

# The Best of the South Pacific

The magical names of Tahiti, Rarotonga, Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga have conjured up romantic images of an earthly paradise since European explorers brought home tales of their tropical splendor and uninhibited people more than two centuries ago. And with good reason, for these are some of the most beautiful islands in the world—if not *the* most beautiful. Here you can relax at remote resorts perched on some of the most gorgeous beaches the planet has to offer. Off-shore are some of the globe's most fabulous diving and spectacular snorkeling.

Picking the best of the South Pacific is no easy task. I cannot, for example, choose the most friendly island, for the people of Tahiti and French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa, American Samoa, and the Kingdom of Tonga are among the friendliest folks on earth. Their fabled history has provided fodder for famous books and films, their storied culture inspires hedonistic dreams, and their big smiles and genuine warmth are prime attractions everywhere in the South Pacific. Personally, I like all the islands and all the islanders, which further complicates my chore to no end.

In this chapter, I point out the best of the best—not necessarily to pass qualitative judgment, but to help you choose among many options. I list them here in the order in which they appear in the book.

Your choice of destination will depend on why you are going to the islands. You can scuba dive to exhaustion or just sit on the beach with a trashy novel. You can share a 300-room hotel with package tourists or get away from it all at a tiny resort on a remote island. Even out there, you can be left alone with your lover or join your fellow guests at lively dinner parties. You can totally ignore the Pacific Islanders around you or enrich your own life by learning about theirs. You can listen to the day's events on CNN International or see what the South Seas were like a century ago. Those decisions are all yours.

For a preview of each South Pacific country, see “The Islands in Brief” in chapter 2.

## 1 The Most Beautiful Islands

“In the South Seas,” Rupert Brooke wrote in 1914, “the Creator seems to have laid himself out to show what He can do.” How right the poet was, for all across the South Pacific lie some of the world's most dramatically beautiful islands. In my opinion, the best of the lot have jagged mountain peaks plunging into aquamarine lagoons.

Here are some that you see on the travel posters and in the brochures:

- **Moorea** (French Polynesia): I think Moorea is the most beautiful island in the world. Nothing to my mind compares with its sawtooth ridges and the great dark-green hulk of Mount Rotui separating glorious Cook's and Opunohu

bays. The view from Tahiti of Moorea's dinosaur-like skyline is unforgettable. See chapter 5.

- **Bora Bora** (French Polynesia): The late James Michener thought that Bora Bora was the most beautiful island in the world. Although tourism has turned this gem into sort of an expensive South Seas Disneyland since Michener's day, development hasn't altered the incredible beauty of Bora Bora's basaltic tombstone towering over a lagoon ranging in color from yellow to deep blue. See chapter 6.
- **Rarotonga** (Cook Islands): Only 32km (20 miles) around, the capital of the Cook Islands boasts the beauty of Tahiti—with hints of Moorea—but without the development and the high prices of French Polynesia. See chapter 8.
- **Aitutaki** (Cook Islands): A junior version of Bora Bora, Aitutaki is one of the hottest South Pacific destinations. The main island sits at the apex of a shallow, colorful lagoon, which from the air looks like a turquoise carpet laid on the deep blue sea. See "Aitutaki" in chapter 8.
- **The Yasawa Islands** (Fiji): Another hot destination of late, especially for backpackers, this chain of long, narrow islands off the northwest coast of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, has some of the region's best beaches. Despite the inroads of tourism, however, mostly the Yasawas are populated by Fijians who live in traditional villages. See chapter 10.
- **Ovalau** (Fiji): The sheer cliffs of Ovalau kept the town of Levuka from becoming Fiji's modern capital, but they create a dramatic backdrop to an old South Seas town little changed in the past century. Ovalau has no good beaches, which means it has no resorts to alter its landscape. See "A Side Trip Back in Time to Levuka" box in chapter 10.
- **Qamea and Matagi Islands** (Fiji): These little jewels off the northern coast of Taveuni are lushly beautiful, with their shorelines either dropping precipitously into the calm surrounding waters or forming little bays with idyllic beaches. See "Resorts Offshore from Taveuni" in chapter 11.
- **Upolu** (Samoa): Robert Louis Stevenson was so enraptured with Samoa that he spent the last five years of his life in the hills of Upolu. The well-weathered eastern part of the island is ruggedly beautiful, especially in Aliepata, where a cliff virtually drops down to one of the region's most spectacular beaches. See "Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu" in chapter 12.
- **Savai'i** (Samoa): One of the largest Polynesian islands, this great volcanic shield slopes gently on its eastern side to a chain of gorgeous beaches. There are no towns on Savai'i, only traditional Samoan villages interspersed among rain forests, which adds to its unspoiled beauty. See "Savai'i" in chapter 12.
- **Tutuila** (American Samoa): The only reason to go to American Samoa these days is to see the physical beauty of Tutuila and its magnificent harbor at Pago Pago. If you can ignore the tuna canneries and huge stacks of shipping containers, this island is right up there with Moorea. See chapter 13.
- **Vava'u** (Tonga): One of the South Pacific's best yachting destinations, hilly Vava'u is shaped like a jellyfish, with small islands instead of tentacles trailing off into a quiet lagoon. Waterways cut into the center of the main island, creating the picturesque and perfectly protected Port of Refuge. See "Vava'u" in chapter 14.

