

WINTER 1999

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Switching

Heaven

and

Earth

in

French

POLYNESIA

During my travels, I have heard
two islands, more than any others, called the most
beautiful in the world.
Both lie across from Tahiti...

By Bob Payne

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORBERT WU

Le Meridien
Resort,
Papeete, Tahiti.
The island of
Tahiti is the
jumping-off
point for
visits to French
Polynesia—
nearby islands
like Bora-
Bora can be
reached by
air, ferry, or
sailboat.

ON A RECENT VISIT TO THE ISLAND OF MOOREA, in French Polynesia, I spent much of my time thinking about beauty. And not just because I would need a way to explain, when I returned home, why I had obtained a tattoo, an adornment (in case you hadn't known this) that was once required of Polynesian chiefs, and without which other men were considered to be less than physically desirable.

I have spent much of my life traveling among islands, including my first visit to French Polynesia in 1983, when I journeyed from Panama to Tahiti aboard a sailing yacht. During my travels, I have heard two islands, more than any others, called the most beautiful in the world. Both lie across from Tahiti.

One is Bora Bora, which from the air makes it appear as if heaven and earth have been reversed. The other, my favorite, is Moorea, about which writer James A. Michener once said, "Nothing on Tahiti is so majestic as what faces it across the bay."

What I remember most vividly about my sailing voyage in 1983 is that when you approach Moorea from the sea, Cook's Bay, with its backdrop of towering, serrated peaks, appears with such unexpected grandeur that you almost feel as if you've accidentally walked into a room where somebody is counting piles of coins stacked high on a table.

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LEFT: Aerial view of Rangiroa, the second largest atoll in the world. TOP: A boat moored in Bora Bora. ABOVE: A school of big-eyed Trevally. FRENCH Polynesia is renowned for its diving. FAR RIGHT: Swaying palm trees on Bora Bora.



currently generating the most interest among travelers—and developers. There is a hotel boom of sorts taking place in French Polynesia, and while the boom appears as if it will pass Moorea by, it is possible that Bora Bora will see more building activity than at any time since the beginning of World War II.

From the air, Bora Bora, with its relatively small pinnacle of inner island encircled by an enormous aquamarine lagoon, looks like the kind of art you are afraid to ask the price of.

How lucky for travelers, who are faced with a choice between Bora Bora and equally lovely, but less-crowded, Moorea. Because natural beauty, unlike loaves and fishes distributed by a

Yet what is most beautiful about Moorea is that it lasts beyond a first impression. It is big enough and green enough that you are able to hike far back into the secret center of things, where waterfalls flow and strange fruit grows. And where, for a while at least, you can be totally alone, and maybe a little lost.

There are the more expected pleasures, too. The soft white sand beach in front of the bungalows, or *burres*, at the Sofitel. Paddling your own outrigger canoe through the azure lagoon from the Beachcomber Parkroyal. Making sure you arrive at the Club Bali Hai, on Cook's Bay, early enough on Friday night to get a seat at the outdoor bar for Happy Hour.

And because Moorea is generally a quiet, serene island, you get a chance to talk at leisure with people who live there, as I did on this trip.

"Oh no," I commiserated with the manager of a floating restaurant called *Le Bateau*, after he told me the story of how the restaurant had sunk one day right after they'd had some plumbing work done.

"What did you do?"

"First," he said, in his heavy French accent, "We get a new plumber."

Yet despite my affection for Moorea, it is Bora Bora that is



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divine hand, is not easily shared by a multitude.

When I was in Moorea in 1992, I visited a Cook's Bay boutique called Island Fashion Black Pearls, which was run by a man named Ron Hall.

Hall was an American who first arrived in Moorea in 1975 to join the crew of a yacht Peter Fonda had sailed from Hawaii, and he had never left. I told him I had no interest in buying a pearl, but simply wanted to learn a little more.

"No problem," he had told me, with an easiness and the offer of a beer that should have made me suspicious.

