

Venture

When canvassing the South Pacific, stage a mutiny against crowded cruise ships and puddle-jumpers by traveling in the most luxurious way: island-hopping by helicopter

BY CRISTINA VELOCCI

High Society

They never wanted to leave. No one can pinpoint what, exactly, held them captive — the undulating verdant landscape, the crystal-clear waters, the beautiful women with sun-kissed skin and their cheerful greetings of “*Ia ora na!*” But the siren song of French Polynesia has clearly been ineluctable since it first seduced Fletcher Christian and the rest of the *HMS Bounty* crew, leading them to stage their infamous mutiny against Captain Bligh when he insisted they ship off back to puritanical England (such a downer, that Bligh).

These men were by no means the only ones to become helplessly mesmerized by the island nation’s charms: It counts among its converts French painter Paul Gauguin, who gave up his family and career as a Parisian stockbroker to flee to Tahiti in 1891, and Marlon Brando, who in 1960 came to film *The Mutiny on the Bounty*, fell in love with his Tahitian costar and bought a cluster of flat islets known as Tetiaroa, where he lived out much of his life as a recluse. Nor would they be the last — Tahiti and her islands, the best-known of which make up the Society Island chain of Moorea, Huahine, Taha’a and Bora Bora, continue to lure and lead astray financial types to this day.

That’s because little of French Polynesia has changed, with the exception of a recent influx of luxury — making it all the more enticing for dealmakers to visit. Even Brando’s once-isolated retreat will become a luxury eco-resort when it opens this year as **The Brando** (brandohotel.com). Indeed, so many high-end hotels have opened in the past year on tiny Bora Bora that the government capped further development on the island with the Four Seasons Resort & Residences, slated to open early this year.

But perhaps the most telling sign of today’s French Polynesia, where ships and outrigger canoes were once the only method of inter-island transportation, is the new preferred way to travel: by helicopter. Since nearly all the top-notch hotels have their own helipads, or are in close proximity to one, island-hopping in the South Pacific has never been easier — or more desirable.

Thus, with my own chartered chopper’s view from above providing a big picture of the Society Islands,

I made it my mission to discover the source of this magnetic force field by exploring its sublime resorts, restaurants and lagoons for a few weeks — assuming, that is, that I would ever want to leave.

TAHITI

It was well past midnight when my plane touched down at Tahiti’s Faa’a airport. And after a 13-hour direct flight from JFK to the country’s capital, Papeete, via **Air Tahiti Nui** (877-824-4846; airtahitiniui.com), I was glad that, for the duration of my stay, my time on cramped commercial flights was over.

The mere mention of the word *Tahiti* conjures fantasies of pristine beaches and untrammelled beauty — but sadly, reality took a different turn in the 1960s, upon construction of the airport and after Brando’s film debuted, simultaneously making Tahiti a jet-set destination while ushering in an era of urbanization and pollution — something that was glaringly evident, even in the dark, as we drove to the hotel.

Tahiti served as little more than a gateway to the rest of French Polynesia for Captain James Cook and the explorers who followed, and it functions much the same way today: Faa’a is the only airport large enough to accommodate international flights, most of which arrive late enough to require an overnight stay.

Though none of the hotels here comes close to the degree of luxury found on its sister islands, by far the best all-around resort is the 265-room **InterContinental Resort Tahiti** (011-689-86-51-47; tahiti.interconti.com). Built during Tahiti’s glory days as the Tahiti Beachcomber Travelodge, its traditional Polynesian design of carved mahogany and wicker accoutrements retains an old-school feel despite having been renovated in 2003.

While most travelers make sure to visit *les roulettes* — traditional food trucks assembled at night on Papeete’s waterfront, serving such local specialties as steak frites and crêpes — what’s widely considered the best sit-down meal in Tahiti can be found at the InterContinental. Serving international fare categorized by country, the roster of visiting French chefs at **Le Lotus** (011-689-86-51-10, x5512) proudly call France’s Michelin three-starred Auberge de L’Ill their older sibling.

