

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE ON EARTH

By *Pamela Jacobs*

InterContinental Tahiti's Sandbottom Lotus Pool

The book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* calls Bora Bora a “South Pacific beauty and an idyllic lagoon,” and references James Michener, having called it “the most beautiful in the world” and “the South Pacific at its unforgettable best.” The book also states that the paradise that is Moorea, with its “jagged, dinosaur-scale peaks and spires” “contend[s] with Bora Bora for the World’s Most Gorgeous Island title.” This is French Polynesia, an area of the world so beautiful and spectacular, it will literally take your breath away. There may be some places in the world *as* breathtaking, but there can’t possibly be anything *more* beautiful. I spent a week of my life contemplating this, wondering how anything on earth could be this perfect.

French Polynesia, located in the South Pacific about halfway between South America and Australia, is an overseas collectivity of France, an archipelago comprising multiple collections of islands. Within this territory



View from the room at the InterContinental Tahiti

are the Society Islands, in which Tahiti—the largest and the capital, Bora Bora, and Moorea exist. Each of these islands has a unique character and charm, but all include the mystical, magical feeling that is French Polynesia. While French is the official language and the influence of French culture is seen (and tasted) throughout, everyone speaks English, and everywhere you look, it is distinctly, authentically Polynesian. And unlike the Caribbean, nothing is overbuilt or commercialized. It’s, quite simply, pure paradise in every sense of the word. Whether for a honeymoon (romance might have been invented here), an anniversary, a family vacation (for very lucky children), or just a trip to get away from it all, it is pretty much guaranteed that you’ll have one of the best experiences of your life. French Polynesia is, indeed, one of the top places to see before you die.

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Polynesian dancing at
InterContinental Tahiti

Begin your journey to paradise aboard Air Tahiti Nui, an airline so Polynesian you'll feel as if you're already there, before you even depart from LAX. The direct flight from L.A. is only eight hours—not bad for a trip straight to heaven—and after spending this time with Polynesian food and music, traditionally-attired flight attendants, and gifts of tiare flowers (French Polynesia's sweet-smelling official flower, which you'll catch whiffs of everywhere you go throughout the islands), your anticipation will be at a maximum; yet, you still won't possibly be able to comprehend the scale of what awaits you.

Arriving in Papeete, Tahiti, the first thing you'll notice when you land and step outside is the fragrance of fresh flowers in the air. It's as if it has been manufactured, but it hasn't. Polynesian singers will greet you at customs upon arrival, and soon you'll be met by representatives from your first hotel, InterContinental Tahiti Resort, who will whisk you away to the beginning of the best vacation of your life.

When I arrived at the InterContinental Tahiti it was late in the evening—most flights from the US arrive at night—and I was giddy as the traditional flower lei was placed over my head, the sweet fresh fruit juice was handed to me, and the shirtless sarong-clad bellmen brought me to my room. I couldn't see the property or the ocean, since it was pitch black, but I could sense the beauty that surrounded me.

After a peaceful and happy sleep, I awoke, ran to my balcony, opened the curtains...

and voila, was greeted by the most beautiful scenery I had ever laid eyes on. In front of me lay the sprawling property of the InterContinental Tahiti with its oceanfront swimming pools and blue lagoons, and beyond that was the ocean itself, glistening like a gem. In the distance, I saw the peak of Moorea, the island which was one of three I would be visiting.

The hotel, which opened in 1974 and has since been expanded, includes 257 rooms (it is the largest, and nicest, in all of Tahiti) two swimming pools, an ocean-water lagoon stocked with coral and fish, several dozen overwater bungalows, two restaurants, three bars (including a swim-up bar), and gift shops. Sitting on 30 acres, it is the best place to begin your Polynesian vacation. The majority of the guests stay at the InterContinental Tahiti before moving on to the other islands and often bookend their vacation with this property, which is certainly recommended, but there is enough to do here if it was your only stop. One of the pools, a sand-bottom infinity pool with the aforementioned swim-up bar, is most certainly the most tranquil, gorgeous pool I have ever experienced, and I could have happily spent seven days floating in its warm water.

