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*A Conversation for the Millennium:
Dr. Sylvia Earle and Jean-Michel Cousteau*

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The untouched beaches and dense tropical forest of this uninhabited island off Moorea invite exploration.

Discovering *Tahiti*

by Norbert Wu and Deanna Maha

Everything you have heard or imagined about Tahiti is true. This is, after all, the earthly paradise that caused the mutiny on the *Bounty*. You will find breathtakingly beautiful islands, with perfect palm trees swaying over pink coral sand beaches. There are gorgeous, tanned, beautiful young women of the Polynesian variety everywhere. And yes, young, gorgeous, tanning, capless females of the European variety also abound. There are incredibly lovely atolls ringed by azure blue lagoons.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLANDS IN THE WORLD

Traveling, exploring and diving Tahiti is far easier than you might imagine. Flying there from California, landing at the airport at the capital, Papeete, takes only three hours more than flying to Hawaii. Exploring the unique sights and breathtaking landscapes of the larger, more populated islands is easy and reasonably priced, with Air Tahiti inter-island flights (only some of the 118 islands are inhabited). You can rent cars, mopeds, bicycles or electric cars to venture into the towns.

Diving (plongée in French) in Tahiti is no problem for Americans. Dive operations now accept PADI-certified divers, in addition to the European CMAS certification. The reefs here are virtually untouched, the fish life is spectacular, and the dives are enormously varied. In one day you



Left: Fish swirl in frenzied abandon around a diver giving hand-outs off Moorea. Below: Bottlenose Dolphins surge through the deep blue waters off Rangiroa Atoll.

in the shallow turquoise waters of the lagoon, amid hundreds of butterflyfish, parrotfish and jacks swimming above sparkling white-sand. Manta Rays are often seen in the lagoon, as well as moray eels and turtles. Eagle Rays are also encountered.

Moorea

Moorea is a lovely island, with gorgeous bays, dramatic mountains and sunny motus (small islands on the atoll, with sandy beaches, good for a pleasant boat ride and a picnic lunch). It is incredibly easy to get to Moorea from Papeete (a 10-minute plane ride or 30-minute ferry).

Moorea's coral reefs are well preserved and the visibility is often more than 120 feet. Regular fish-feedings over the past years have ensured a large population of fish waiting for a handout. Moorea is also the center in French Polynesia for shark feeding, a real dive thrill. If you want the excitement of seeing sharks up close, this is the place.

In one day you can be in the midst of a shark-feeding frenzy and then glide above a coral garden replete with just about any animal you'd like to see.

can be in the midst of a shark-feeding frenzy and then glide above a coral garden replete with just about any animal you'd like to see. The natives are friendly, the travel is easy, and the food is good.

Although French Polynesia (the formal name of the island group) used to be a French territory, it has been autonomous since 1996. Tahitian and French are the official languages, but you will get by just fine with your English. However, most of the natives in the less touristy islands speak Tahitian dialects, and it would definitely be useful to attempt some French, even with a bad accent. But there's not much call for complex conversations when your days are filled with some of the world's best diving.

Bora Bora

Bora Bora is, quite simply, the most beautiful island I have ever seen, be it from the air, on land or underwater. Even the airport at Bora Bora is an experience. It's located on a small island on the outer edge of the atoll, and you step from the plane to overlook the water. A family of pufferfish entertain you as you wait for the catamaran to take you from the airport to your resort.

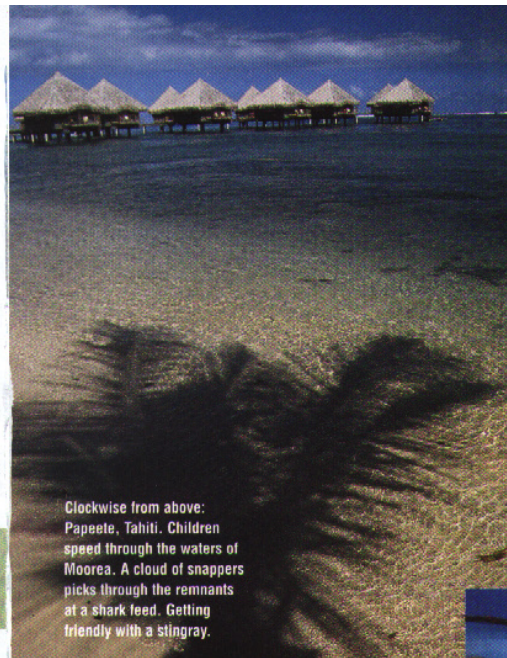
For diving, there is only one pass out of the lagoon, Teavanui Pass, and it can be a long trip to some of the outer reef dive sites. Dive sites closer to the pass are more popular and offer some gorgeous, relaxing diving and snorkeling