Before long, I knew about size and luster and how it all starts with some kind of irritation in the poor oyster's gonad. And I had charged a thousand-dollar black pearl pendant to Visa.

Which, come to think of it, is pretty much how, five years later, I ended up with a tattoo.

"This time, I asked Hall if he ever reflected on the beauty of Moorea.

"I'll be driving around the island sometimes," he said, "and even after more than twenty years, I'll slow down just to look."

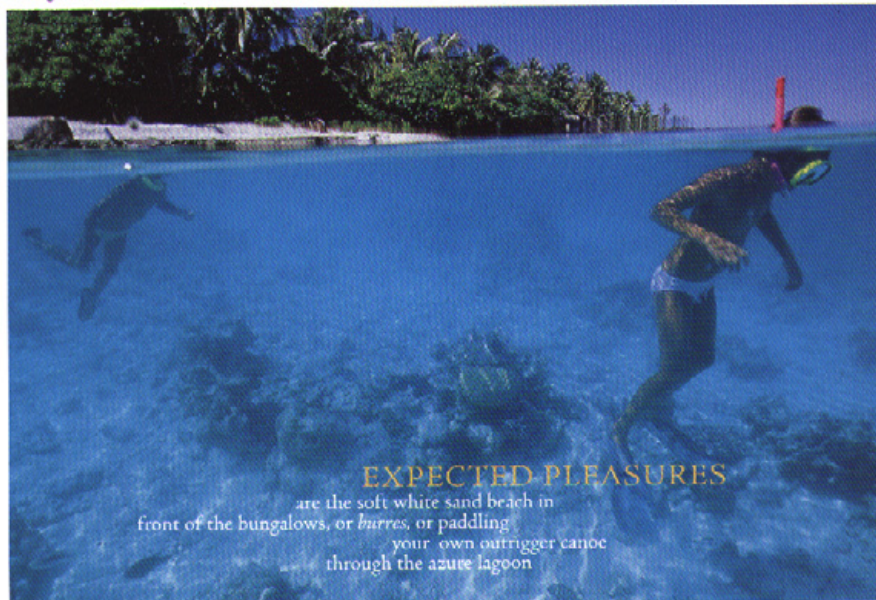
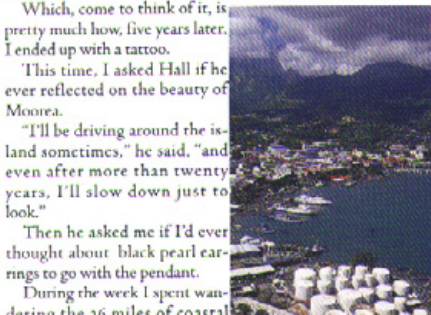
Then he asked me if I'd ever thought about black pearl earrings to go with the pendant.

During the week I spent wandering the 36 miles of coastal

BELOW LEFT: The town of Papeete, capital of Tahiti. **BELOW RIGHT:** Palms line the road all 36 miles of it—the magical island of Bora Bora. **BOTTOM:** Swimming in the clear waters of the Rangiroa atoll lagoon.

road that circled the island I'd often seen him—the ultimate image of South Pacific beauty. Sometimes he would be young and tautly muscled, sometimes older and proof that French Polynesia is as fertile a ground for Weight Watcher franchisees as it once was for missionaries. Always, though, he would look like he had been doing whatever he was doing—even if it was changing the tape in his Walkman—for a thousand years.

And once, on the sparsely populated back side of Moorea, I even saw—her. She was dressed in a red and white wrap-around *pareau*,



EXPECTED PLEASURES

are the soft white sand beach in front of the bungalows, or *burres*, or paddling your own outrigger canoe through the azure lagoon



sitting by herself in a canoe that was pulled up on the shore, and strumming a ukulele. I wanted to stop and talk, but wanting even more not to alter the scene in any way, I drove slowly on, smiling to myself with the thought that the perfect image of paradise was locked in my head forever.

