



Lagoon by Jean Georges at the St. Regis in Bora Bora, with its view of Mount Otemanu in the distance, white powder sand and turquoise water, may be the most romantic restaurant in the world. PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL

Discovering exotic culinary treasures

French Polynesia offers a variety of delights, from exquisite fine dining to fun food trucks

MHAIRRI WOODHALL
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

With lemon sharks circling below my feet, I gaze out at the last wisps of pink floating behind Mount Otemanu's jagged peak. Soon the stars will come out to play — their brilliance enhanced by the black, lightless South Pacific sky. We linger over our final dish of the seven-course tasting menu at Lagoon by Jean Georges. Caramelized bananas with a spiced milk chocolate sauce is the perfect ending to an exquisite meal.

Suspended over its namesake, Lagoon at the St. Regis, Bora Bora is arguably one of the most romantic restaurants in the world. We dined at sunset while listening to live Polynesian music and watching reef sharks and tropical fish swim in the lagoon beneath the restaurant's glass floor. The menu marries traditional French techniques with Asian flavours, resulting in culinary ecstasy. Caramelized foie gras with pineapple-lemon jam and French brioche, fresh fish crusted with spices and nuts in a sweet and sour broth, and beef tenderloin served with caramelized carrots and a miso mustard sauce were a few of the highlights.

Another idyllic day in French Polynesia has passed and I believe the pinnacle has been reached. For how can one surpass the island of Bora Bora? A landscape of talcum white powder sand, lush tropical foliage and rugged volcanic hillsides surrounded by crystalline turquoise lagoon water.

Four years ago, on our first visit to the Society Islands, we followed the 125 kilometre, three-day Ha-waiki Nui Va'a canoe race by fishing boat. I was four months pregnant and unable to indulge in Tahiti's

national dish — poisson cru — raw fresh fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk.

This trip, I focused on righting that miss. In fact, my husband and I spent much of our time familiarizing ourselves with the local cuisine. Our gastronomic adventure began in Tahiti, where we stumbled upon a cosy bistro that served one of the best poisson cru dishes I've had to date. Chez Remy, which is steps from Le Meridien Tahiti where we stayed, is a delicious affair. Dishes are hearty, generous and reasonably priced when compared to on-resort meals.

We feasted on buckwheat galettes filled with cheese and fresh seafood, watching reef sharks swim in the moonlit lagoon below

Throughout our global travels, we've always enjoyed taking a cooking class to learn more about local recipes, ingredients and techniques.

When we arrived for our lesson with the pastry chef at Le Meridien, we quickly realized there had been a miscommunication about our French language skills. Needless to say, we enjoyed a rather comical and highly entertaining interactive

demonstration. Using a combination of charades, some English, rudimentary French and a lot of laughter, we managed to create a delicious white chocolate and almond Buche de Noel (Yule Log) — a traditional French dessert served during the Christmas season.

If you're in Tahiti on a Friday, a visit to the famed Roulettes (food trucks) on the dock in Papeete is a must do. While the experience is as far from Lagoon as one can imagine, it will likely be your most economical meal here. Plus it's a fun, relaxing way to experience some local culture. Tahitians love to eat, and the portion sizes served at this culinary extravaganza reflect this. We found everything from fish and chips and barbecue to galettes and crepes.

My favourite crepes, however, were served at Toatea Creperie in the Hilton Moorea Lagoon Resort. We feasted on buckwheat galettes filled with cheese and fresh seafood, watching reef sharks swim in the moonlit lagoon below the open-air restaurant. Dessert — flambeed Crepe Suzette — was equally delicious.

Another little gem on Moorea is Rudy's. The charming French restaurant operates a round-trip shuttle to some of the area hotels, including the Hilton. Missing out on Rudy's French onion soup, legendary stuffed parrotfish and crème brulee would be a tragedy.

Food and drinks definitely tend to be on the more expensive side in French Polynesia, so if your hotel offers a bed-and-breakfast package, it can be well worthwhile. For many, the trip will be a once in a lifetime experience, so why not let loose and indulge?

There's a very good chance you'll enjoy one your most memorable meals here.

We visited remote hill tribes by bicycle

VIETNAM FROM **E1**

After experiencing the hustle and bustle of the city, we took a night train from Hanoi to Lao Cai. The sleeping came easy in the four-berth car as our jet lag caught up with us. Upon arrival, we were picked up by a driver and taken to the beautiful mountain town of Sapa. Here, we spent an afternoon riding bikes into the mountains — heading toward remote hill tribe villages that we would have been unable to see without a bike.

