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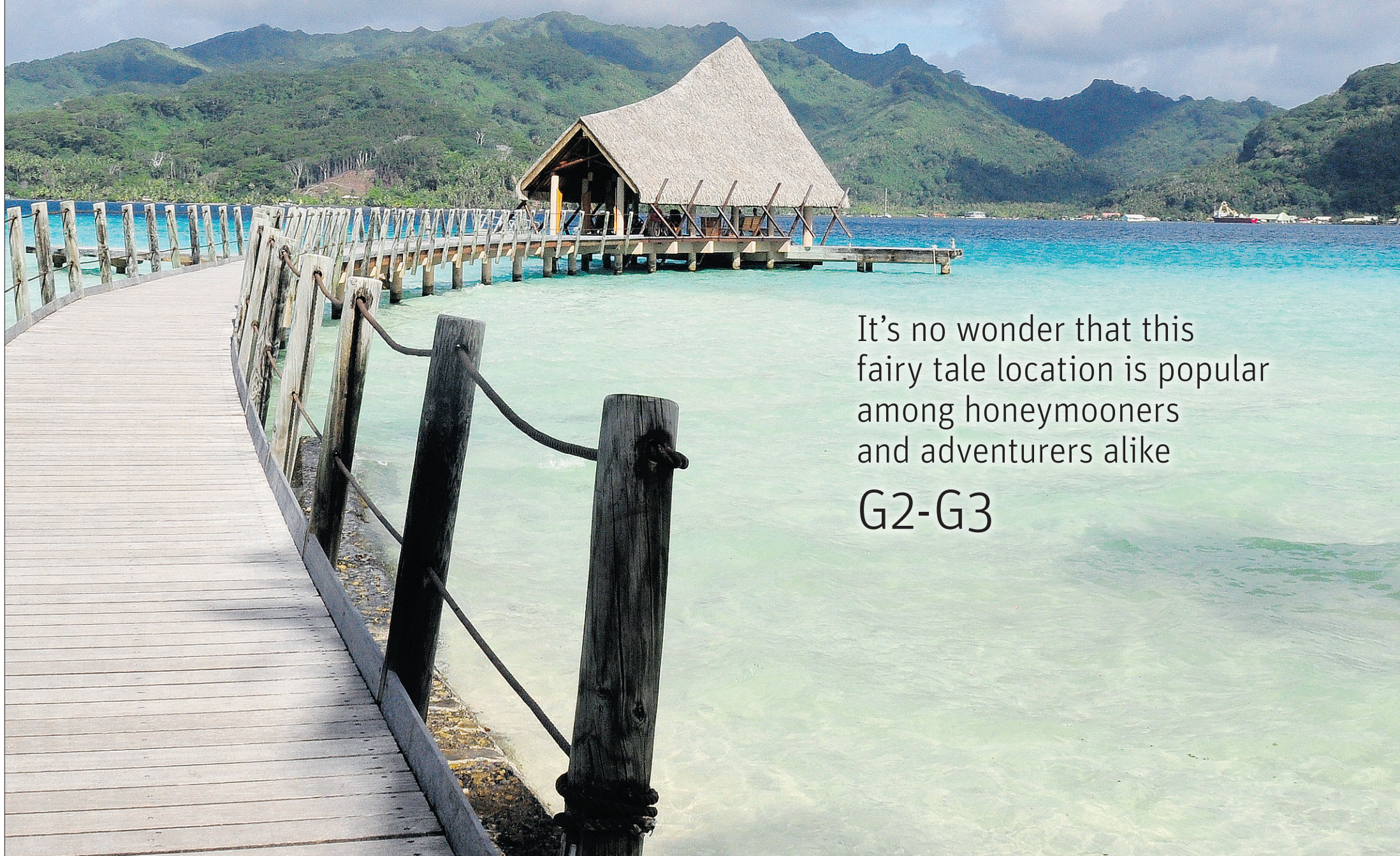
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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10 | 2011 | EDITOR CARALYN CAMPBELL 604.605.2784 | CACAMPBELL@SUNPROVINCE.COM

THE ISLANDS

Picture perfect French Polynesia



It's no wonder that this fairy tale location is popular among honeymooners and adventurers alike

G2-G3

The dock and entrance to Le Taha's Resort & Spa showcases the magnificent scenery in Tahiti.