It was an image, I knew, that painters would appreciate. More artists live on Moorea than anywhere else in French Polynesia.

In search of landscapes painted on a broader canvas, I would sometimes idle, by car or on foot, through Moorea's silent, lost-world interior—a kind of bowl or natural stadium, brooded over by eight encircling peaks that, in the days before European contact, was home to thousands of Mooreans, but is now so deserted, except for the ruins of stone *marae*, or worship sites, that you can almost hear the footsteps of the ancients.

ONE DAY, I DROVE UP INTO THE interior with a Moorean named Alex Roo a I Haamataarii to the Belvedere Lookout, which film buffs might recognize from the Anthony Hopkins version of the *Bounty* mutiny. To un-



TOP: Swimming with butterfly fish in Bora Bora. **ABOVE LEFT:** Dive resorts in Bora Bora. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The beaches of Bora Bora are so lovely that it looks as though "heaven and earth have been reversed."

derstand Moorea, Roo a I Haamataarii said, all I had to do was look out across the lush interior to the twin glimmers of Opunohu and Cook bays.

"Everywhere you are looking at the island, beauty," he said.

In Cook Bay we could see a sailing cruise ship swinging at anchor. From our vantage point, it looked like a white feather floating on the water.

"We Polynesians were very great navigators," said Roo a I Haamataarii, who seemed to be contemplating the ship. "We

if you go

CONTACT: Your travel agent or cruise consultant
IDEAL TIME TO GO: Year-round; April to October is high season.
IDEAL TIME TO BOOK: Winter/early Spring
GEOGRAPHY: When people refer to Tahiti, they usually refer to a group of islands known as the Society Islands in French Polynesia, including Tahiti (capital is Papeete), Moorea, Bora Bora, Huahine, Raatea and the atolls of Rangiroa & Manihi.
AIR: To L.A., then Air France, Quantas, Air Tahiti
TO ISLANDS: Frequent service from Tahiti; Air Moorea is ferry.
CRUISE: Crystal & Princess make occasional stops. Tahiti is also a good place to book shared yacht or charter cruising.
TOURISM ENQUIRIES:
USA: Tahiti Tourisme, 300 Continental Boulevard, Ste. 180, El Segundo, California 90245.
 Ph: 310-414-8484 Fax: 310-414-8490



used to navigate with the pig."

"Excuse me?"

