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scents and spas of

French Polynesia

By Drew Linsky & Melissa B. Williams



The brilliant waters off of Bora Bora Lagoon Resort are the location's calling card.

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rench Polynesia, located in the South Pacific in the same time zone as Hawaiï, is made up of hundreds of islands spread over an area the size of Europe. Of the various archipelagos such as the Tuamotos and the Marquesas, the Society Islands—also known as Tahiti and Her Islands—are the most accessible (the gateway is the city of Papeete, Tahiti).

These islands are unspeakably beautiful and seriously away. Once your private launch ferries you to your resort, you never have to lay eyes on a car, streetlight, or any other sign of urban modernity until you fly home from Papeete. But before that happens, you'll have no choice but to be mesmerized by the coconut palm-fringed lagoon that is the destination's calling card—as the depth drops, the color goes from neon green to deep blue as if a line had been drawn.

Wherever you drop into the water you're bound to be surrounded by an aquarium of purple fan coral, wispy butterfly fish, striped angelfish, and orange, Nemo-like clownfish. The lagoon is tranquil and shallow enough to allow the world's most romantic resort architecture to rest on top of its fabled waters—the over-water bungalow. You'll be entranced by verdant mountain peaks that seem to rise straight from the sea as you stand in serene, fish-filled waters right off your private sundeck.

French Polynesia is finally discovering the spa trend, with older resorts constructing gorgeous tropical facilities and new luxury chains introducing monumental temples for the body and soul. Whether you want a simple massage in a palm grove with the local monoi oil (made from coconuts and the indigenous, fragrant tiare flower), or a six-hour journey in a spa suite with a cascading shower and soaking tub, the choice is yours.

Bora Bora

BORA BORA LAGOON RESORT & SPA

This Orient-Express property, one of the first to be built on Bora Bora, rests unpretentiously on Motu Toopua with a direct and dreamy view of the electric-green, double-horned Mount Pahia. The gardens are lush and mature, and the resort is especially magical at dusk when the mountain is reflected in the swimming pool, one of the largest on Bora Bora. Barefoot luxury is the vibe at this eminently comfortable hideaway. Regular boat service is available to Vaitape, Bora Bora's main village, where there are a variety of shopping and dining options.

SPA SPECIFICS The new Maru Spa is nestled dramatically within the branches of two 40-foot Banyan trees and approached via a walkway suspended over a moat. The five treatment rooms include two tree-house massage rooms. The two-hour Tahitian Rainstorm (*Tē Ua Maohi*) features a Vichy-type shower, a Lagoon Sand Scrub using algae, a rain shower massage, and an application of re-hydrating marine mud. Couples will want to opt for the Honeymoon Bliss, a two-and-a-half-hour experience that begins with a pineapple and brown sugar exfoliation, follows with a traditional Polynesian massage, and sends you off smiling with a bath filled with coconut milk and flower petals.

GET A ROOM! The pandanus roofs come down low over the rustic, yet luxurious over-water bungalows, affording maximum privacy. Interiors are heavy on bamboo and wicker, with woven ceilings, slatted teak shutters to catch the Pacific breeze, and hand-tied padded panels behind the king-sized beds. Remove the glass-topped coffee table and feed the fish, or head to the white, modern bathroom and the wood-encased soaking tub. Beyond the double layer of white draperies, plush teak loungers await on your ample deck. Each bungalow comes outfitted with snorkeling gear. Ask for a room on the outer pier to get the best view of Mount Pahia, and be sure to have your breakfast delivered by canoe. You'll never look at room service the same way again.

DOWNTIME The pool is deep enough for scuba lessons, the thatched-roof gym has lifecycles, treadmills, and free weights, and the two floodlit tennis courts are open day and night. In the alfresco part of the restaurant, some of the best local dance performances in French Polynesia are held tableside. The poolside café serves up excellent mahi-mahi and pizzas made to order. The resort runs regular shark-feeding and manta ray feeding excursions, and you can find all manner of watersports on the white-sand beachfront.

CONTACT (800) 237-1236, www.orient-express.com

ST. REGIS RESORT, BORA BORA

When it opened in the summer of 2006, this sublime resort with spectacular views of Mount Otemanu instantly raised the standard for luxury in French Polynesia. Other resorts have over-water bungalows; the now world-renowned St. Regis boasts over-water villas, the smallest of which sprawl across 1,500-square feet of fabulous indoor and outdoor space. The resort has the ultimate in celebrity cred—Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban spent their honeymoon here, and Eva Longoria showed up just after. Ask for an over-water bungalow far out on the pier, where the crystalline water is deep enough to dive in, or just watch manta rays and angelfish swim beneath your temporary home.

SPA SPECIFICS The resort has the genuine full-service Miri Miri Spa tucked away on a tiny island reachable by footbridge. The men's and women's changing areas are beautifully appointed, with complimentary snacks at the

ready, plus private outdoor space and dunking pools. The air-conditioned gym is expansive and well equipped. The Classic Monoi Massage can be customized according to your preferred scent, and the Luminous Pearl Body uses pearl powder and kamani oil for smoothness and shimmer. Though the spa bests all others in these islands, some guests opt to have their treatments performed right in their villas or on their ample sundecks. Small wonder.

GET A ROOM! The interiors of both the on-land and over-water villas were constructed and outfitted with the finest materials, craftsmanship and technology—amenities include thick, canopied beds with direct water views, state-of-the-art entertainment systems, and multi-level decks with covered dining areas. As the rate increases, so does the wow factor: some over-water villas have over-water Jacuzzi tubs and even over-water swimming pools. Nicole and Keith chose the \$15,000/night Royal Estate for its private beach and its kingly pool set within an interior courtyard.

DOWNTIME There isn't anything this resort doesn't offer, from helicopter tours and deep-sea fishing to sailboats and kayaks to wakeboarding around the magnificent lagoon. Scuba and its cousin snuba (think scuba-lite) are available, as are guided jet-ski tours. One pool fronts the beach; the other, called the Oasis, is composed of private wading pools, a free-form waterfall swimming pool, and sexy cabanas.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten's sleek, over-water Lagoon restaurant serves local seafood, including a tangy, perfectly marinated carengue and a pleasingly crunchy rice-cracker crusted tuna. Wash it all down with their signature "Bora Bora" cocktail—champagne and raspberry puree.

CONTACT (689) 607888, www.starwoodhotels.com

BORA BORA PEARL BEACH RESORT

From your vantage point at Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort's pool on Motu Tevairoa, you'll gaze across azure and sapphire waters to the renowned Mount Otemanu, one of Bora Bora's distinctive and lush icons. With only eighty rooms, fifty of which are over-water, the property caters to the romantic; after all Bora Bora is known as the Romance Island, and what better way to be romanced than in a bungalow facing Bora Bora's signature setting?