

# TAHITIAN DREAM

## Learning to Savor the Posh Life in French Polynesia

BY BRET LOVE

PHOTOS BY BRET LOVE & MARY GABBETT

**T**HINK OF EVERY SHADE OF BLUE YOU CAN imagine— Aqua, Cobalt, Powder, Royal, Turquoise... The islands of Tahiti boast every color in that spectrum and a million more, with a remarkable natural beauty that words and pictures can't accurately describe. It's a magical place you have to see and experience for yourself. All too often on our trips, "experience" becomes the operative keyword. Like most travelers, our time is limited, but we don't want to miss anything in a given destination. So we tend to stack activities on top of one another so densely that our adventures become a Jenga-like tower of memorable experiences. That intense schedule frequently sends us crashing into utter exhaustion.

But we discovered that the islands of Tahiti require (and reward) a more languid pace. And while the concepts of "rest" and "relaxation" do not come easily for us, our time in French Polynesia reminded us how to savor the sweet luxury of doing nothing at all.

Tahiti made me want to slow down. It made me want to savor the good things. It made me want to catch my breath, soak in the beauty of the world around me, and embrace the splendor of this thing we call life. And, perhaps most importantly, it made me want to dive down deep... both within myself and without.

### INTO THE LAP OF LUXURY

Visiting the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora ([FoursSeasons.com/BoraBora](http://FoursSeasons.com/BoraBora)) is like the personification of "luxury" whispering into your ear with a sultry, seductive breath.

At the tiny airport, staff members bearing traditional leis made from fragrant tiare flowers greet you upon arrival. You're whisked away on a small yacht whose rich hardwood frame is offset by plush lounging couches; plied with ice-cold towels and tropical fruit juices as your luggage is brought on board; and tantalized with picturesque views of Mount Otemanu, whose peak rises like a foreboding castle spire above the lush tropical jungle. Before you even arrive at the resort's dock, you know you won't want to leave.

The resort's only downside is its sprawling size, which encompasses 100 bungalows perched on stilts above the crystal clear South Pacific waters, 7 beachfront villas, four restaurants, two bars, an expansive lagoon sanctuary, spa, exercise room, and a chapel for weddings. But, if you're in a hurry (or don't feel like walking in the midday heat), they have a legion of golf carts ready to carry you anywhere you want to go.

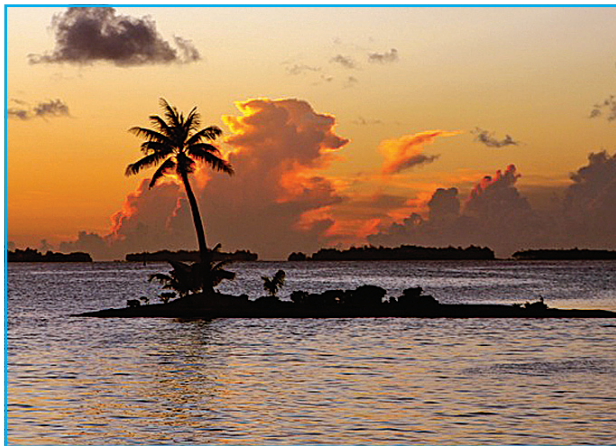
Of course, once you check into the aforementioned over-water bungalows, you may find yourself not wanting to go anywhere. The rooms are massive (1,080 sq feet) and lushly appointed, with every luxury you could possibly desire. Teakwood furnishings and traditional Polynesian artwork? Check. Oversized tub looking out over incredible ocean scenery? Check. Breathtaking mountain views? Check. They even provide snorkeling gear so you can swim in the water off your private deck.

Suffice it to say that, thanks to room service, we didn't leave our room for the first 24 hours. But the incredibly relaxing taurumi-style ("health in the hands") couples massage we got from their gorgeous spa made us glad when we finally did.

### THE RUAHATU MARINE SANCTUARY

The beach sands are white and pristine, having been raked smooth in the early hours when guests are still sleeping. The water is crystalline blue, and as still as mirrored glass. Ten yards from shore, coral nubbins of varying shapes and sizes are grafted to stone, like seedlings in some sort of underwater greenhouse.