The hotel's main restaurant, Tiare, is a delightful open-air space serving authentic cuisine for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; here I enjoyed a bountiful breakfast buffet while feeling the Polynesian breeze and staring at the sea. They offer traditional shows three nights per week, including an

incredible dance show every Friday night.

The other restaurant, Lotus, serving gourmet French cuisine with just the right amount of local flavor, is open for lunch and dinner, and is a favorite among locals, hotel guests, and guests of other hotels. My freshly caught fish, tropical cocktails, and decadent desserts were impressively good.

As I toured the property, I was oohing and ahing everywhere I looked, and someone said to me, "You think this is amazing? Just wait until you see the rest of the islands. This is nothing," but I couldn't believe anything could be better than this. Other resort favorites include: an aquatic activities/dive center, the most complete on all of the island; the lagoon aquarium, a closed-off oceanwater lagoon (a.k.a. lagoonarium) where guests can swim, snorkel, and observe the colorful fish and coral; a high-end top-of-the-line 24 hour fitness center featuring ocean views; and the Deep Nature Spa, an oasis within an oasis, offering top-notch services and treatments, including the much-loved Tahitian Wave treatment with local oils.

The InterContinental Tahiti is both the perfect introduction to the Society Islands, and the best representation of Tahiti, the largest and most populated of the islands. As you sip tropical drinks, soak up the sun, smell the fragrant flowers, and float in the world's loveliest swimming pool with the world's best view, you'll think, "it can't get any better than this," but just wait...for your next stop is Bora Bora... *Continued on Page 65*



InterContinental Le Moana
bungalows

Grab a quick flight to Bora Bora, and as the plane descends and you spot the island which is your next home, you'll be so overcome, you might wonder if it's all a dream. You'll arrive at the prettiest little airport anywhere (and if you're lucky, you'll be greeted by a rainbow, as I was), and you'll realize this trip only gets better and better.

Bora Bora is as gorgeous, spectacular, lush, tropical, heavenly, and perfect as you would have imagined—actually, it's more. Four miles long and two and a half miles wide, it's a small stretch of green with the dramatic Mount Otemanu as its centerpiece; surrounding this island is a lagoon of tranquil, warm, Technicolor waters defying description, and surrounding this lagoon a circular reef which serves as a natural barrier and the home to unimaginably beautiful and abundant sea life. Within all this are lovely little motu's—small islands within a lagoon—which provide even more opportunity for total escape. Unfortunately, there really is no way words can do it all justice.

In Bora Bora there are two InterContinental resorts, each different from the other, but both spectacular; do what I did: stay at both. If you're following my lead, your first stop will be the InterContinental Bora Bora Le Moana Resort, the more casual of the two, whose elegance and romance lies in its simplicity. You'll be taken by boat from the airport, and as you pull up to the dock, with the blanket of stars twinkling overhead and the lights of the small resort coming on, and the soft-spoken local woman guiding you from the dock to the check-in area and placing a flower lei around your neck, you'll wonder



InterContinental Le Moana
property

how you got so lucky to be calling this home.

There are 64 thatched-roof overwater bungalows that are, like the rest of the resort, traditional in design, intimate, comfortable, and, well, divine. Steps lead from your terrace directly into the calm, warm waters below, and no details are overlooked, including the refreshing outdoor shower. Perhaps my favorite aspect of my overwater home, if I was forced to choose, was the glass coffee table in the living room that slid open to reveal the ocean below; from here, you can feed the fish.

While Le Moana is not a place to party, there are plenty of activities that will remind you why you came here, and to enjoy the simple things: there's a nightly happy hour, a pool table, ping pong, and more, all under thatched roofs, off of winding paths, and within the luscious, tropical setting that is Le Moana. Of course, you can do nothing at all but swim in the picture-perfect waters and nap on a hammock under the Polynesian sun.