## 2 The Best Beaches

Because all but a few South Pacific islands are surrounded by coral reefs, there are few surf beaches in the region. Tahiti has a few, but they all have heat-absorbing black volcanic sand. Otherwise, most islands (and all but a few resorts) have bathtublike lagoons that lap on coral sands draped by coconut palms. Fortunately for the environmentalists among us, some of the most spectacular beaches are on remote islands and are protected from development by the islanders' devotion to their cultures and villages' land rights. Here are a few that stand out from the many.

- **Temae Plage Publique** (Moorea, French Polynesia): The northeastern coast of Moorea is fringed by a nearly uninterrupted stretch of white sand beach which commands a glorious view across a speckled lagoon to Tahiti sitting on the horizon across the Sea of the Moon. See "Exploring Moorea" in chapter 5.
- **Matira Beach** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): Beginning at the Hotel Bora Bora, this fine ribbon of sand stretches around skinny Matira Point, which forms the island's southern extremity, all the way to the Club Med. The eastern side has views of the sister islands of Raiatea and Tahaa. See "Exploring Bora Bora" in chapter 6.
- **Relais Mahana's beach** (Huahine, French Polynesia): My favorite resort beach is at Relais Mahana, a small hotel near Huahine's south end. Trees grow along the white beach, which slopes into a lagoon deep enough for swimming at any tide. The resort's pier goes out to a giant coral head, a perfect and safe place to snorkel, and the lagoon here is protected from the trade winds, making it safe for sailing. See "Where to Stay on Huahine" in chapter 7.
- **Titikaveka Beach** (Rarotonga, Cook Islands): On Rarotonga's southern coast, Titikaveka is blessed with palm trees draped over a long beach of brilliant white sand, and the lagoon here is the island's best for swimming and snorkeling. See "Exploring Rarotonga" in chapter 8.
- **Beach on One Foot Island** (Aitutaki, Cook Islands): The sands on most beaches covered in this book are a tannish coral color, but on the islets surrounding Aitutaki, they are pure white, like talcum. Tiny One Foot Island has the best beach here, with part of it along a channel whose coral bottom is scoured clean by strong tidal currents, another running out to a sandbar known as Nude Island—a reference not to clothes but to a lack of vegetation. See "Exploring Aitutaki" in chapter 8.
- **Yasawa Island** (Fiji): One of the most spectacular beaches I've ever seen is on the northern tip of Yasawa Island, northernmost of the gorgeous chain of the same name. This long expanse of deep sand is broken by a teapotlike rock outcrop, which also separates two Fijian villages, whose residents own this land. Blue Lagoon Cruises and oceangoing cruise ships stop here; otherwise, the Fijians keep it all to themselves. There are other good beaches on Yasawa, however, and two of them are at Yasawa Island Resort and Oarsman's Bay Lodge. See "Island Escapes from Nadi" and "Resorts Offshore from Nadi" in chapter 10.
- **Natadola Beach** (The Coral Coast, Fiji): Fiji's main island of Viti Levu doesn't have the high-quality beaches found on the country's small islands, but Natadola is an exception. Until recently

this long stretch was spared development, but a big resort is coming. See “The Coral Coast” in chapter 10.