ONLINE

Border blues

Tourism officials on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border are cheering new measures to make travelling easier, but warn barriers still exist

INSIDE | G4-5

Passing the torch

Former Olympian Emily Brydon works closely with hometown ski hill Fernie Alpine Resort through her own foundation to expose young people to sport, the arts and education



INSIDE | G6

A New York state of mind

For a day or a weekend sparkling with the season's spirit, there's no topping the Big Apple, with a twinkling Norway spruce towering over the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center



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CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Top reasons why you must visit French Polynesia

BY MHAIRRI WOODHALL

Picture perfect only begins to describe what awaits you in the French Polynesian islands of Tahiti, Moorea, Huahine, Taha'a and Bora Bora.

Rugged volcanic hillsides blanketed with lush tropical foliage juxtapose talcum white powder sand fringed by turquoise crystalline water.

Like a song with perfect pitch, the landscape in French Polynesia touches the soul and releases a flurry of emotion.

Here, there is no shame in spending hours daydreaming on the veranda of a thatched-roof hut while gazing in wonder at nature's creation.

During our 10 days on these fairy tale islands, we experienced some of French Polynesia's greatest gifts.

Warm and wonderful Tahitians

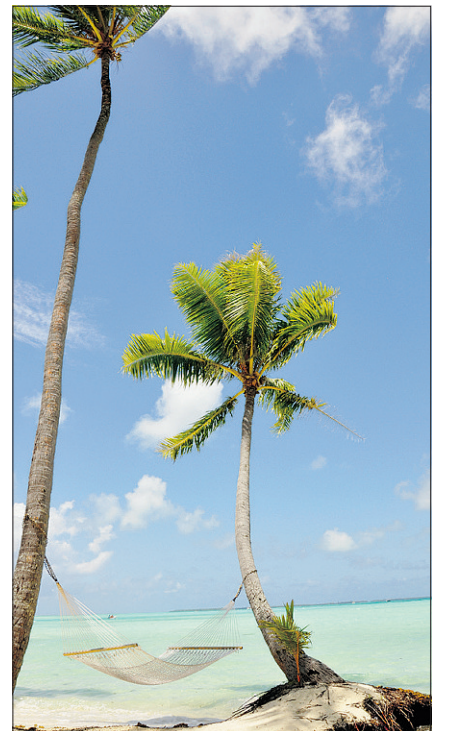
Like the sun's rays, the people of Tahiti are warm and welcoming. Smiles here are genuine and locals seem to go out of their way to offer directions, recommendations and a helping hand.

After spending time exploring Tahiti and her islands it's easy to understand how sharing kindness and laughter can become a way of life.

Although the national language is



The Hawaiki Nui Va'a race is held over three days and racers paddle over 124 kilometres between the islands.



An idyllic spot to lounge.

French, most Tahitians will happily converse in English and even offer some simple phrases in the native Tahitian language.

When a local says farewell by kissing both cheeks and inviting you back it's both sincere and heartwarming.

A private island

If you've ever fantasized about having your own private island, then Taha'a might just make your dreams come true.

Ideal for honeymooners and

lovebirds looking for an intimate and exclusive vacation, this somewhat undiscovered haven features a Coral Garden for fabulous snorkelling, luscious vegetation with beautiful tropical flora, an emerald coloured lagoon and the exceptional Relais & Chateaux Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa.

Voted by *Conde Nast Traveller* as one of The World's Best Places to Stay, Le Taha'a offers 57 private over-water bungalows and beachfront villas inspired by traditional Polynesian architecture, a treetop restaurant and tranquil spa amid an exotic garden.

Romance abounds

It is difficult to imagine a setting more romantic than French Polynesia, and it's no surprise that this is the top honeymoon destination in the world. If the idyllic scenery isn't enough to spark flames of passion, the selection of activities for two offered throughout Tahiti's islands will have your heart melting.

Start your morning with a gourmet breakfast of tropical fruit, freshly squeezed juice, French pastries, artisan cheeses and quiche delivered by Polynesian Canoe to your private over-water bungalow.

Dine waterfront with a Polynesian picnic for two in the warm shallow waters of a secluded Motu (island), or on a private sunset dinner cruise.