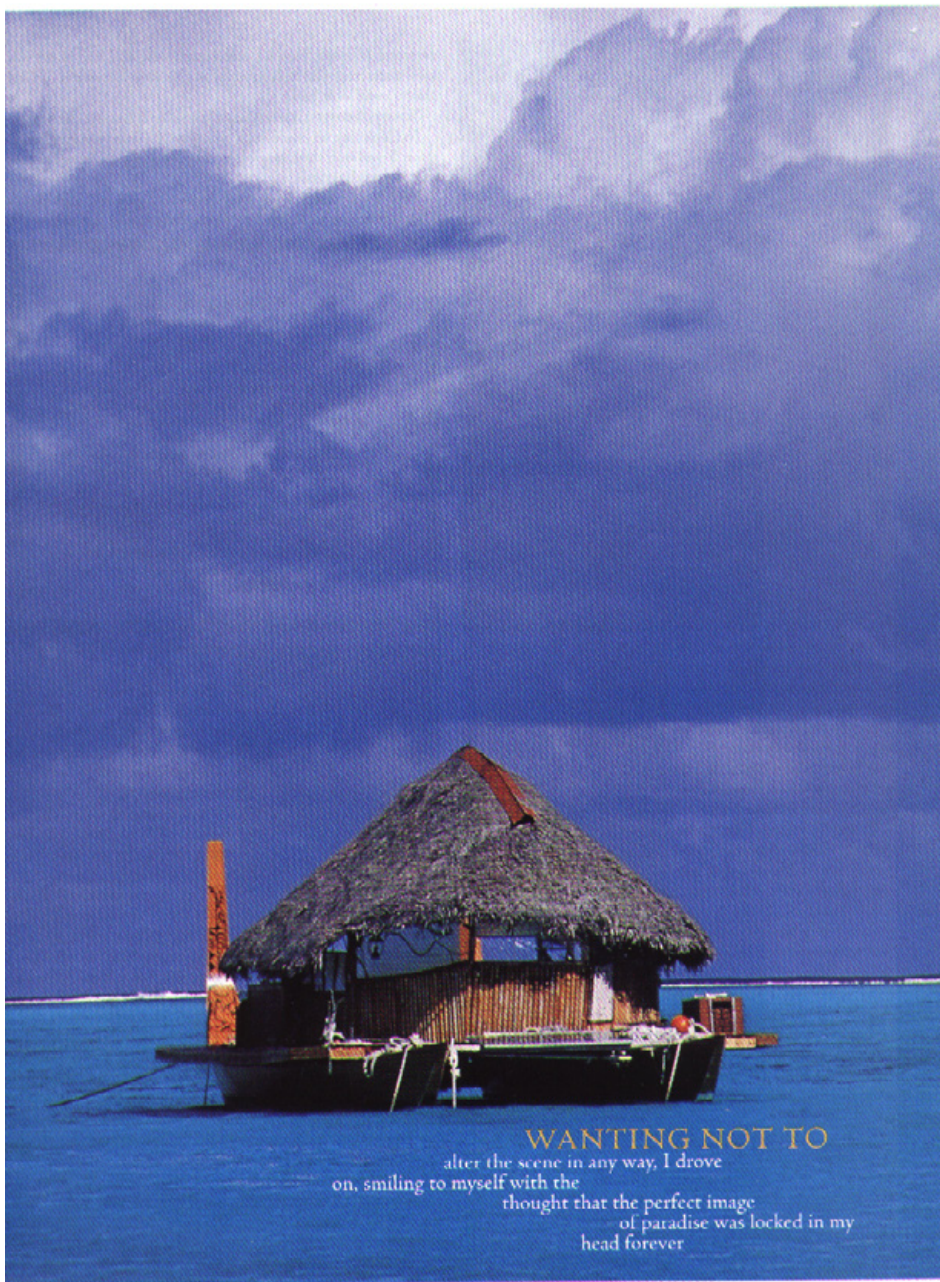
He assured me that I had not misunderstood. Normally, the ancients navigated with the stars, the wind, and the currents, he said. But when they got lost they relied on the pig. "You take pig and put in the water, and the pig always swim toward land. Because the pig, he smell the land more than man."

Which gave me so much respect for that often maligned beast that I vowed to forgo pork

at the Polynesian feast I was planning to attend at the Tiki Theatre Village, a kind of living cultural museum where, I'd heard, Dustin Hoffman had been "remarried" in a traditional Tahitian wedding ceremony.

In my wanderings around the island—one day to the Afareaitu Waterfall, one day into the Opunohu Valley, and one day out to one of the *mones*, or small sandy islands, with Hiro Kelley who told me, "Most Mooreans don't want to know about the bad places in the world, like Bosnia and LAX"—I had discovered that finding traditional Polynesian food like breadfruit, taro, and yams was not particularly easy.

Undoubtedly because of the French influence, there are no really bad restaurants on Moorea. Even tiny places that from the outside look like biker bars might have carpaccio of tuna with ginger or escargot with garlic butter on the menu. I found



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good fresh fish almost everywhere, too, including one that became a favorite: parrot fish.

The universally favorite dish among locals and travelers was *poisson cru*, raw fish (it didn't seem to matter what kind) marinated in lemon juice, with tomatoes, cucumbers, and shredded carrots, then liberally doused in coconut milk. ("They use coconut milk for everything," one Belgian woman said to me, wrinkling her nose. "Food, coffee, even when they make love.")