- **Vatulele Island Resort beach** (Vatulele Island, Fiji): Nearly a kilometer (½ mile) of deep white sand fronts the deluxe Vatulele Island Resort, off the south shore of Viti Levu, Fiji’s main island. Guests can have dinner out on the beach or get a bird’s-eye view from a private gazebo overlooking the sands. See “Where to Stay on Vatulele Island” in chapter 10.
- **Namenalala Island beaches** (Namenalala Island, Fiji): Home to the charming Moody’s Namena resort, the remote, dragon-shaped Namenalala has one large sandy strip with a deep lagoon plus three other small beaches tucked away in rocky coves. See “A Resort Off Savusavu” in chapter 11.
- **Horseshoe Bay** (Matagi Island, Fiji): Home of one of the region’s best-value resorts, Matagi is an extinct volcano whose crater fell away on one side and formed picturesque Horseshoe Bay. The half-moon beach at its head is one of the finest in the islands, but you will have to be on a yacht or a

guest at Matangi Island Resort to enjoy it. See “Resorts Offshore from Taveuni” in chapter 11.

- **Aleipata Beach** (Upolu, Samoa): On the eastern end of Upolu, a clifflike mountain forms a dramatic backdrop to the deep sands of Aleipata Beach, which faces a group of small islets offshore. On a clear day you can see American Samoa from here. See “Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu” in chapter 12.
- **Return to Paradise Beach** (Upolu, Samoa): This idyllic stretch of white sand and black rocks overhung by coconut palms gets its name from *Return to Paradise*, the 1953 Gary Cooper movie that was filmed here. Surf actually pounds on the rocks. See “Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu” in chapter 12.
- **’Atata Island beach** (Tonga): A gorgeous, wide beach wraps around the “tail” of tadpole-shaped ’Atata, off Tonga’s capital of Nuku’alofa and home of Royal Sunset Island Resort. The narrow peninsula protects a colorful, coral-speckled lagoon on its western side. See “Where to Stay on Tongatapu” in chapter 14.

### 3 The Best Honeymoon Destinations

Whether you’re on your honeymoon or not, the South Pacific is a marvelous place for romantic escapes. After all, romance and the islands have gone hand-in-hand since the bare-breasted young women of Tahiti gave rousing welcomes to the European explorers in the late 18th century.

I’ve never stayed anywhere as romantic as a thatch-roof bungalow built on stilts over a lagoon, with a glass panel in its floor for viewing fish swimming below you and steps leading from your front deck into the warm

waters below. You’ll find lots of these in French Polynesia—especially on Bora Bora, the South Pacific’s most romantic (and expensive) honeymoon destination—and a handful more in the Cook Islands and in Samoa.

One caveat is in order: Most over-water bungalows are relatively close together, meaning that your honeymooning next-door neighbors will be within earshot if not eyeshot. (“It can be like watching an X-rated video,” a hotel manager once confessed, “but without the video.”) Therefore, if

you're seeking a high degree of privacy and seclusion they won't be your best choice.

On the other hand, many of the South Pacific's small, relatively remote offshore resorts offer as much privacy as you are likely to desire. These little establishments would also fall into another category: The Best Places to Get Away from It All. They are so romantic that a friend of mine says her ideal wedding would be to rent an entire small resort in Fiji, take her wedding party with her, get married in Fijian costume beside the beach, and make the rest of her honeymoon a diving vacation. Most resorts covered in this book are well aware of such desires, and they offer wedding packages complete with traditional ceremony and costumes. Choose your resort, and then contact the management for details about their wedding packages.

In the meantime, here's what the two best honeymoon destinations have to offer:

- **French Polynesia:** The resorts here have the region's best selection of overwater bungalows. Invariably these are the most expensive style of accommodation in French Polynesia.

On Tahiti, which most visitors now consider a way station to the other islands, the **Inter-Continental Tahiti Beachcomber Resort** has overwater bungalows that face the dramatic outline of Moorea across the Sea of the Moon. See p. 111. Some of those at **Le Meridien Tahiti** also have this view. See p. 112.

