coconut oil fuels six generators and, combined with 2,800 solar panels, produces

most of the electricity. Scientists living on the island are researching ocean desalination and what species of coral can best adapt. The Brando's own sunscreen doesn't harm the coral reef. A future plan aims for no plastic bottles. Marlon would have been proud.

The late singer Karen Carpenter called Bora Bora "boring boring." But that was back in 1980, long before the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora opened in 2009. Captain James Cook wrote about Bora Bora: "Scarcely a spot on the universe affords a more luxurious prospect."

We checked into our thatched-roof bungalows perched above a vast turquoise lagoon, considerably more affordable than the Brando but no less luxurious. No wonder golf carts were darting back and forth with room service. From my private balcony, I gazed at the jagged peaks of Mount Otemanu and had yet another little cry of joy. Captain Cook got it right.

The Four Seasons also got it right when they hired marine

biologist Oliver Martin, known as the Fish Whisperer. Under Martin's watch, a lagoon sanctuary was built and he tended a coral garden, now home to more than 100 species of fish. Do take the complimentary lagoon snorkelling tour with Martin, and bring the kids. You'll see coral grafted along concrete structures and the lagoon banks. Help feed — underwater — his fishy pals. Fearless schools of neon damselfish, parrotfish, clowns and angels created a feeding frenzy when I pried loose a sea urchin and fed Martin's favourite pets — a yellow and a white-spotted puffer fish.

We snorkelled the lagoon twice a day, but saved time for the Shark and Ray tour. Tau, our talented guide, serenaded us with a ukulele and steered the boat with his foot as we sped into open water. With complete trust in Tau, we dived in among lemon and black tip sharks. It was about as exciting as being surrounded by several stingrays, feeling their sandpaper skin as they glided by.

A large moray eel came out of hiding when Tau waved a sardine and right on cue, a school of dolphins played in the boat's wake on our return.

Choosing one of three restaurants for dinner was the biggest decision of the day. A foie gras appetizer, this time with coconut cream and black truffle followed by local jackfish, was the deciding factor. Nothing disappointed.

I can't think of any place better to do as little as possible. (If you must connect with the rest of the world, Wi-Fi is super fast.) French Polynesia had long been on my bucket list. Having been there, it's still on the list.

Granted, it is expensive (the only serpent in the garden) but where else can you swim with sharks, feed stingrays and puffer fish, almost touch a booby bird, enjoy exceptional French and Polynesian cuisine and be treated like royalty?

Check out a video of the resort and tour at [youtube.com/watch?v=DKmnQ00wHwg](http://youtube.com/watch?v=DKmnQ00wHwg)