But the only time I could find the traditional foods were at the Polynesian feasts usually put on once or twice a week at the various hotels. One of the best of these feasts, I was told, was held on Friday nights, along with a dance show, at the Tiki Theatre Village. I was told nothing, however, about the village's resident tattoo artists.

So on Friday night I went. I ate the feast, which left me feeling like the ancient navigators could have put me overboard to search for land. And I watched the dancing, which was quite entertaining right up until the dancers grabbed people from the audience, including me, and brought them out on the dance floor. After the show I made the mistake of wandering over to the hut of one of the tattoo artists, a man named Vatea, who was busy applying to an Australian's



BELOW: Children speeding across a lagoon in Moorea. **BELOW LEFT:** Beach scene on Moorea. The island of Moorea is an island of great variety: beaches, mountains, a spectacular lagoon & pretty little villages.



shoulder what looked to me very much like a turtle jumping over the moon.

Vatea used an electric needle, but the traditionalists still did it the old way, he told me—with shark teeth and a mallet. Up to ten people would be involved in the procedure, several whose only purpose was to sing or chant. Very loudly, I assumed.

I asked the Australian if it hurt. He shook his head. No.

"Man never say hurt," Vatea volunteered.

I was not interested in a tattoo myself. I told him, but just wanted to learn a little more

FAR LEFT: Dive hut floating in the lagoon in Moorea. Diving and snorkelling are favorite activities in French Polynesia, but visitors can just as readily simply relax. **RIGHT:** Palm trees on Bora Bora.



about it. He mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "No problem."

The tattoo originated in Polynesia, but the practice died because of pressure from disappearing missionaries. It had been revived recently, as Polynesians took a greater interest in their cultural heritage. The designs I kept flipping back to—simple geometric patterns—were from the Marquesas Islands, Vatea told me, although I wished he hadn't.

Travelers have long ranked the spectacularly high and green Marquesas right up there with Moorea and Bora Bora among the world's most beautiful islands. And for me the Marquesas had been a kind of romantic icon ever since I had read, as a boy, about a young sailor named Herman Melville who deserted ship in the Marquesas and lived in a cannibal valley with a Polynesian maiden who happily used her only article of clothing as a sail.

And that, I'm afraid, did it. I asked a few more questions that I told myself were purely in the interests of getting the story.

How long would it take? (Less

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tahiti

continued from pg. 29 than an hour. How much did it cost? (About \$50.) Did he give discounts to anyone who drew a crowd? (Would Bill Clinton be in the crowd?) But I was soon sitting down on a straw mat and trying to rationalize that at least no one could say I had done it because I was young and stupid.

Vatea assured me he used disposable needles. And that if I later regretted my decision I could always—wear socks.

To keep my mind off the sensation of the hundreds of needle pricks that were forming a geometrically-patterned band around my right ankle, I asked Vatea if he thought Moorea was beautiful. But I don't think he understood the question, either because his English wasn't up to it, or, as I like to imagine, because he was concentrating on his work.

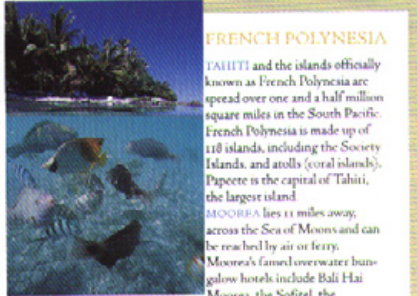
"Pain is only a little," he finally said, finishing off by smearing my ankle with an antiseptic ointment and then wrapping it in a bandage. "Beauty is always."

It was not an unpleasant thought, actually. For the rest of my life, at least when I wasn't wearing socks, I would have a permanent reminder—very permanent—of the beauty of Polynesia. *



LEFT: Resorts and activities in Bora Bora focus on the water.

RIGHT: Over 200 and under a lagoon, Bora Bora.



