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PHOTOS: SUPPLIED, FILE

Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa, located on a private island ideal for honeymooners, was voted by Conde Nast Traveller as one of The World's Best Places to Stay.

French Polynesia feeds the soul

Fairy tale islands a gorgeous getaway

MHAIRRI WOODHALL
Vancouver Sun

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 your 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, 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 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 heart-warming.

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

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 with Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa: letahaa.com

► The ultimate in luxury and service await 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: robertwan.com

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.

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 myriad small and large craft boats to support their favourite team in a 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 three-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 reefs

One of the most popular excursions in French Polynesia is the shark and 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



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



Talcum white sand and turquoise water await you.



The Hawaiki Nui Va'a race is held over three days. Racers paddle more than 124 kilometres between islands.



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

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.

This 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.

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.

Unique 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.

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