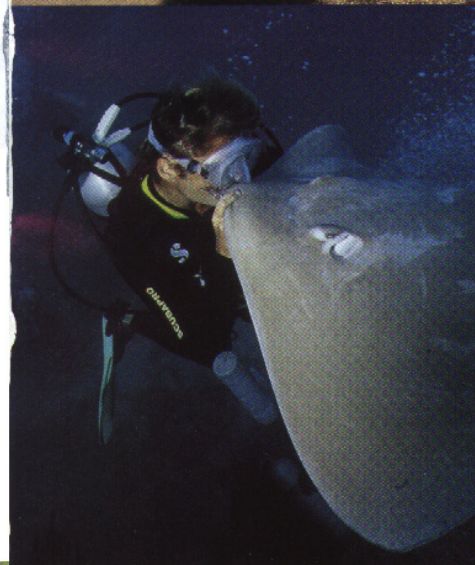
Nurse Sharks and plenty of colorful coral.

Rangiroa

Rangiroa is the second biggest atoll in the world, and from the edge of the lagoon it is impossible to see the opposite side. There are only three passes between the lagoon and the ocean. Twice a day, the tides carry water to and from the lagoon through these passes, creating strong currents and attracting an immense collection of marine



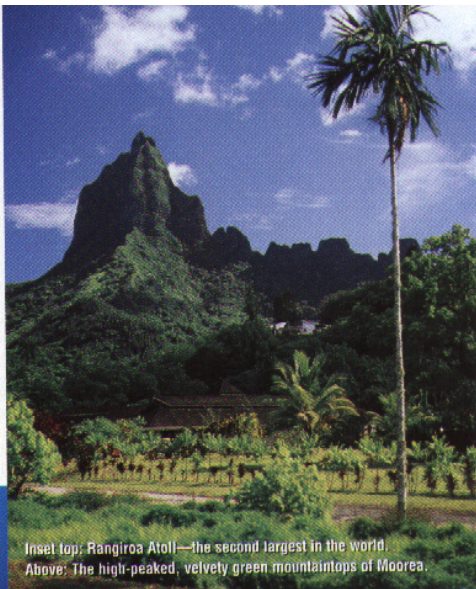
Clockwise from above: Papeete, Tahiti. Children speed through the waters of Moorea. A cloud of snappers picks through the remnants at a shark feed. Getting friendly with a stingray.





life. Rangiroa offers, in my opinion, world-class diving. Drift diving through the passes is a major attraction. The sensation of being swept away or sucked into the lagoon with hundreds of fish is unforgettable. Why dive anywhere else? You can see anything you could possibly want to here: nudibranchs, Whale Sharks, schools of Eagle Rays (my personal grail), schools of Grey Reef Sharks, huge schools of fish and a large, untouched atoll.

There are also plenty of macro opportunities. Crevices shelter a multitude of fish species, making for good photo opportunities. The most spectacular dives are on the external sides, or the right and left, of the Avatoru Pass, along the outer rim of the reef. The Manta Rays, Grey Sharks, jacks, tuna, barracuda and surgeonfish usually converge here. Along the Tiputa Pass, you will usually see pelagic species: dolphins, Grey Sharks, White-pointers, hammerheads and, between November and February, Napoleons, barracudas, Manta Rays and Leopard Rays. Occasionally, you can see



Inset top: Rangiroa Atoll—the second largest in the world. Above: The high-peaked, velvety green mountaintops of Moorea.



Blacktip Reef Sharks on the prowl off Moorea.

several hundred Grey Sharks gathered outside the pass. Rangiroa's two villages, Avatoru and Tiputa, are situated on the edge of the passes. A paved two-lane main road connects the two villages, with a string of islets in between. Because of the level road and minimal traffic, it is easy to bike and a good way to see the local shops.

Tahiti

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Tahiti

The island called Tahiti is the biggest island in French Polynesia and site of the capital, Papeete. It has the only international airport in French Polynesia, so it's the arrival and departure point for most of the visitors to the islands. Most visitors do not spend as much time on this island, as the best beaches and diving are on others. However, Tahiti is of the same, beautiful mold as its sister islands. Jungle-covered mountains rise up in the interior and both black and white-sand beaches rim its volcanic shores.

In Papeete, there is an exotic cultural mix of Polynesian, Asian and European peoples, foods and goods. Great restaurants and dark, steamy clubs on small back streets are the norm. There are also outdoor markets and food stalls, selling the freshest local produce, fish and tasty, local dishes.

In my opinion, Tahiti is a great destination just on the horizon of becoming well-known. Great diving, beautiful scenery and perhaps best of all, untouched and awaiting discovery.

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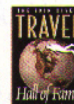
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