FRENCH POLYNESIA

TAHITI and the islands officially known as French Polynesia are spread over one and a half million square miles in the South Pacific. French Polynesia is made up of 118 islands, including the Society Islands, and atolls (coral islands). Papeete is the capital of Tahiti, the largest island.

MOOREA lies 11 miles away, across the Sea of Moons and can be reached by air or ferry.

Moorea's famed overwater bungalow hotels include Bali Hai Moorea, the Sofitel, the

Parkroyal and the Outrigger. Activities include aquarium visits, Tiki Theatre Village, horseback riding, mountain safaris, boat charters, scuba diving and lagoon excursions.

BORA BORA lies 150 miles northwest of Tahiti in the Society Islands; the main island sits in the center of a spectacular lagoon, surrounded by off-shore islets. Hotels with overwater bungalows include I Hotel Moana Beach Parkroyal, the Sofitel, and the Bora Bora Lagoon Resort. Activities include catamaran cruises, fishing, snorkelling, swimming and scuba diving.

BANGIRUA is the largest atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago and is a stunning one-hour flight from Tahiti. Activities include motor boat outings to nearby Tiputa village and snorkelling with hundreds of fish and the occasional (harmless) shark in clear blue lagoon waters.

alaska

continued from pg. 38 the trackless shore, and trying to understand the indefinable, but palpably peaceful aura of the untouched natural world.

A few more hours of serenity, and then the river poured us into the Kenai Lake. Our guide turned on the motor and we powered across, peace and quiet exchanged for thrilling speed.

The bare, distant hills and silty lake, even more turquoise than the river, gave the setting a surreal, alien quality. For a moment, I could not remember where I was.

On the last day of the tour, we arrived in Seward, a small fishing town on the southern coast of the Kenai Peninsula.

I had expected a gradual decline of altitude as the land bowed down to meet the water, but the mountains arrived at the shore vigorously, as though they had wanted to keep right on going. They hugged the town and harbor so tightly that their long morning and evening shadows shortened the Seward day.

I boarded a boat for the Kenai Fjords boat tour and, for the first time in a week, left the mountains behind. Almost immediately we spotted sea otters playing alongside the boat and, soon after, mountain sheep on the steep, rocky cliffs. Eager to see more, we began racing around the deck rails, frantically trying to catch the first glimpse of anything worth bragging about.

Eventually, I just followed the sounds of the "Ohhhhs" and "Ahhhhhs" from one side of the boat to the other.

We saw a pod of killer whales rising and falling in the sparkling water, an eighty-foot fin whale skim the green surface, hundreds of puffins nesting on cliffs, and communities of fat sea lions sunbathing on rocky islands.

After about two hours of wildlife watching, we headed into the nearby fjords to view a glacier. The giant wall of packed, bluish ice, framed by rocky cliffs, was moving. Every few moments we heard a sound like a muffled gun shot echo through the fjord and then watched another iceberg break off and plummet into the water.

During the two hour boat trip back, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the distant mountains. The jagged, ethereal lines of the peaks traveled the entire length of the coast, but never repeated their delicate designs. The layers and layers of charcoal hued crests went on forever in depth, inviting exploration, tempting curiosity.

Maybe there was much more to see than the views from mountainside decks, domed train cars, and tour boats. Maybe these views were only the beginning of the true Alaskan journey. Maybe I should have brought my hiking boots.

Naturalist John Muir described his Alaskan boat trip as the beginning of a journey. These fantastic landscapes didn't satisfy him, they beckoned him to find a greater paradise beyond.

"Tracing shining ways through fjord and sound, past forests and waterfalls, islands and mountains and far azure headlands, it seems as if surely we must at length reach the very paradise of the poets, the abode of the blessed." Or perhaps, he was just headed for one of the hot tubs at the Kenai Lodge. *

Writer LAURIE SWOPE also contributes to the Boston Globe. PHILIP ROSENBERG also contributes photography to Geo, Life, Outside, Smarter & Cheaper. He lives in Honolulu, Hawaii.