Or, simply pamper each other with a couple's spa service inspired by the rituals and natural ingredients of the South Pacific.

three-day, 124.5-kilometre paddling race between the islands of Huahine, Raiatea, Taha'a and Bora Bora.

Each day, in the blistering hot sun, we were in the heart of the action as our fishing boat navigated rough waters and large swells to cheer on the rapidly paddling teams.

The favourite to win, Shell Va'a, did not disappoint with a record-breaking 3 hour 11 minute time in the first leg, and first place finishes in the second and third legs. The finish line, at Matira Point in Bora Bora was a spectacle in itself.

The waist deep, bathwater-warm turquoise water became the world's largest pool-party as fans and athletes celebrated together.

Music blared, champagne and beer flowed and exhausted athletes and elated fans danced aboard boats and in the calm shallow water.

Sharks, stingrays and coral reefs

One of the most popular excursions in French Polynesia is the Shark & Stingray tour.

Depending on the outfit you book with, an outrigger canoe or powerboat will take you to the beautiful outer reef.

From there your experienced guide will feed the Black-tip Reef Sharks while you snorkel or watch from the safety of the boat.

On our excursion in Bora Bora, more than 20 sharks ranging from one to two metres in length surrounded us, which caused my heart rate to soar and had me back in the boat within a few minutes.

After our great shark encounter we went to the shallow blue lagoon to swim with stingrays.

If you choose to book this excursion from Bora Bora or Taha'a you'll likely also have the opportunity to visit the Coral Garden, an amazing natural underwater park teeming with colourful tropical fish.

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Hawaiki Nui Va'a

Va'a (canoe racing) is one of the traditional sports of Tahiti. It is said that a Tahitian's umbilical cord is cut with a rock and a canoe paddle, which is apparent in their dedication to, and appreciation of the sport.

Every year upwards of 7,000 spectators and fans take to the waters in a myriad of small and large craft boats to support their favourite team in a

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Four Seasons Bora Bora is one of the top hotels, with views of Mount Otemanu.

Pretty pearls

The warm lagoon waters that surround French Polynesia's island and atolls are the perfect setting to create the Tahitian Cultured Pearl. Often referred to as Black Pearls, these fine gems range widely in size, shape and colour. Dark black and grey with a shimmering palette of tints and hues which range from green, blue, bronze, aubergine and even pink. Pearl oysters are nurtured and carefully monitored from birth through their pearl harvest five years later. Better conditions and care produce higher quality pearls with brilliant lustre. Shopping for pearls can be done at galleries or hotels on Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea, or at family pearl farms on Taha'a and Huahine. To learn more about the history and legend of the Tahitian Pearl visit the Robert WAN Pearl Museum in Papeete.

Unparalleled accommodations

We experienced some of the most unique and spectacular properties in French Polynesia, and given the amount of time you'll spend at your hotel selecting the right accommodation is critical. Of course the ultimate in luxury, service and ambience is found at the Four Seasons Bora Bora. Our traditional thatched roof over-water bungalow with hardwood floors and panoramic views of the lagoon and towering Mount Otemanu was one of the trip highlights. The sprawling, yet intimate property includes four restaurants, a full-service spa with open-air treatment decks overlooking a private lagoon, beachfront pool with cabanas and an abundance of smiling and accommodating staff. With unwavering perfection in every last detail this true tropical paradise is what dreams are made of.

When it was time to say goodbye, the lifetime memory of pool-warm azure lagoons, gently swaying palms and bright-breasted birds chirping in the breeze remained as French Polynesia's parting gift to us.

Special to The Vancouver Sun

If you go:

The Tahiti Tourism website is a fabulous resource for planning a trip to French Polynesia: tahiti-tourisme.com

If you overnight in Papeete before or after travelling to the outer islands, the Manava Suite Resort or Intercontinental Tahiti Resort are great options and only minutes from the airport: spmhotels.com / tahiti.interconti.com

On Moorea we loved our garden bungalow with private plunge pool at the boutique Moorea Pearl Resort and Spa: spmhotels.com

For a secluded island hideaway nothing compares to Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa: letahaa.com

The ultimate in luxury and service awaits you at the Four Seasons Bora Bora: fourseasons.com/borabora

An incredible three-day sporting event: hawaikinuivaa.pf

Anyone interested in learning more about the Tahiti Cultured Pearl can visit the Robert WAN Pearl Museum: robert-wan.com

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