



Beyond Paradise

FRENCH POLYNESIA IS FAMED FOR ITS IDYLIC RESORT ISLANDS, BUT JOURNEY BEYOND THESE HIGHLY CELEBRATED DESTINATIONS AND YOU'LL FIND A RICH HISTORY AND SPIRITED CULTURE, WRITES **CAROLINE RICHES**

THE BOULES CLASH WITH A METALLIC CLUNK ON THE patchy grass amid jovial French chatter. In the distance, waves break gently on the busy shore. With my eyes closed, I might be on the Cote d'Azur, not deep in the heart of French Polynesia.

Casuarina trees provide shade, but the harsh Tahitian sun has already lost its bite for the day. I wander from the park onto Point Venus, the black sandy spit that nudges into the calm, cyan South Pacific.

For the British sailors who arrived at this spot 250 years ago, Tahiti was a foreign world. If they could see it today, with skimpy bathers nattering in French, I doubt they'd be impressed. They'd also be in the minority – the beach is packed.

The French eventually claimed French Polynesia in 1880. Today, the country retains significant autonomy and its Polynesian culture is deep-rooted, but French influence is everywhere, from the road signs to the school system and food. Propped up financially by France, it also enjoys a high standard of living, with clean drinking water, solid infrastructure and one of the highest GDPs per capita in the Pacific.

The capital Pape'ete is the entry point for most visitors to French Polynesia and often the only place they see on Tahiti before they head to other islands such as Bora Bora.

But to do so would rob them of French Polynesia's history and spirited culture. Tahiti, which contains around two thirds of the nation's population, offers a chance to experience local life and cuisine without compromising on luxury.

On a Sunday morning in Pape'ete, locals queue outside sweet smelling bakeries selling baguettes and brioche. At the Municipal Market, tables of bright fish and neat piles of fruits and vegetables vie for the title of most colourful. I imagine myself in Paris, but as the market prattle fades, the tradewinds carry polyphonic Tahitian hymns from the windows of packed-out churches.

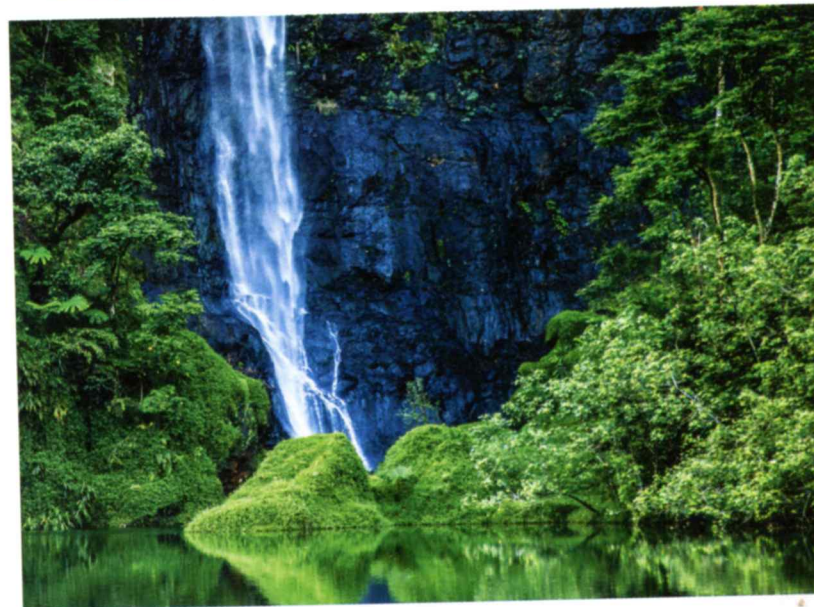
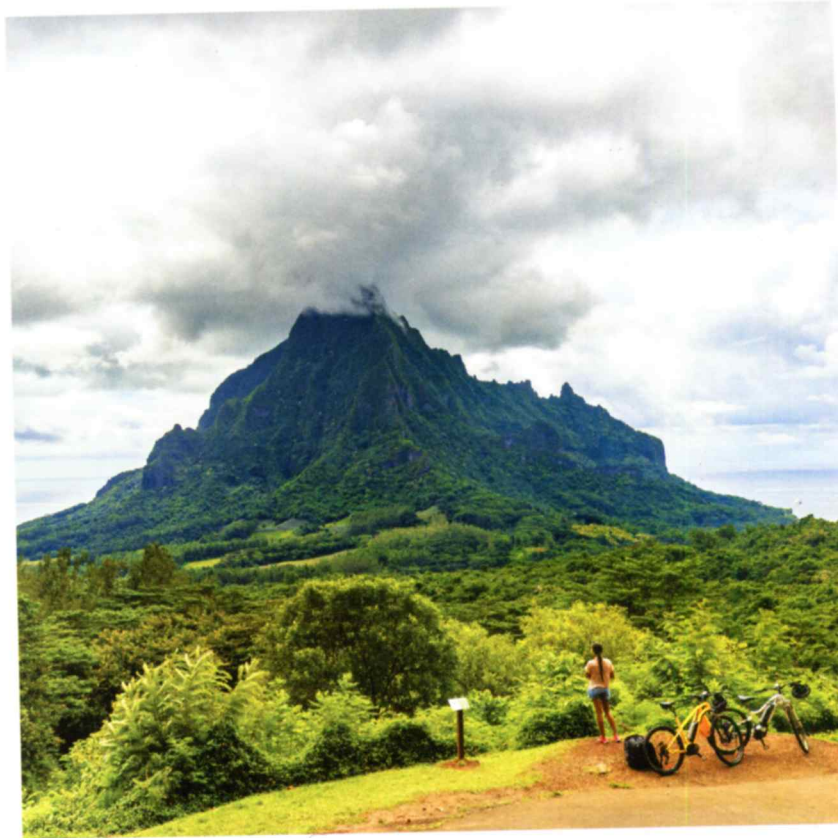
I take a walk past the town's famous black pearl boutiques to Pape'ete's bustling waterfront. Along a promenade lined with ornate lamps, the French and Tahitian flags fly side by side. Behind me, food carts, or roulottes, serve raw fish marinated in lime juice and coconut milk alongside pomme frites and Chinese noodles.

