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DEFINING BLUE PERFECTION

Story by Anne Z. Cooke

Photography by ColorWorld/Steve Haggerty

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 the shiny rims of my face mask.



Loading up for a run to the airport, on the boat dock at Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort, Tikehau, Tuamotu

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, foot-long juvenile sharks and the fish.

Frigate birds sing overhead and the waves crashing on the outer reef in 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 will remain unspoiled. And how different it is from its neighbors, Tahiti and Bora Bora, where my vacation began.



Morning sun lights the overwater bungalows at the Pearl Beach Resort, Tikehau.

“Choices,” said Marie Garrigou, spokesperson for the Pearl Beach Resort hotels, “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 ten 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 (in the Society Islands) as the two are from each other.



Ragged coral complicates the approach to “Bird Island”, Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort, Tahiti.

The magic on Tikehau is undeveloped motu, the silence, hot sunny days and the chance to explore the atoll and its motu, Bird Island, with eight – not eighty – other visitors. A Galapagos-like sanctuary, Bird Island shelters hundreds of resident and migratory sea birds who build their nests and raise chicks, all completely unafraid of visitors who stop to photograph both the birds and their 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.



A honeymoon dream, on the beach in Bora Bora, at the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort, Tahiti.

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. Thus he knew every creek and gully, bush and flower. Leaving the sea behind, we drove uphill through thick forests heading for the top of the valley, through successive ecosystems. Then suddenly the forest parted to reveal rows of waterfalls pouring over each summit.



Snorkeling guide Fabien Guilbert, from Pure Snorkeling, scatters crumbs from day-old French bread and the fish gather around. Bora Bora lagoon, French Polynesia.

On Bora Bora, the celebrity island, it was all about the South Seas dream. With a blue lagoon, easy snorkeling and two dozen deluxe resorts, regional hotels and guest houses, the possibilities were endless. No matter where you stayed, you could find a shady spot on a beach, hire a snorkeling guide or join a jeep tour.

My overwater bungalow, at the deluxe Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort, on Tevairoa Motu near the island's only pass into the lagoon 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.

A native of 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 objects. What matters here is the culture,” he added. “Without it, it’s just another beach.”



A distant paddler, silhouetted against a fiery sky, becomes part of the story in Papeete, Tahiti, French Polynesia.

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.

TRAVEL FACTS:

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 around. 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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