On Moorea, some overwater units at the **Sofitel Ia Ora** actually face Tahiti across the Sea of the Moon, and they're built over Moorea's most colorful lagoon. See p. 136. There's actually a bar out on the pier leading to those

at the new **Sheraton Moorea Lagoon Resort & Spa**. See p. 135. The new **Moorea Pearl Resort** has a few perched on edge of the clifflike reef, making for superb snorkeling right off your front deck, while the **Inter-Continental Moorea Beachcomber Resort** has bungalows that are partially built over the lagoon. See p. 137.

Bora Bora has several hundred overwater bungalows, and more are on the way. The largest and most luxurious are at the new **St. Regis Bora Bora Nui Resort & Spa** (p. 153), although they don't look out to tombstonelike Mount Otemanu, rising across the famous lagoon. Along with Cook's Bay on Moorea, this is one of the most photographed scenes in the entire South Pacific. For that, you have to stay at the **Sofitel Motu** (p. 153) or in one of the few units with a view at the **Hotel Bora Bora** (p. 151). Other bungalows at the Hotel Bora Bora sit right on the edge of the reef. Ashore, the Hotel Bora Bora has large, luxurious bungalows that boast their own courtyards with swimming pools. Equally private though less luxe are the garden units at the **Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort**; you can cavort to your heart's content in their wall-enclosed patios, which have sun decks and splash pools. See p. 151. The **Sofitel Marara** itself is not as charming or luxurious as other resorts on Bora Bora, but about five of its bungalows are the most private overwater units in French Polynesia, and they have large, partially covered decks. See p. 153. Out on an island, the **Bora Bora Lagoon Resort** has 50 rather closely packed bungalows over its reef, some with great views of Bora Bora's "other" peak, the more rounded Mount Pahia. See p. 150. The smaller but

well-appointed overwater units at the friendly **Hotel Maitai Polynesia** are the least expensive on Bora Bora. See p. 155.

On Huahine, units at the **Te Tiare Beach Resort** have the largest decks of any overwater bungalows (one side is completely shaded by a thatch roof). See p. 165. The **Sofitel Heiva** has six bungalows with views of the mountainous main part of that island. See p. 165. The most deluxe of all overwater units are at the **Le Taha'a Private Island & Spa**, a luxurious new resort on a small island off Tahaa. See p. 171.

Out in the Tuamotu archipelago, the huge atoll known as Rangiroa, **Hotel Kia Ora** has bungalows over the world's second-largest lagoon. See p. 175. On the adjacent atoll, overwater bungalows at the new **Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort** actually sit over the rip tides in a pass that lets the sea into the lagoon. See p. 176. On Manihi atoll, units at the **Manihi Pearl Beach Resort** are cooled by the almost constantly blowing trade winds. Isolated on their own islets, the Pearl Beach resorts on Tiki hau and Manihi more closely approximate Fiji's offshore resorts than any others in French Polynesia. See p. 177.

- **Fiji:** Fiji has one of the world's finest collections of small offshore resorts. These little establishments have two advantages over their French Polynesian competitors. First, they have only 3 to 15 bungalows each, instead of the 40 or more found at the French Polynesian resorts, which means they are usually more widely spaced than their Tahitian cousins. Second, they are on islands all by themselves. Together, these two advantages multiply the privacy factor several fold.

Off Nadi, the atmosphere at **Turtle Island Resort** and the **Vatulele Island Resort**, both of which are in the luxurious, super-expensive category, is active, with guests given the choice of dining alone in their bungalows or at lively dinner parties hosted by the engaging owners. See p. 288 and 290, respectively. **Yasawa Island Resort** sits on one of the prettiest beaches and has a very low-key, friendly ambiance. It has 16 very large bungalows, the choice being the secluded honeymoon unit, which sits by its own beach. If you can't get that, be sure to reserve one of the newer units because a communal pathway runs just outside the bedroom windows of the older bungalows. See p. 289. Much less luxurious but also much less expensive, **Matamanoa Island Resort** caters exclusively to couples, making it a good choice for honeymooners on a budget. See p. 286.

In central Fiji off Suva, **The Wakaya Club** has the largest bungalows in Fiji, plus a palatial mansion with its own pool, perched high atop a ridge. The staff leaves the guests to their own devices. You might see a movie star or two relaxing at Wakaya. See p. 315.