You'll also enjoy two restaurants—one for breakfast and lunch, one for dinner, both serving excellent food utilizing the fresh, local ingredients, and full privileges at the other InterContinental in Bora Bora, the InterContinental Bora Bora Resort and Thalasso Spa. If you don't feel like leaving your bungalow for breakfast, no worries—they can deliver breakfast to you via canoe. You'll never want to leave Le Moana (trust me, you really won't), but you might as well head over to Thalasso—for an overnight stay or at the very least, a spa treatment—and see what all the fuss is about. *Continued on Page 67*

Breakfast delivery by outrigger
canoe at Le Moana



French Polynesia

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Rumor has it that while filming the movie “Couples’ Retreat,” Vince Vaughn was so enamored with the InterContinental Thalasso’s Deep Ocean Spa, he visited numerous times during his stay in Bora Bora. I had heard from several people that they actually wanted to film the movie there, but the management didn’t want to disrupt their guests or interfere with anyone’s tranquility.

This resort is the larger sister of Le Moana, and one of the great things about having this as an option is that Le Moana is perfect for those who prefer smaller, more traditional island accommodations, while the Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa is perfect for those seeking more modern touches. Either way, you can’t go wrong.

While the Thalasso property is more modern, there are still Polynesian touches sprinkled throughout, making it clear that you are in a quintessentially Polynesian paradise. And while it’s larger, it’s still warm and intimate, from the 80 overwater bungalows with differing views, the best directly facing the mountain, to the open-air restaurants and bars. Thoroughly embracing the environment, the resort utilizes a deep-sea water air-conditioning system, and encourages interaction with the plentiful marine life; a favorite activity among guests is the daily stingray feeding in the shallow waters of the property. I couldn’t help but giggle like a child as the soft, friendly stingrays begged for food like puppies.

The gorgeous, crystal clear water spreads around the resort and throughout it like an accidentally perfect design element. Lagoons and small pools weave their way around the buildings and bring the beach to almost every area of the property, including the world-renowned Deep Ocean Spa.

The Spa, a most impressive undertaking, is the only Thalasso spa in Polynesia, Thalasso being a technique that utilizes ocean water, brought from depths of 2.7km below the sea via a large pipe. This pure deep ocean water, known for its curative and restorative qualities, is present in many of the treatments, including the “Algospa” Marine Scrub and Wrap, the Deep Sea Hydromassage Bath, the Bora Bora Deep Blue Massage, and more. Aesthetically, it’s quite possibly the most relaxing, soothing, beautifully designed spa I’ve ever seen. The massage tables look down onto a glass bottom floor that sits atop the turquoise waters; the relaxation areas harmoniously combine so many elements of nature, it’s

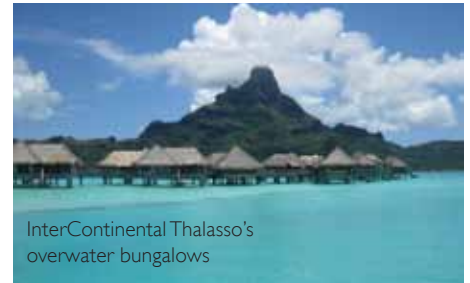
almost unreal; the unobstructed ocean views, outdoor showers and Jacuzzi, and intimate tea lounge make for an experience for which there are no words. Perhaps this is what Adam and Eve experienced.

Beyond the sublime spa, there’s an overwater wedding chapel that could convince any commitment-phobe to tie the knot, and restaurants that offer food as delicious as the scenery. It was here that I first tried poisson cru—the Polynesian version of ceviche, with fresh-caught tuna, coconut milk, cucumbers, carrots, tomatoes, and lime juice—and fell instantly in love with this local dish. I also had a Tahitian vanilla crème brûlée that practically brought tears of joy. By the end of my stay at InterContinental Bora Bora Resort & Thalasso Spa, I had decided I needed to create new words for “beautiful” and “perfect,” as they failed to really capture what I was seeing and doing.

