

TAHITI LOOKS NICE

French Polynesia has all the trappings of paradise.



Jacked backwards up the elbow of a hairpin bend on a Tahitian mountainside, the 4WD has earned every inch gained over every loose stone that has slipped under its tyres.

Our thighs ache from being splayed against the side of the Jeep, our white-knuckled fingers afire from being curled desperately around the aluminium frame, our jaws locked in a futile attempt to stop the little truck from hurtling over the side.

The steady staccato of “Oh! Oh! Oh!” utterances from a nervous German travelling companion suddenly changes tone.

“Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” she coos, clasping her hands to her breast. “Beautiful. Where the dinosaurs live.”

The wheels of the 4WD are barely touching terra firma while mist puffs against our faces like the draught from giant pterodactyl wings.

Our terror turns to wonder as we absorb the scene around us.

Against a dimpled thunderous sky, majestic peaks fence an enormous volcano crater.

The hollow gouged from the earth's almighty belch is now covered in a moist plush-pile carpet of vegetation in myriad shades of green, a stark contrast to the jagged cliff lines and glowing escarpments of our Great Dividing Range.

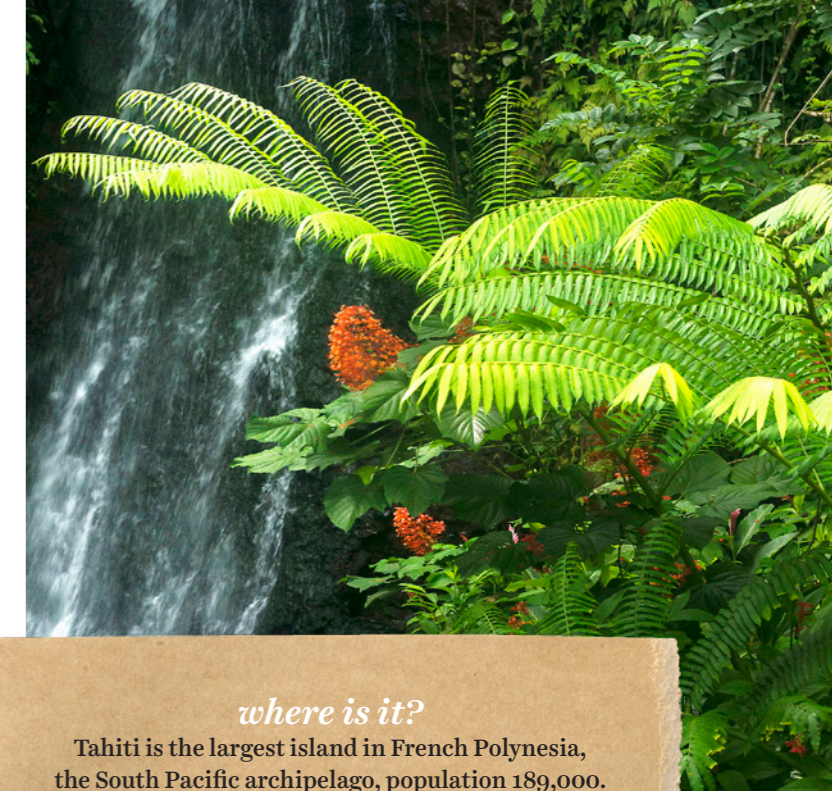
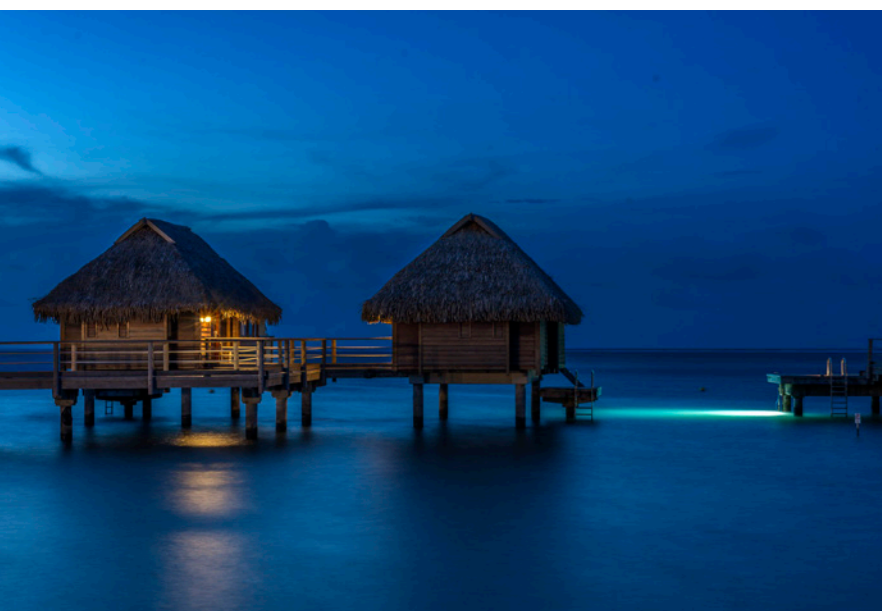
By now we have discovered so much more to Tahiti than syrupy waters, exquisite bruised cloudscapes, hibiscus flowers and the legend of Moana. >

FACING PAGE: Overwater bungalows on the island of Mo'orea.

ABOVE: A lazy day on the island of Mo'orea; Tahiti high country; the towering Vaimahutu Falls in Tahiti; safari jeeps stop for travellers to capture a spectacular group of waterfalls that feed the lush interior of Tahiti.