On a dragon-shaped island all by itself in the Koro Sea off Savusavu, **Moody's Namena** is the most remote of all South Pacific resorts. You won't get a lot of amenities at Moody's, but one of its hexagonal bungalows is perched treehouse-like on a ridge, providing both privacy and stunning sea views. OCCUPIED/UNOCCUPIED signs warn guests that someone else is already cavorting on four of the island's five private beaches. See p. 332.

Off Taveuni, **Matangi Island Resort** is one of the region's best

values for both honeymooners and families. One of its widely spaced bungalows is built 20 feet up in a Pacific almond tree, and two more are carved into the side of a cliff (they are reserved for honeymooners). See p. 341. Among my favorite places to stay are the charming, old South Seas-style

bungalows and stunning central building at **Qamea Resort and Spa**. Kerosene lanterns romantically light the 52-foot-high thatch roof of Qamea's main building, and each bungalow has an outdoor shower and its own hammock strung across the front porch. See p. 341.

#### 4 The Best Family Vacations

There are no Disney Worlds or other such attractions in the islands. That's not to say that children won't have a fine time here, but they will enjoy themselves most if they like being around the water.

A family can vacation in style and comfort at large resorts like the two Sheraton resorts in Fiji, or Shangri-la's Fijian Resort, but here are some of the best smaller establishments that welcome families with children.

- **Inter-Continental Moorea Beachcomber Resort** (Moorea, French Polynesia): Most resorts in French Polynesia are designed for romance, not children. The one notable exception is the Moorea Beachcomber, which has an attractive pool, a calm lagoon, the widest selection of watersports in French Polynesia, and a kids' program. See p. 137.
- **The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa** (Rarotonga, Cook Islands): Rising like a Phoenix after years of

government-owned neglect, this is now the best international-standard resort on Rarotonga. Although it caters to everyone from honeymooners to families, the Rarotongan's children's program is tops in the Cook Islands. See p. 210.

- **Castaway Island Resort** (Mamanuca Islands, Fiji): One of Fiji's oldest but thoroughly refurbished resorts, Castaway has plenty to keep both adults and children occupied, from a wide array of watersports to a kids' playroom and a nursery. There's even a nurse on duty. See p. 284.
- **Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort** (Savusavu, Fiji): The South Pacific's finest family resort encourages parents to enroll their kids in an exceptional environmental education program. It keeps the youngsters both educated and entertained from sunup to bedtime. See p. 329.

#### 5 The Best Cultural Experiences

The South Pacific Islanders are justly proud of their ancient Polynesian and Fijian cultures, and they eagerly inform anyone who asks about both their ancient and modern ways. Here are some of the best ways to learn about the islanders and their lifestyles.

- **Tiki Theatre Village** (Moorea, French Polynesia): Built to resemble a pre-European Tahitian village,

this cultural center on Moorea has demonstrations of handcraft making and puts on a nightly dance show and feast. It's a bit commercial, and the staff isn't always fluent in English, but this is the only place in French Polynesia where one can sample the old ways. See "Exploring Moorea" in chapter 5.

- **Rarotonga** (Cook Islands): In addition to offering some of the

region's most laid-back beach vacations, the people of Rarotonga go out of their way to let visitors know about their unique Cook Islands way of life. A morning spent at the **Cook Islands Cultural Village** and on a **cultural tour** of the island is an excellent educational experience. For a look at flora and fauna of the island, and their traditional uses, **Pa's Cross-Island Mountain Trek** cannot be topped. See "Exploring Rarotonga" in chapter 8.

- **Fijian Village Visits** (Fiji): Many tours from Nadi and from most offshore resorts include visits to traditional Fijian villages, whose residents stage welcoming ceremonies (featuring the slightly narcotic drink kava) and then show visitors around and explain how the old and the new combine in today's villages. See "Cultural Tours" in chapter 10.
- **Samoa**: The entire country of Samoa is a cultural storehouse of *fā'a Samoa*, the traditional Samoan way of life. Most Samoans still live in villages featuring *fales* (oval houses), some of which have stood

for centuries—although tin roofs have replaced thatch. The island of Savai'i is especially well preserved. A highlight of any visit to Savai'i should be a **tour** with Warren Jopling, a retired Australian geologist who has lived on Samoa's largest island for many years. Not only does he know the forbidding lava fields like the back of his hand, but everyone on Savai'i knows him, which helps make his cultural commentaries extremely informative. See "Savai'i" in chapter 12.