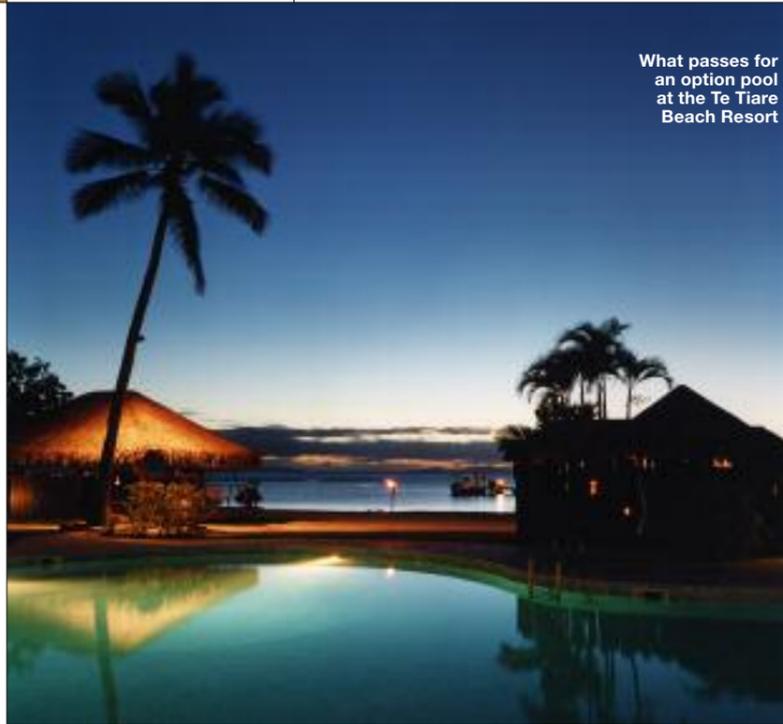


The whirlybird’s-eye view of the approach to Bora Bora

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CLOSING

What passes for an option pool at the Te Tiare Beach Resort



BY HELICOPTER, DOOR (OF ONE ISLAND'S LUXE RESORT) TO DOOR (OF ANOTHER'S) TAKES LESS THAN HALF AN HOUR.

A decent meal isn't all the island has to offer. While here, you might as well take advantage of some of the world's best surfing. Indeed, each May, the world's top pro surfers gather at the legendary wave known as Teahupoo to compete in the Billabong Pro. But unless you happen to be Kelly Slater (which would be surprising), you'd best avoid the building-sized slabs of water and jagged reefs there and enlist, as I did, the aid of French expat Olivier Napias. He's been teaching novices to ride less lethal waves through his **École de Surf Turai Mataare Tahiti (011-689-41-91-37; tahiti-surfschool.info)** for the past 13 years.

MOOREA

The next morning, we headed back to Faa'a Airport, where **Polynesia Helicopters (011-689-54-87-20; polynesia-helicopter.com)** is based, just a five-minute drive from the hotel. Minutes after I arrived we were airborne, swooping over the glistening Pacific.

It's said that precisely 42 shades of blue can be found in French Polynesia's color-changing waters — which is exactly the sort of claptrap that travel desti-

nations always feed their tourists. Still, no one likes to quantify a thing more than a deal pro. From within the clear glass bubble of the helicopter cockpit, I managed to count 18 before the seven-minute flight was over.

The moment we touched ground at Moorea's Temae Airport, our host swiftly greeted us with fresh tiare-flower leis and directed us to our chauffeured Mercedes-Benz. We arrived at the **Sofitel Moorea Beach Resort (011-689-52-12-12; sofitel.com)** just four minutes later. Door (of one island's luxury resort) to door (of another's) had taken less than half an hour.

In 2005, the Sofitel, more than three decades old, underwent its first massive renovation, adding 19 brand-new luxury overwater bungalows. Poised on stilts above the lagoon, they boast grassy pandanus-thatched roofs and glass-panel viewing floors for watching the multitude of fish swimming below.

I would be spending time getting to know those waters and their many creatures in Moorea — in some instances, perhaps too well. **Albert Tours (011-689-55-21-10; albert-transport.net)** arranges combination manta-ray and shark feedings, chumming the waters and setting free anyone idiotic enough to pay money for an up-close-and-personal adventure with the same cuddly sea creatures that ended Steve Irwin's life. I opted instead for the relatively safer pursuit of snorkeling with a family of reef sharks. Afterward, my guide whipped up a little *poisson cru*, a national dish made with raw fish soaked in salt, lime juice and coconut milk, which I chased down with local Hinano beer on a deserted *motu* (coral island), Robinson Crusoe-style.

HUAHINE

Reaching my next stop proved more difficult: With heavy trade winds separating the Leeward Islands from the Windward ones I was leaving, the copter was out of the question. I was forced to travel the leg by private plane (the traveler does what she must).

Dubbed the Garden of Eden, Huahine remains lush and undeveloped — so much so that even though **Te Tiare Beach Resort (888-600-8455; tetiarebeach-resort.com)** resides on the mainland, the only way to reach it is by boat. One of two traditional resorts on the island, Te Tiare is the nicest by far, with 11 deep overwater bungalows whose spacious L-shaped sundecks compensate for the lack of a glass-bottom floor. If you think you've seen the natural, rustic décor and terracotta floors somewhere before, you probably have: The *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models stayed here while photographing the 2006 issue.

