

TAHITI

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Development threatens to hurt Papeete's charm

yourself when you're in Tahiti is, "I can't believe I'm in Tahiti." Everyone likes to list Tahiti as a dream destination, but who actually goes? It's really far away (at least a 12-hour flight from Chicago), and did I mention the dollar doesn't go very far here?

But once you sink your toes into the black sand, you forget about the cramped flight and the cost and you revel in your decision. The dark sand might freak you out a bit at first. When you walk through it barefoot, though, you will be amazed at how smooth and velvety it feels — like walking in warm chocolate, if you were so inclined.

There is a feeling of purity in French Polynesia that prevents it from feeling like a tourist trap. For instance, cruise ship ports in the Caribbean are full of T-shirt stands and other souvenir shops hawking items to tourists. In Moorea, there were a handful of buildings geared for shoppers. In Bora Bora, there were a few more than that. But that's it.

On more remote islands, the buses that take tourists to their destinations are the same vehicles that took students to their schools earlier in the day — old produce trucks that most likely will have a small gecko or two nosing around passengers' feet.

For almost two weeks, I lived in a parallel universe where it was perpetually 80 degrees and the natives spoke not one, but at least two or three different languages (Tahitian, French and English). At meals, the waitstaff sized up patrons, determined the nationality of the guests and took their orders in French or English.

It is here that tortured artists such as Paul Gauguin and Marlon Brando felt at home. During a brief lull before dinner, I watch a documentary on television about the artist for whom the ship is named. After a visit to Tahiti, Gauguin fell in love with the climate — and a native teen girl — and left his wife and children behind to live in French Polynesia. I begin to dislike Gauguin (the man) a little bit for his kinkiness. But I like Gauguin the ship even more, because just then I notice my French maid, Erika, and her Filipino steward, Michael, have left me fresh bottles of Aveda shampoo and conditioner. They smell almost as nice as my dinner: lobster ravioli with shellfish emulsion and basil, truffle and mushroom risotto and Tahitian vanilla creme brulee for dessert.

Tahiti-based anthropologist and archaeologist Mark Eddowes relays a story often told by locals about Brando and the controversy surrounding his children Christian and Cheyenne. Brando, who fell in love with the island when he filmed his version of "Mutiny on the Bounty" four decades ago, had taken a 99-year lease in Tetiaroa with his Tahitian wife, Tarita Teriipa. Christian was convicted of killing Cheyenne's boyfriend, Dag Drollet, a Tahitian native, who reportedly had been abusing her.

"In Tahiti, no one believes that Christian shot her," Eddowes says. "Cheyenne had told people here she had accidentally shot Dag. But her family knew she would never be able to survive in prison, so Christian took her place for her."

Regardless of who pulled the trigger, the tragedy ended with Cheyenne committing suicide in Tahiti in 1995.

During one trip into Tahiti's capital Papeete (pronounced pap-AY-tee), a local asked what I thought about the political upheaval. Being typically American and therefore somewhat myopic about America's importance in the world, I assumed he meant our presidential race. But he was referring to the chaos in the Tahitian government.

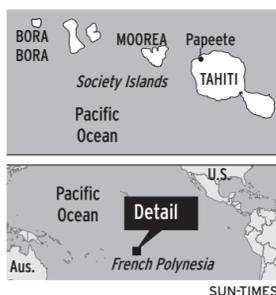
On Oct. 9 Oscar Temaru was ousted from the Presidency of the General Assembly and replaced with Gaston Flosse, who is pro-French. Temaru and his followers refused to leave office and some Tahitians worried about violence that might ensue. Police reinforcements were recruited but proved unnecessary for the most part. (A new election is set for February.)

I look around the busy port capital and am amazed that such a small city can sustain itself. The waterfront is bustling and the city's famous open-air market — Marche du Papeete — is full of vendors hawking raw fish, fragrant flowers and pareos. Across the way, I see my home away from home, which won't be ready to set sail for another few hours.

When you're on a cruise, it's almost startling to see your fel-



The black strip along the water appears to be dirt, but it's actually the black sand of Lafayette Beach adjacent to the Radisson Plaza Resort Tahiti. —DENTON MORRIS/FOR THE SUN-TIMES



ISLAND Q & A

You'll have no problem getting around the islands speaking English. But if you want to come across as a little more cosmopolitan, give these Tahitian and French words and phrases a shot. Note: I spoke a little French to the natives and spent the next five minutes trying to figure out what they said back to me.

How much does it cost?

Tahitian: E Hai?
French: Quel prix?

Where's the bathroom?

Tahitian: Fare iti?
French: Ou est le wc?

Good evening.

Tahitian: Haere.
French: Bonsoir.

Wine

Tahitian: Uaina.
French: Le vin.

Fresh water

Tahitian: Vai.
French: Eau.

Coffee

Tahitian: Taofe.
French: Un cafe.