- **Tongan National Centre** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): Artisans turn out classic Tongan handcrafts, and a museum exhibits Tongan history, including the robe worn by Queen Salote at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953; and the carcass of Tui Malila, a Galápagos turtle that Captain James Cook reputedly gave to the king of Tonga in 1777, and which lived until 1968. The center also has island-night dance shows and feasts of traditional Tongan food. See "Exploring Tongatapu" in chapter 14.

## 6 The Best of the Old South Seas

Many South Pacific islands are developing rapidly, with modern, fast-paced cities replacing what were sleepy backwater ports, such as those at Papeete in French Polynesia and Suva in Fiji. However, there are still many remnants of the old South Sea days of coconut planters, beach bums, and missionaries.

- **Huahine** (French Polynesia): Of the French Polynesian islands frequented by visitors, Huahine has been the least affected by tourism, and its residents are still likely to give you an unprompted Tahitian greeting, "*Ia orana!*" As on Aitutaki, agriculture is still

king on Huahine, which makes it the "Island of Fruits." There are ancient *marae* (temples) to visit, and the only town, tiny Fare, is little more than a collection of Chinese shops fronting the island's wharf, which comes to life when ships pull in. See "Huahine" in chapter 7.

- **Aitutaki** (Cook Islands): Although it is now one of the hottest destinations in the South Pacific, the little island of Aitutaki is still very much old Polynesia, with most of its residents still farming and fishing for a living. The crystal-clear

lagoon is something to behold. See “Aitutaki” in chapter 8.

- **Levuka** (Ovalau Island, Fiji): No other town has remained the same after a century as has Levuka, Fiji’s first European-style town and its original colonial capital in the 1870s. The dramatic cliffs of Ovalau Island hemmed in the town and prevented growth, so the government moved to Suva in 1882. Levuka looks very much as it did then, with a row of clapboard general stores along picturesque Beach Street. See “A Side Trip Back in Time to Levuka” box in chapter 10.
- **Taveuni Island** (Northern Fiji): Like Savai’i, Fiji’s third-largest and most lush island has changed little since Europeans started coconut plantations there in the 1860s. With the largest remaining population of indigenous plants and animals of any South Pacific island, Taveuni is a nature lover’s delight. See “Taveuni” in chapter 11.
- **Apia** (Samoa): Despite a sea wall along what used to be a beach and two large high-rise buildings sitting on reclaimed land, a number of clapboard buildings and 19th-century churches make Apia look much as it did when German, American, and British warships washed ashore during a hurricane here in 1889. See “Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu” in chapter 12.
- **Savai’i** (Samoa): One of the largest of all Polynesian islands, this great volcanic shield also is one of the least populated, with the oval-shaped houses of traditional villages sitting beside freshwater bathing pools fed by underground springs. See “Savai’i” in chapter 12.
- **Neiafu** (Vava’u, Tonga): Although Nuku’alofa, the capital on the main island of Tongatapu, gets most of the ink about Tonga, the little village of Neiafu on the sailor’s paradise of Vava’u has remained untouched by development. Built by convicted adulteresses, the Road of the Doves still winds above the dramatic Port of Refuge, just as it did in 1875. See “Vava’u” in chapter 14.

## 7 The Best Dining Experiences

You won’t be stuck eating island-style food cooked in an earth oven (see “Feasts from Underground Ovens” in the appendix), nor will you be limited to the rather bland tastes of New Zealanders and Australians, which predominate at many restaurants. Wherever the French go, fine food and wine are sure to follow, and French Polynesia is no exception. The East Indians brought curries to Fiji, and chefs trained there have spread those spicy offerings to the other islands. Many chefs in Tonga are from Germany and Italy and specialize in their own “native” food. Chinese cuisine of varying quality can be found everywhere.

