

Soaking up the beauty of French Polynesia by water



Exploring French Polynesia by sailboat is a unique way of getting around the islands. (Michaela Urban, For Tribune Newspapers)

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Ever since the days when wooden sailing ships toured the world, French Polynesia defined the term "tropical paradise." As such, it has long been a destination I've wanted to sail, and this winter my photographer and I did just that.

Our focus was the leeward part of a 14-island group in French Polynesia called the Society Islands, the most famous of which is Bora Bora.

Our trip started in Raiatea, where most yacht charters are based. On our first day we sailed across a small channel to neighboring Tahaa, which shares a lagoon with Raiatea. Tahaa was highly recommended and turned out to be our favorite destination on our sail.

Sailing can be a great way to save on the high prices of Polynesian resorts. Our boat, a 38-foot Leopard Catamaran, had four cabins and two bathrooms and could easily accommodate four couples

and two kids. We tied up or anchored at night. As long as you use common sense, sailing is not too difficult here, especially in the offseason (winter-spring), when the swells are small. That being said, there are a lot of reefs here, so you have to stay alert and follow the charts religiously.

Our first stop here was at Champon Pearl Farm (tahiti-pearl-online.com). French Polynesia is known for its black pearls, and Champon is a great spot to learn how they grow and harvest these seaborne gems. Owner and French expat Monique Champon, who has been on the island for more than 30 years, shared with us her massive inventory of pearls of all shapes, sizes and even colors. "Black pearl" is actually a misnomer, because they come in colors that range from silver to purple, green and blue.

After our pearl lesson, we motored our dinghy around the corner to visit a place called Le Ficus Restaurant, which we heard was the best place to experience local foods cooked in the traditional fashion (buried in the ground with hot lava rocks and banana leaves) and enjoy traditional Polynesian music and dance. We arrived at the start of a torrential rainstorm, but the incredible food and dancing quickly warmed up our bodies and our mood.

The next day we visited one of Tahaa's vanilla farms, called La Vallee de la Vanille. There we learned how they grow these delicate plants (which need to be hand-pollinated) and how — unlike "Bourbon" vanilla — Polynesian vanilla is soft when dried.

If you want to experience Tahaa sans sailboat, there's an amazing small resort on Vahine Island on the east side of Tahaa. Ranked among the best escapes in the world by Conde Nast Traveler magazine, Vahine is a *motu*, which is the local word for the tiny islands that have sprouted from the barrier reefs that surround the larger islands. This resort has only a handful of bungalows (some on land, some over water), which give the place an intimate feel that makes it very special. Here you can chill in your hammock, gazing at the distant peaks of Bora Bora or snorkel beautiful coral gardens right off your porch.

Our next destination was Bora Bora. This was the first island to be developed by Westerners (U.S. troops had a base here during World War II) and now hosts the biggest range of luxury hotels in French Polynesia. With its 36 idyllic motus circling the jagged towering mountains that once made up the edge of this volcanic island's crater and a lagoon that has more shades of blue than there are words to describe them, it's no wonder this island is so popular.

One of the famous resorts here is the Hilton, which sits on the western rim of the volcanic crater. Guests can stay in over-water bungalows that are only a few hundred yards from one of Bora Bora's main snorkeling spots, where you regularly see stingrays and small black-tip reef sharks.

The eastern motus of Bora Bora offer the biggest array of resorts, one of them the well-known Four Seasons. The over-water bungalows have glass floors that bring the region's abundant marine wildlife right into your room. Near the Four Seasons is one of our favorite snorkel spots, where you can see

schools of large manta rays gently feeding on microscopic plankton.

Speaking of high-end resorts, if you like tropical luxury, you have to check out The Brando, which opened just last year on Tetiaroa. Located in the Windward Society Islands, this tiny atoll purchased by actor Marlon Brando after he filmed "Mutiny on the Bounty" is arguably one of the most exclusive and remarkable resorts in the region. A little out of range for our sailing trip (you have to fly into The Brando), it's built in a sustainable way according to Brando's wishes. Here you'll find eco-friendly features like air conditioning cooled by water from the depth of the ocean, and a marine research station.

The last stop on our sailing tour was a relatively undeveloped island east of Tahaa called Huahine. This island doesn't have the large number of motus or great snorkeling sites that you find in some other places, but it's a great place to learn about the history of Polynesia due to its large number of amazing *maraes*. These religious sites date back 1,000 years, when tribes would make human sacrifices and engage in cannibalism. In fact the last sacrifice was held here in 1906. If you like the idea of sailing in Polynesia but don't want to charter, there's a unique boutique cruise ship here that tours these islands year round called the Paul Gauguin. With an intimate maximum of 330 guests, this is not your standard tropical cruise experience. To give you an idea of how special this cruise is, marine environmentalist Jean-Michel Cousteau (son of Jacques Cousteau) is a regular guest here and gives presentations on his work.

Speaking of Cousteau, if you like scuba (Jacques Cousteau pioneered it) be sure to do some dives on your trip. French Polynesia has some of the world's most celebrated dive sites, the most famous in the remote Tuamotus, an atoll chain that is incredibly rich in coral and fish. My recommendation is the local outfitter TOPDIVE, which has dive centers throughout French Polynesia.

There are a lot of great tropical beach destinations and certainly many that are easier to reach than Polynesia, but none has the charm and history of this magical archipelago.

Eric Vohr and Michaela Urban have a travel website at travelintense.com.

If you go

Getting there

Air Tahiti Nui flies out of Los Angeles International. airtahitinui.com/us-en

Boat charter: We chose Sunsail, because it has one of the largest selections of boats for hire, and we've had great experiences in the past. We sailed in January. Rates for that month next year start at \$2,615 for a bareboat (just the boat) without a skipper. Rates run higher as the year progresses till next winter. sunsail.com

Resorts

Hilton, Bora Bora, rooms start at \$433, tinyurl.com/hiltonbora

Four Seasons, Bora Bora, bungalow rates start at about \$1,000 a night. fourseasons.com/borabora

Vahine Island, Tahaa, rates start at about \$452 a night. vahine-island.com

The Brando, Tetiaroa, (brace yourself) \$2,717 a night for a one-bedroom villa. thebrando.com

Cruise

A seven-night sailing via Paul Gauguin for Tahiti and the Society Islands starts at \$3,995 per person, including air from Los Angeles. pgcruises.com

Diving

TOPDIVE, topdive.com

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