Still, visitors to this island don't come for brand-name hotels and celebrity chefs. Here, the real luxury is absolute seclusion. That's the quality that drew American expat Peter Owen, who sells pearls and handmade

pottery from his floating workshop in the middle of the lagoon. His is an ever-familiar story in these parts: He left his life in California after he met and married a Tahitian. "Everybody's dying to stay here," he said. "You just have to meet a nice Tahitian spouse."

TAHA'A

By now, I'd grown used to the ease of island-hopping by helicopter, but as we circled over our next destination, I began to truly appreciate the beauty of door-to-door travel. Had we not taken the whirlybird, it would have meant a 10-minute puddle-jumper to Raiatea, the island adjacent to Taha'a, then a 40-minute boat ride to the *motu* that **Le Taha'a Private Island & Spa (011-689-42-99-14; letahaa.com)** has claimed as its own. Instead, by chopper, our total transit time was a tidy 20 minutes.

Unlike most other resorts in French Polynesia, Le Taha'a's 48 overwater bungalows are not the most sought-after accommodations (though when Tom Cruise stayed here, he chose to stay first in one that overlooked Bora Bora and then another with a sunset view). Those would be the two royal beach villas (both a product of a renovation completed in 2007) with private pool, private garden and private beach. They also happen to be every agoraphobic deal pro's dream: All services on the property can be performed within them, from personal massage to dining by personal chef, even a personal Polynesian dance performance and fire show.

In fact, *personal* is a buzzword around here, though things can get a little *too* personal for some. Before a guest even arrives at Le Taha'a, the staff will call the other nearby resorts at which he's been staying so that by the time he arrives, not only will his food preferences and allergies be noted, but his room will have been stocked with his favorite bottle of wine and slippers and snorkel gear in his size. It's creepy, really. But in a good way.

BORA BORA

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that you might not have had your finest dealmaking year. There was, in case you hadn't heard, a bit of tightening in the private-equity markets in 2007. If you therefore find yourself able to take only one helicopter jaunt during your stay in the South Pacific, without question make it the 12-minute one to the stunning Bora Bora.

Though Bora Bora has become a hotbed of tourist activity, you'd never know it. Consider that the volume of tourists those *other* Polynesian islands, Hawaii, receive in 10 days is the same French Polynesia sees in a year. Couple that with the fact that there are 15 resorts to shoulder the burden, and at peak season you'll be scratching your head, wondering where everybody is

(hint: They don't leave their private sundecks).

Among the first of that new wave of resorts was the 120-room **Bora Bora Nui Resort & Spa Luxury Collection (011-689-47-88-14; boraboranui.com)**, which opened in 2002. Spread over 16 acres on the southern end of Motu Toopua, its 84 overwater bungalows were the choice of both Jacques Chirac and Keyshawn Johnson (not together, of course; just imagine *that* cultural exchange), and remain so for those craving traditional Polynesian accommodations.

Boasting more modern flair is the chic Philippe Starck-designed **InterContinental Resort & Thalasso Spa (011-689-60-49-00; boraboraspa.interconti.com)** on Motu Piti Aau. Not only was it the first all-overwater hotel in Bora Bora when it opened in May 2006, it was also the first eco-friendly one. The resort's air conditioning is powered using deep-sea water pumped from over 3,000 feet below the ocean's surface — the same pure, mineral-rich water that's then heated to



What qualify as liquidity events in French Polynesia

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CLOSING



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If instead it's the grandest accommodations in the land you seek, look no further than the **St. Regis Bora Bora (011-689-60-78-88; starwood.com)**, whose 100 spacious beach and overwater villas are best described as palatial. Take, for instance, the three-bedroom Royal Estate (with private beach, pool, spa treatment room, sauna and Jacuzzi), which at 13,000 square feet has been a favorite of such patrons as Keith Urban, Nicole Kidman and Russian moguls — although, again, presumably not at the same time.

This star magnet, which has reportedly hosted Danny DeVito and Eva Longoria, is clearly for those who like to drop names — and a lot of cash. At its overwater Jean-Georges Vongerichten eatery **Lagoon (011-689-60-78-88)**, it's not hard to do both. There, the menu socks the palate with Vongerichten's trademark one-two punch of complex, evolving flavors, blending French, Asian and local Polynesian ingredients.

But for the quintessential Bora Bora dining experience, **Bloody Mary's (011-689-67-72-86)** is practically required eating. Though the boards displaying the names of famous guests outside the restaurant's entrance and the sandy floor that requires diners to check their shoes at the door may seem kitschy, the food is anything but: A thick teriyaki-marinated wahoo fish and an incredibly juicy (and rare) Po broadbill caught 900 feet below the ocean at night are so flavorful, you'll forget you're sitting on a palm-trunk stool — or that you just ordered your dinner from an assembly line on ice.

Which, of course, is the thing about French Polynesia: just being there, indulging in its many pleasures, makes you forget about a lot of things — including that there's any other place in the world you need to be. ☐