Wine connoisseurs will have ample opportunity to sample the vintages from nearby Australia, where abundant sunshine produces renowned full-bodied, fruit-driven varieties, such as chardonnay, semillon, Riesling, shiraz, Hermitage, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot. New Zealand wines are also widely available, including distinctive whites, such as chenin blanc, sauvignon blanc, and soft merlot. Freight and import duties drive up the cost of wine, so expect higher prices than at home.

- **Auberge du Pacifique** (Papeete, Tahiti): Award-winning chef Jean Galopin has been blending French

- and Polynesian cuisines at his lagoonside restaurant—with a removable roof to let in starlight—since 1974. He's even written a cookbook about Tahitian cooking. See p. 116.
- **Le Lotus** (Papeete, Tahiti): The most romantic setting of any South Pacific restaurant is in this overwater dining room at the Tahiti Beachcomber Inter-Continental Resort. Even if the food weren't gourmet French and the service highly efficient and unobtrusive, the view of Moorea on a moonlit night makes an evening here special. See p. 116.
  - **Linareva Floating Restaurant and Bar** (Moorea, French Polynesia): With luck you won't get queasy while dining at chef Eric Lussiez's charming restaurant, which occupies the original ferry that plied between Tahiti and Moorea. His menu highlights fresh seafood excellently prepared in the classic French fashion. See p. 140.
  - **Bloody Mary's Restaurant & Bar** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): A fun evening at the South Pacific's most famous restaurant is a must-do experience when on Bora Bora. That's because Bloody's offers the most unique and charming dining experience in the islands. Come early for a drink at the friendly bar, then pick your fresh seafood from atop a huge tray of ice. After eating heavy French fare elsewhere for a few days, the sauceless fish from the grill will seem downright refreshing. See p. 156.
  - **Chefs The Restaurant** (Nadi, Fiji): Chef Eugeme Gomes's establishment has gourmet cuisine, excellent service, and lots of little touches that make for Fiji's finest dining experience. There's a branch in Suva, too. See p. 277.
  - **Vilisite's Seafood Restaurant** (The Coral Coast, Fiji): This seaside restaurant, owned and operated by a friendly Fijian woman named Vilisite, doesn't look like much from the outside, but it offers a handful of excellent seafood meals to augment a terrific view along Fiji's Coral Coast from the veranda. See p. 301.
  - **Old Mill Cottage** (Suva, Fiji): Diplomats and government workers pack this old colonial cottage at breakfast and lunch for some of the region's best and least expensive local fare. Offerings range from English-style roast chicken with mashed potatoes and peas to sweet Fijian-style *palusami* (fresh fish wrapped in taro leaves and steamed in coconut milk). See p. 318.
  - **Sails Restaurant and Bar** (Apia, Samoa): Ian and Lyvia Black have turned Robert Louis Stevenson's first Samoan home into one of the South Pacific's best casual restaurants, complete with tables on an upstairs veranda overlooking historic Beach Road and Apia Harbour. You'll never forget the Commodore Sashimi. See p. 380.
  - **Seaview Restaurant** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): In a country where restaurants come and go, this German-owned establishment in an old waterfront home has for years provided Nuku'alofa's best cuisine. Tonga is the last island nation with an abundance of spiny tropical lobsters, so go for one here. See p. 433.
  - **La Terrazza** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): After two years of idle retirement in Tonga, restaurateur Gino Bacchi missed the cuisine of his native Rome so much that he opened this fine Italian restaurant on Nuku'alofa waterfront. He doesn't go hungry any more. Nor do we. See p. 432.

## 8 The Best Island Nights

Don't come to the South Pacific islands expecting opera and ballet, or Las Vegas-style floor shows, either. Other than pub-crawling to bars and nightclubs with music for dancing, evening entertainment here consists primarily of island nights, which invariably feature feasts of island foods followed by traditional dancing.

In the cases of French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, of course, the hip-swinging traditional dances are world famous. They are not as lewd and lascivious today as they were in the days before the missionaries arrived, but they still have plenty of suggestive movements to the primordial beat of drums. By contrast, dancing in Fiji, Tonga, and the Samoas is much more reserved, with graceful movements, terrific harmony, and occasional action in a war or fire dance.