Thank you very much

Tahitian: Mauruuru roa.
French: Merci beaucoup.

low passengers out of context on land. I see the cruise photographer strolling around town in shorts and it takes me a while to place his face, though he already has taken my picture half a dozen times. I run into members of Les Gauguines — a cluster of gorgeous young Tahitian entertainers from the ship — wearing Bermuda shorts and sneakers as they socialize with friends on their down time. It is the first time I have seen them out of their traditional sarongs.

And I wonder how a city best known for its dazzling black pearls generates enough revenue to provide for its own. Certainly, tourism makes up a large part of its economy. But with more Westerners coming to visit and more development springing up on the islands, I worry this paradise might one day become lost.

"There is a risk that without controlled development Papeete will become just like any other tourist destination for mass tourism," Eddowes says. "Yet in the outer islands I doubt that this will happen in the immediate future. There is a growing awareness with the youth at least of the importance of the environment for tourism as well as just simple well-being. The government needs to take a long deep look at the reality of this re-

source as the best way to lure visitors and keep their islands pristine for the future generation."

Then, too, there are some salacious Web sites touting Tahiti as a destination for easy sex. The Tahitians do have a more carefree attitude about sex than Americans, but the relationships traditionally have been contained within its own pocket of people. But since the 18th century when Europeans such as Captain James Cook returned to Britain with tales of exotic women and uninhibited sex, Westerners have been lured there by the promise of sex with young girls and, now, boys. Thanks to the West's misinformation about rae-raes — Tahitian males trained to fulfill female roles — the island unfortunately has attracted some tourists who equate them with male prostitutes. (See sidebar.)

While Tahiti has the bustling feel of a metropolitan city, Bora Bora and Moorea are more lush, green and beautiful.

The scuba diving and snorkeling in French Polynesia is amazing. I see clown fish everywhere and am pleased to learn these gorgeous creatures mate for life. Apparently, even the fish know they're in one of the most romantic parts of the world.

The food on the ship was

pretty darned tasty, but the best meal I had in French Polynesia easily was the tuna steak at Bloody Mary's Restaurant & Bar in Bora Bora (in Povai Bay, half a mile north of Hotel Bora Bora). A thatch roof covers the floor, which is essentially just white sand. After you order drinks, a server takes you to the front of the restaurant to show you all of that evening's choices. As I eye a lazy cat sleeping under the table and the array of raw meat and fish being displayed on ice, I couldn't help but think that such an establishment would never get licensed to open in America. Which is a shame, because the food was catch-of-the-hour fresh and marinated so well I still dream about it today.

I also took a Wave Runner expedition that went completely around Bora Bora. Our guide was a ripped young man named Johnny. Just Johnny, like Madonna. He speaks Tahitian, French, English and Japanese and utilizes all the languages for this international tour group comprised primarily of couples.

He refers to the women as mommas and the men as poppas. One of the more provincial tourists (American, sad to say) doesn't understand the lingo and huffs, "I'm not a poppa. I'm not even married." No one laughs. Sadly, all the foreigners understand what he has said because they all speak English.

Part of Johnny's job is showing us the different varieties of coconuts. He refers to himself as a monkey — something that would be very un-PC in the United States — but when you hear him theatrically grunt as he nimbly scales a tree, you understand his nickname is well-earned and wish you were strong and graceful enough to be called that as well.

Soon, it will be time to go home. But for a few more days, I lose myself in paradise and dream of schools of clown fish, the best tuna steak I've ever eaten and, well, Johnny.

Cultural lesson: rae-raes

In America, they would be referred to as gay. But in Tahiti, the men you see walking around in dresses are rae-raes, or third gender males. This is a post 1960's evolution in urban Papeete of the traditional village "mahu" tradition.

Westerners have falsely assumed mahus are gay or transvestites and write rae-raes off as campy drag queens. But in reality, Tahitian society created a role for these males to serve the needs of sexually frustrated young men. They are an accepted part of society and while some certainly are homosexuals, many are not.

Tahitian-based anthropologist and archaeologist Mark Eddowes explains the importance of rae-raes and how they came to be such an integral part of Tahitian life:

"[Rae-raes] were highly regarded and often in the immediate entourage of high chiefs. [Captain James] Cook and most early navigators noticed there were a higher number of males than females in Tahitian society. The reason for this was many. First there was a common custom of u'umi (infan-

ticide). When asked who they chose to 'destroy,' as the missionaries put it, the parents replied, 'Girls. We need warriors.' This may partly account for the disproportionate numbers.

"The u'umi practice also served as a population control in societies characterized by a high degree of [people] on small islands. Thus in such a society where boys mature physically early, there is a need to channel the sexual needs of those numerous and sometimes potentially violent adolescents away from women within the immediate social or kin group.

"Thus boys with a natural preference for same-sex activity and who show from an early age a degree of femininity are encouraged to dress as surrogate girls and take on that role. Apart from undertaking female tasks in the home, their roles include the sexual initiation of young males.

"Interestingly, they were subject to exactly the same tapus [taboos] as actual women in society, which suggests that in some ways they were perceived as being women."

Jae-Ha Kim

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