Beyond the capital, jagged volcanic peaks of Tahiti's interiors slope down into luscious green rainforest and powder-soft beaches lapped by crystal-clear lagoons. I imagine it was a similar view for the Austronesians who first arrived on double-hulled voyaging canoes around 2000 years ago.

Since then the people's identity has been defined by waves of colonisers, but their mana (spiritual energy) remains strong, expressed through music, tattoos, sports, crafts and cooking.

The best place to experience the rhythmic drumming and hip-wriggling of traditional Polynesian dance is at the InterContinental Tahiti Resort and Spa, just 20 minutes from Pape'ete. The hotel is on a stunning 13 hectares of tropical gardens encompassing serene pools and a snorkelling lagoon teeming with tropical fish. We tuck into a sumptuous breakfast of island fruit and homemade pineapple and mango jam on French pastries while admiring the red raffia skirts, proud smiles and joyous movements of large, rounded bodies.

From here we drive around Tahiti Nui, a loop of 114 kilometres where lush forests, caves and waterfalls are natural traffic stoppers. The cool blue waters of Mara'a Grotto once provided privacy to the royal family and inspiration to French artist >>





InterContinental Tahiti Resort and Spa



Sofitel Mo'orea la Ora Beach

"As I step off the ferry, I see why they choose to live here. With one quiet road circling the lush mountainous interior, Mo'orea is the perfect place to while away some days swimming, surfing or kayaking."

Paul Gauguin. At the stunning Vaipahi Falls, water spills from tall hanging vines into a little cove.

On this Sunday afternoon, local families are cooling off. We join them in the Vaima river, where they smile warmly but – like the occasional eel who flicks our legs – they leave us be. They just want to know we appreciate their paradise. *"Tahiti, c'est jolie eh?"*

Our resting place for the next two nights is Tahiti Pearl Beach Resort, just 10 minutes outside Pape'ete but a world away with its infinity pool, tropical gardens and beautiful black volcanic sand beach of Lafayette. All rooms enjoy a sweeping view of Matavai Bay where European explorers once came ashore, and where tropical fish, eagle rays and turtles glide around us as we snorkel through the warm water.

In the distance, the neighbouring island of Mo'orea beckons. French Polynesia is 118 islands strung across the Pacific like pearls, many of which are days apart. Mo'orea is just 30 minutes from Tahiti by ferry, a trip that's surely one of the world's most beautiful commutes for those who work in Pape'ete.

As I step off the ferry, I see why they choose to live here. With one quiet road circling the lush mountainous interior, Mo'orea is the perfect place to while away some days swimming, surfing or kayaking.

Fishing is a local pastime; huge fresh-caught tunas, mahi-mahi and swordfish hang on hooks by the roadside. Cooking and tasting is another. Everything grows in this fertile soil, with pineapples and vanilla particularly prized.

Wonderful places to stay are the tranquil Mo'orea Beach Lodge, where you can cook your own food, or for an overwater bungalow, Sofitel Mo'orea la Ora Beach Resort offers some of the most spacious on the island.

Out in the lagoon, Tahitian kids paddle past in their canoes, navigating the waves and reefs with a skill passed down over generations. With small tiare flowers tucked behind their ears, they flash big Polynesian smiles as they call out to us in French, *"bonne journee!"* And 'have a nice day' we did. 🌺

The Details

Air Tahiti Nui offers three weekly services from Auckland to Pape'ete, connecting with Qantas codeshares from Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

For further information, visit airtahitinui.com.

For further information on the islands of French Polynesia, visit tahititourisme.com.au.

Rooms at InterContinental Tahiti Resort and Spa start at \$590 per night. Visit tahiti.intercontinental.com.

Rooms at Tahiti Pearl Beach Resort and Spa start at \$459 per night. Visit tahitipearlbeach.pf.

Rooms at Mo'orea Beach Lodge start at \$550 per night. Visit mooreabeachlodge.com.

Rooms at Sofitel Mo'orea la Ora Beach start at \$750 per night. Visit accorhotels.com.