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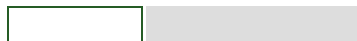
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Tahiti Calls: Lost in time on Tikehau

BY ANNE Z. COOKE - TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

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TIKEHAU, THE TUAMOTU ISLANDS — There's nothing quite so blue - vibrantly, rivetingly, blindingly blue - as the blue of the lagoon on Tikehau, an hour's flight from Tahiti, in French Polynesia. Unless you're suspended above it, looking down.

I'm deliciously alone this morning, lying on the deck of my overwater bungalow at the Tikehau Pearl Resort, peering down through water as clear as glass and busier than any aquarium. When I climb down into the lagoon to float face down, a crowd of iridescent fish - silver striped, day-glow blue, yellow and a velvety black - crowd around me, bumping my hands and pecking at my face mask's shiny rims.

The water is shallow here, close to the Pearl's thatched main lodge. A breezy Polynesian-style retreat, it shelters beneath coconut palms on a sandy motu (islet) on this coral atoll, in the Tuamotu Archipelago. The boardwalk starts here and curves away over the lagoon toward the bungalows, the deck and pilings offering a refuge for the marine community below: brown corals, blue-lipped oysters, lumbering sea cucumbers, footlong juvenile sharks and the fish.

From my perch on the deck, it's peaceful watching the frigate birds overhead and listening to the roar of the waves crashing on the outer reef, a continuous low hum. Since Tikehau's only "pass" through the reef is a narrow gap too perilous for anything larger than a fishing boat, it's likely that Tikehau, where time seems to have stopped, will remain secluded and unspoiled. And how different it is from Tahiti and Bora Bora, in the neighboring Society Islands where my vacation began.

"Choices," said Marie Garrigou, a spokesman for the Pearl Beach Resort hotels, when we met for a glass of French wine on the terrace of the Manava Hotel, in Papeete, Tahiti's capital. "Choices is what visitors have here on Tahiti, or Bora Bora, or Tikehau. There are a dozen ways to spend a vacation, from introducing your kids to Polynesian culture to mountain biking or kayaking. But mention Bora Bora and most people think honeymoon. We'd like to change that."

After 10 days in French Polynesia, I knew what she meant. I didn't know much about Tikehau when I added it to my itinerary, figuring that an atoll would be a change from two high islands. But I was lucky. Not only was it close to Tahiti - convenient for flying in and out from Papeete's airport - but Tikehau is as different from Tahiti and Bora Bora as the two are from each other.

The magic on Tikehau was the empty motus, the silence, hot sunny days and the chance to be part of a group of six - not 60 - exploring Bird Island, a Galapagos-like sanctuary where two dozen resident and migratory sea birds eat, fly and build nests, completely unafraid of the visitors who pause to snap selfies with newly hatched chicks.

In contrast, Tahiti and Bora Bora's steep, volcanic peaks and encircling lagoons beckoned with hiking, rock climbing, first-rate snorkeling, and those famous South Seas sunsets, the ones that paint the sky when the clouds gather over the peaks. And for explorers yearning for variety, the rest of French Polynesia was there, 115 more islands in five archipelagoes scattered over 2,123 square miles of Pacific Ocean.

The big-city thrill of the trip was my day in Papeete, Tahiti's administrative capital, a city alive with energy, shops and offices, a busy harbor filled with ships, narrow streets clogged with taxis and delivery trucks, and sidewalks crowded with sightseers, snack joints and fancy store windows displaying everything from women's dresses to office equipment.

I'd contemplated mountain biking on the lower slopes of 7,352-foot Mount Orohena, highest mountain on Tahiti, and in the Society Islands, but after a closer inspection changed my mind. Instead, I joined a half-day cultural and waterfall truck tour guided by Teiva, (he uses just one name) a 12th-generation Tahitian who arrived in festival gear (boar's tusk necklace, green pareo, pony tail and a huge smile).

Teiva's family once owned the valley that was now parkland. But having played there as a child, he knew every creek and gully, bush and flower, he told us. Leaving sea level and a lush, flowery forest behind, we drove uphill on a narrow winding road, heading for the top of the valley. Here we stopped to identify an entirely different set of plants, those typically found above 5,000 feet. Then suddenly the forest parted to reveal rows of waterfalls pouring down each narrow gulley.

On Bora Bora, the celebrity island, it was all about the South Seas dream. And with a blue lagoon to dive in and two dozen deluxe resorts, regional hotels and guest houses, the possibilities seemed almost endless. No matter where you stayed, you could find a shady spot on a beach, hire a guide to snorkel with the sharks or take a jeep trip up the mountain.

My overwater bungalow, at the deluxe Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort, on Tevairoa Motu near the island's only pass (it was enlarged years ago to admit cruise ships) made bamboo and thatch feel as elegant as a palace. The extra-long bathtub invited slow, pampering soaks, and there was a pool, as well. Much larger than its sister resort on Tikehau, the Bora Bora Pearl occupied acres of beach and a palm grove. But as luxe as it was, low-key, traditional Polynesian hospitality was the modus operandi.

The employees, mostly Tahitians, welcomed the guests with attention and respect, as if we were family. And for those who wanted to experience a bit more, one-hour cultural activities (crafts, dance and music) were offered daily at 10:30 a.m., according to General Manager Sylvain Delanchy, who stopped at the lounge at sunset, to greet guests gathering to chat.

Born in France, Delanchy took the job on Bora Bora "to give Polynesia a try," and fell in love with the lifestyle. "Look at the flower wreaths that the waitresses wear around their hair," he said, as the sun dropped below the yardarm. "They make them fresh every day using ordinary flowers, the ones growing

out there on the bushes. I've never seen people so artistic, who make such beautiful things out of the most ordinary objects. What matters here is the culture," he added. "Without it, it's just another beach."

Just because you can fill every minute with sports, cuisine and culture, doesn't mean that a honeymoon, or even a wedding, wouldn't be a dream come true. It would. If you're planning to get hitched, any deluxe hotel on Bora Bora will make it happen. Assistants can arrange the flowers, organize a reception, order a wedding cake decorated with flowers and whales and can promise enough beds to accommodate all your relatives as well as your entire high school graduating class.

If you want a smaller wedding, choose Tikehau and book the entire Pearl Beach Resort, all 19 overwater bungalows, plus the restaurant. Fly your friends over from Papeete and treat them to snorkeling, scuba diving, picnicking, a trip to Bird Island and romantic evenings watching the stars come out.

And there's another plus. Because Tikehau is self-sufficient (the resort's "green" technology includes a desalinization plant, solar panels and refuse disposal tanks periodically shipped to treatment plants on Tahiti) your wedding will leave no footprints. But it will surely be the year's most memorable.

IF YOU GO:

ISLAND TIPS: Because Tahiti is a former French colony (an "overseas collectivity,") many visitors are French. Because they observe similar holidays, Tahiti's busiest months are over Christmas and summer school holidays. For better room rates and availability, consider visiting in the spring and fall.

Tahiti has rainy and dry seasons, with similar temperatures year round. The rainy season, from December through April, is hotter and more humid, with short storms and cloud cover. The dry season, May to October, is sunnier and slightly cooler.

GETTING THERE: Air Tahiti Nui, Air France, American Airlines and Delta fly nonstop from Los Angeles to Papeete, on Tahiti. Travelers coming from Boston, Dallas, Minneapolis or other U.S. cities will be routed through Los Angeles.

STAYING THERE: For rates, dates and reservations at the Manava Hotel, on Papeete, and the Pearl Beach Resorts on Tikehau, Moorea, Bora Bora and Huahine go to www.spmhotels.pf.

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