As we strap on our masks and head out into the warm waters, we're instantly surrounded by all manner of marine life, from Parrotfish and Picasso Trumpetfish to playful Pufferfish. Making our way through what can only be described as a lushly landscaped coral garden, we see hundreds of different species, as well as numerous underwater sculptures colored by algae. For the next hour,



we have this idyllic underwater Eden all to ourselves. This is the Ruahata (God of the Ocean) Lagoon Sanctuary.

Back in 2008, when the resort was completed, there was only land where the sanctuary is now. There was no coral in the waters between the main island of Bora Bora and the motu (or small island) upon which the Four Seasons was built, because there were no rocks upon which coral could grow. There were no fish for snorkelers to see, other than the occasional Pufferfish or Eagle Ray passing beneath the bungalows.

So the resort brought in marine biologist Oliver Martin, a native of the Antibes whom the resort's staff came to refer to as "The Fish Whisperer." Martin has spent the last four years tending to his coral garden daily. And, on a 75-minute private tour of the lagoon sanctuary (which is available to anyone who donates to their Adopt-A-Coral program, while

group tours are free for all guests), he introduces visitors to its myriad wonders with an infectious sense of pride and passion.

He explained that, after digging out the lagoon, the resort laid down a few ground rules: He had to grow all new coral himself, and he was forbidden from bringing in fish, whether by hand or by chumming the waters with food. In short, every single fish you'll find in Ruahatu is there simply because they enjoy the safety the sanctuary provides.

As we followed Martin back into the recesses of the lagoon, it was easy to see the love he has for his little slice of Polynesian paradise. He showed us the tiny coral nubbins as if they'd been borne from his womb. Fish crowded around him expectantly, like fans backstage at a rock concert, knowing he'd eventually pick up a large rock and allow them to feed on the algae that grow beneath it. He even took time to dive down and brush sand off sea anemones, whose tendrils seemed to wave a watery thank-you.

One of the coolest things we saw with Martin was an Octopus, hidden amongst some rocks, camouflaged to blend in with his surroundings. After making sure we weren't going to attack him, the octopus made a run for it, spreading his tentacles out as he swam for shelter. As we watched, he suddenly changed colors from a yellow-beige to a burgundy red before slipping into the next crevice, where, once again, he was perfectly camouflaged. It was an amazing animal adaptation.

As reefs around the world suffer from the pressures of climate change, the degradation of water quality, and human impact, it's incredible to explore such a lovingly tended aquatic ecosystem. Through educational programs for visitors and local Tahitian children alike (which include an opportunity to help graft coral), Martin and the Four Seasons are hoping to encourage the next generation of marine conservationists.

"We hope our guests who appreciate the beautiful environment here will devote some of their time and energy to helping us preserve this pristine ecosystem," said Martin as we bid farewell. "This is something that the future generations should be able to enjoy."

### OFF INTO THE SUNSET...

On our last night in Bora Bora, we treated ourselves to their Polynesian Style Romantic Dinner, served at a private table on the beach with a postcard-worthy view of the sunset. Tiki torches were set up to frame a tiny motu, and the sexy sounds of bossa nova emanated from the cool beachside lounge nearby.

As we sipped pina coladas and sighed at the romantic tranquility of the scene, we were festooned with a seemingly never-ending stream of tasty tropical tidbits. The appetizers offered an array of robust flavors, such as massive prawns with tangy grapefruit, remarkably sweet watermelon paired with creamy feta, fresh-caught yellowfin tuna and sesame, and delightfully marinated wagyu beef. The service was impeccable, seemingly anticipating our every need, yet never intruding on our delightfully mellow mood.

We were so stuffed from the "earthly fenua assortment" that we barely had room for our "surf 'n' turf umete" entrees—grilled angus beef strip loin, marinated Lagoon fish and spiny lobster—so we tried just enough of each to satisfy our curiosity, then asked them to pack us a doggy bag to take back to the room. We knew we had to save room for their decadent desserts, which more than lived up to our expectations.

By the end of our time at the Four Seasons, we were content to simply sit on our deck, ordering breakfast from room service and watching the sky change from the reddish-orange hues of morning sunrise to the brilliant blues of midday. As much as we loved the marine sanctuary, we loved spending time luxuriating in the pleasure of each other's company even more. The peacefulness was downright blissful.

There are some trips that change your mind, such as our 2012 trip to the Middle Eastern nation of Jordan. Others, like the South African safari I took back in 2000, change your heart and soul. But our week in Tahiti changed my spirit, and I honestly don't think it could've happened at a better time.