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InterContinental Thalasso, bungalow bathroom with a view



InterContinental Thalasso's overwater bungalows



InterContinental Thalasso's overwater wedding chapel



Private Jacuzzi at InterContinental Thalasso's Deep Ocean Spa



InterContinental Moorea beach bungalows

If you're only going to see one other island in French Polynesia, make it Moorea, called "a monument to the bounty of nature" by *1,000 Places to See Before you Die*, and by James Michener: "To describe it is impossible. It is a monument to the prodigal beauty of nature." Surrounded by the same translucent blue and green waters as the other islands, perhaps Moorea's most striking feature is the dramatic Mount Rotui that juts into the blue sky and separates the sapphire-blue Cook's and Opunohu bays. Remarkably, Moorea is known as the "green island"—remarkable because the other islands are so very green, it's hard to believe anything could be more so. This oasis is considered the ecological island of French Polynesia, and strict eco laws keep it as such.

The InterContinental Moorea Resort and Spa, sitting on 28 lush acres (the largest property on the island), blends so harmoniously with nature, it is the perfect example of just how "green" the island is. Having recently undergone a multimillion dollar renovation, the resort features 48 standard rooms and 95 bungalows: 28 beach, 17 pool/garden, and 50 overwater. The renovations have taken a superior resort and made it even better: garden bungalows now include private plunge pools, all suite bungalows' terraces have been expanded for even more private outdoor space, and a gorgeous new two-level infinity pool sits

beside a brand-new poolside restaurant and bar, competing with the translucent ocean for the attention of swimmers and sunbathers. Like all of the other InterContinental in French Polynesia, the resort features a perfect blend of modern creature comforts and traditional local design, excellent restaurants, and stunning natural beauty.

The infinity pool, located adjacent to the beach, is an ideal spot to relax, while the flower-scented tropical gardens throughout the property are some of the most beautiful you'll find anywhere. The H el ene Spa, 16,000 square feet of pure bliss, utilizes holistic secrets and natural ingredients to elevate every treatment and ritual to new levels of contentment.

Beyond all this, what really makes InterContinental Moorea truly stand as a world-class resort like no other is its commitment to the protection of and interaction with the sea creatures that share its home. Here you'll find Te Mana o te Moana (the Spirit of the Ocean), a non-profit sea turtle rehabilitation program that not only rescues these beautiful creatures, but promotes conservation of marine species, education, and important research. Guests and visitors can see firsthand how they are accomplishing this mission, and can observe the turtles who were lucky enough to be rescued and brought to the resort.

Guests and visitors can also interact with another majestic species—the dolphin—at

the Moorea Dolphin Center on the property. Here lucky participants can get right into the water with the amazing mammals, pet them, kiss them, and learn all about them from passionate experts. While it's difficult to pick a highlight of my trip, this was definitely one of them.

If you're lucky enough to be a frequent traveler, you know how much a really special place can touch you, and in some ways change you. Many vacations provide memories to last a lifetime and photos to enjoy for years to come—but it is a really unique trip that affects many parts of you, in many ways. This was the case for French Polynesia. Sure, I felt a true sadness when I left, but I thought it was just because I didn't want to get back to real life. Yet, months later, I still have the same sense of nostalgia and longing that I felt two days after I left; I can still feel the warmth of the water, smell the sweetness of the tiare flower, and taste the Tahitian vanilla and the Moorean pineapple. I can still truly, deeply remember how happy I was there, how relaxed, how content. I have two wishes: one is that the people I love will one day get to see the perfection that is French Polynesia, and the other is that I will get to see it again.

For more information

Air Tahiti Nui: www.airtahitiniui-usa.com

All four InterContinental properties: www.tahiti.intercontinental.com



InterContinental Moorea pool area