“From the bucket list overwater bungalow stay, swimming with sharks and stingrays and romantic sunset beach strolls, the slosh and ripple of water soaks into the soul in extremes.”



where is it?

Tahiti is the largest island in French Polynesia, the South Pacific archipelago, population 189,000. Sister island Moorea lies within sight.

how to get there

Several airlines have regular flights from Sydney to Auckland, from which Air Tahiti Nui has daily flights to Tahiti. All flights arrive at Faa'a International Airport near the city of Papeete on the main island of Tahiti.

what to eat

Poisson Cru (the national dish) – raw red tuna marinated in a delicious aromatic lime juice and coconut milk. Also, plenty of other seafood, a Hima'a (an underground oven feast) is a must and loads of tropical fruits like coconut, banana, pineapple, yams and breadfruit.

what to do

Swim with stingrays and sharks, surf the legendary Teahupo'o reef break, indulge in a traditional Polynesian pamper experience, take a 4WD tour into the mountains and snack from food trucks.

We have traipsed through the bustling markets of Papeete on the main island of Tahiti, discovered street art everywhere we looked, coveted trinkets at the Robert Wan Pearl Museum and walked among the heady fragrance of tropical flowers at Bougainville Park.

And tour guide William gave us an overview of Tahitian geography and culture as we made our way around the 120km circumference of the largest island in French Polynesia.

Tahitians, of which there are 189,000, are “very happy people”, a “chop suey, fruit salad” population of cultural diversity, William says.

And speaking of food, there are 10 varieties of mango, 30 of breadfruit, there are bananas, pineapples and vanilla plantations and more than 700 varieties of fish.

Tahiti has also been featured on the silver screen. Marlon Brando's 1960s film *Mutiny on the Bounty* was filmed on the island and the Disney animation *Moana* (which, William assures us, is completely correct) is set there.

While hire vehicles are available for solo adventurers to explore the Tahitian hinterland on their own, joining a guided tour takes the panic out of an often-treacherous journey through a rugged landscape.

The Papeete Inner Island Full-Day Jeep Safari (from \$AUD132) is but one that wends its way through dense rainforest into the interior.

The tour outline says we “Go off the beaten path”.

Beaten alright. Potholes, sharp hairpin bends, sliding gravel, unstable water crossings and dank tunnels are an adventure worth taking to reach the former 19th century French fortress Mount Marau, the lush cascades of the Faarumai Valley near Tahiti's north coast and rainforest-clad Punaruu Valley overlooked by impressive peaks Orohena, Aorai, Tetufera and Teamaa.

Pausing for lunch at the Relais de la Maroto restaurant high in the mountains above the Papenoo River is a welcome reward for hours spent muscle clenching along a deep pitted road.

The food is good and reasonably priced but secondary to the view.

Peace envelops us as we each find a spot on the verandah from which to surrender our worries to the majesty of the landscape in a yawning silence broken only by the distant “shh” of more than 1000 waterfalls sliding down the mountainside.

Water is an ever-present element to any island getaway, and the Society Islands are no different.

From the bucket list overwater bungalow stay, swimming with sharks and stingrays and romantic sunset beach strolls, the slosh and ripple of water soaks into the soul in extremes.

The Arahoho Blowhole, an unmarked roadside attraction created over aeons when battering surf undercut the basalt shoreline and eroded a tunnel-like passageway, makes an aggressive watery show when it sends a geyser-like plume of seawater shooting into the air, spraying onlookers.

Meanwhile, Vaimahutu Falls plunging 30m into a clear pool below is a tranquil oasis bounded by rainforest.

Best known for its romance island of Bora Bora, Tahiti is not a budget destination.

However, there are less expensive options.

With a teenage son in tow, an overwater bungalow stay at Hotel Manava Beach Resort & Spa Moorea on the Island of Moorea within sight of Tahiti is a better, more affordable family option with flexible sleeping arrangements and activities such as kayaks and jet skis.

Cafes and restaurants in the villages around the island, such as the Manuia Grill opposite Hotel Manava where local Mahi Mahi fish and salad are served with Tahitian beer at simple trestle tables under a pergola, are great alternatives to hotel restaurants.

Or mingle with the locals at a supermarket and prepare stocks in self-contained accommodation such as at the Hotel Manava Suite Resort Tahiti on the main island.

Australians can also slash costs by travelling in the off season, which, in the tropics, is the wet season. Bear in mind though that you do dice with the weather, although we only experienced one full day of rain and a couple of light showers.

Travelling between November and May also avoided hordes of America tourists, having to use the stronger Greenback currency (the French Pacific Franc is used in the off season) and higher premiums.

Our trip to the land of Moana ended in a dream, watching the passing parade under a scarlet-flared sky while munching cheap eats from one of the colourful food vans (Les Roulottes), which line the Papeete waterfront, and grinning at the thought of William the Tahitian tour guide.

“Do you have snakes in Tahiti?” a German tourist had asked.

“No,” William answered. “No snakes, no alligators, no lions in Paradise. You don't need to die – you're already in Paradise.” **CWL**

Words: Ellen Hill Images: David Hill

ABOVE: Wild ginger grows among palms and waterfalls.

FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Sunset over the island of Mo'orea; Polynesian dancers perform for guests at the Hotel Manava Beach Resort and Spa; overwater bungalows on the island of Mo'orea; the mountains of Moua Puta, “Queen of Mo'orea”, gazes heavenward with her head thrown back (peaks on left representing her nose and chin) with her hands clasped in prayer (peak on lower right).