We unexpectedly came across an event where a hill tribe was celebrating the planting of the region's rice. Hundreds of people were dressed in their tribal clothing. Everyone at the celebration was welcoming and smiling. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that magically appeared before us.

Over the next two days, we trekked up rice terraces and came across water buffalo, ducks, pigs, dogs and many other animals. Going up the mountains took a bit of effort as we balanced our weight on the ledges of the terraced paddies — but the further up we got, the more amazing the views. Along the way, we came across locals. Many of them knew our guide and invited us in to see their homes. They live simply, often with three generations in the same small, two-room dwelling. It certainly made us realize how abundant our life in Canada is.

We stopped at a remote village for lunch and were hosted by the hill tribe's elder. The lunch was made up of a dozen local dishes — including spring rolls, amazing

salads, grilled fish and even tasty little eels that live in the rice paddies. Accompanied by cold beer, the elder told jokes (translated by our guide), introduced us to his grandson, and offered my husband many shots of rice wine. It was a lunch to remember.

That night, we stayed at Topas Ecolodge — located in Hoang Lien National Park, about a 45-minute drive out of Sapa. Our accommodation was a beautiful bungalow overlooking the incredible rice terraces and mountain valley. The lodge is focused on sustainability and creating opportunities for the people of the local hill tribes. It was one of the most memorable places we have ever experienced in all of our travels.

Then, we were off to Halong Bay to see the limestone karst landscape, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We spent two-and-a-half days on a luxury Vietnamese junk. On board, I took a Vietnamese cooking class with the chef and we learned Tai Chi as the sun came up each morning. We visited a pearl farm and a floating village and kayaked through the hidden caves and coves. On our final day, we climbed to the peak of a Titov Island to enjoy the 360-degree view of the bay. It is spectacular.

When it was time to leave Vietnam, I knew that we'd have to return. Not just to visit the south, but to come back to the north. We saw so much, but yet not enough. There is so much more of the incredible country to experience.

The writer was a guest of BikeHike Adventures, which did not read or approve of this article before publication.



Biking and hiking in Vietnam delivers an opportunity to interact with local villagers. RUTH ATHERLEY

East Coast & Caribbean Cruise Temptations!



Dave Frinton
Co-Founder
& President
CruisePlus

Let's start with a 22 night package that I think is not only a great itinerary, but also fabulous value. On October 3rd you will fly to Quebec City, have one night in a 4 star hotel, then board the elegant ms Eurodam for 21 nights. You cruise to Saguenay, Gaspé, Charlottetown, Sydney, Halifax, St. John, Portland, Boston, Port Canaveral, Fort Lauderdale, Grand Turks, Puerto Rico, St Maarten and then to Holland America's exquisite private island Half Moon Cay in the Bahamas before disembarking October 25th in Florida. \$3099 CAD gets you an inside stateroom and \$4499 CAD pp lands you in a nice balcony stateroom, and also includes roundtrip Calgary air, a \$50 per person onboard credit and all taxes. If you just want the Canada/New England 15 day package, a balcony is \$3949 CAD pp, with other categories available.

As for the Caribbean, we have 4 sailings aboard the ms Oosterdam that are lovely 10 or 11 day Southern itineraries departing between October 16th and November 27th. I don't have space to talk about all of them, but as an example, the November 27th sailing including airfare from Calgary, 1 night hotel and the 10 day cruise (Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, Dominican Republic, Bonaire, Curacao and Aruba), all taxes and more is \$2549 CAD for a high category balcony. Another terrific option is a 16 night package aboard the ms Eurodam on November 21st. This is \$2799 CAD pp and includes roundtrip Calgary air, 1 night hotel in Fort Lauderdale, 15 nights cruising with ports in Half Moon Cay (2 days!), Jamaica, Cayman Islands, Key West, Dominica, USVI, and St Kitts, all taxes and more. Did I get you interested?...as I write this I wish I was going this fall, but Shelley and I will have to wait as we are planning to go on the 80's cruise (with INCREDIBLE entertainment!) on the Eurodam on February 28th — which I will be telling you about soon. Have a great week!



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Caramelized banana dessert is the perfect ending to an exquisite meal.

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