- **French Polynesia:** Hotels are the places in which to see Tahitian dancing here. The resorts rely on village groups to perform a few times a week. The very best shows are during the annual *Heiva i Tahiti* festival in July; the winners then tour the other islands in August for minifestivals at the resorts. See "Island Nights" in chapters 4 through 6.
- **The Cook Islands:** Although the Tahitians are more famous for their dancing than the Cook Islanders, many of their original movements were quashed by the missionaries in the early 19th century. By the time the French took over in 1841 and allowed dancing again, the Tahitians had forgotten much of the old movements. They turned to the Cook Islands, where dancing was—and still is—the thing to do when the sun goes down. In the Cooks the costumes tend to be more natural and less colorful than in the Tahitian floor shows, but the movements tend to be more active, suggestive, and genuine. There's an island night show every evening except Sunday on Rarotonga. The best troupes usually perform at the Edgewater Resort and the Rarotongan Beach Resort, but ask around. The best public performances are during the annual Dancer of the Year contest in April and the Constitution Week celebrations in August. See "Island Nights on Rarotonga" in chapter 8.
- **Samoa:** Among the great shows in the South Pacific are *fiafia* nights in the magnificent main building at Aggie Grey's Hotel in Apia. This tradition was started in the 1940s by the late Aggie Grey, who at the show's culmination personally danced the graceful *siva*. Nowadays the show includes a rousing fire dance around the adjacent pool. See "Island Nights on Upolu" in chapter 12.

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### Weekend Pub Crawling

Fundamentalist Christians may own Sundays in the islands, but Friday and Saturday nights definitely belong to the sinners. That's because bar-hopping—or pub-crawling as it's known out here—is *the* thing to do after dark on weekends. Every island has its favorite bars, which are packed until the wee hours on Friday night, until midnight on Saturday. There's a dark side, however, for fights can break out, and drunken driving is a problem on those nights.

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- **Tonga:** The weekly shows at the Tongan National Centre are unique, for this museum provides expert commentary before each dance, explaining its movements

and their meanings. That's a big help, since all songs throughout the South Pacific are in the native languages. See "Island Nights on Tongatapu" in chapter 14.

## 9 The Best Buys

Take some extra money along, for you'll spend it on handcrafts, black pearls, and tropical clothing.

For the locations of the best shops, see the shopping sections in chapters 3 through 14.

- **Black Pearls:** Few people will escape French Polynesia or the Cook Islands without buying at least one black pearl. That's because the shallow, clear-water lagoons of French Polynesia's Tuamotu archipelago and the Manihiki and Penrhyn atolls in the Cook Islands are the world's largest producers of the beautiful dark orbs. The seemingly inexhaustible supply has resulted in fierce competition by vendors ranging from market stalls to high-end jewelry shops. See chapters 3 through 8.
- **Handcrafts:** Although many of the items you will see in island souvenir shops are actually made in Asia, locally produced handcrafts are the South Pacific's best buys. The most widespread are hats, mats, and baskets woven of *pandanus* or other fibers, usually by women who have maintained this ancient art to a high degree. Tonga has the widest selection of woven items, although Samoa and Fiji are making comebacks. The finely woven mats made in Tonga and the Samoas are still highly valued as ceremonial possessions and are seldom for sale to tourists. See chapters 9 through 12 and 14.

Before the coming of European traders and printed cotton, the South Pacific islanders wore garments made from the beaten bark of the paper mulberry tree. The

making of this bark cloth, widely known as *tapa*, is another preserved art in Tonga, Samoa (where it is known as *siapo*), and Fiji (where it is known as *masi*). The cloth is painted with dyes made from natural substances, usually in geometric designs whose ancestries date back thousands of years. Tapa is an excellent souvenir because it can be folded and brought back in a suitcase. See chapters 9 through 12 and 14.

Woodcarvings are also popular. Spears, war clubs, knives made from sharks' teeth, canoe prows, and cannibal forks are some examples. Many carvings, however, tend to be produced for the tourist trade and often lack the imagery of bygone days, and some may be machine-produced today. Carved tikis are found in most South Pacific countries, but many of them resemble the figures of the New Zealand Maoris rather than figures indigenous to those countries. The carvings from the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia are the best of the lot today. See chapter 3.

- **Tropical Clothing:** Colorful hand-screened, hand-blocked, and hand-dyed fabrics are very popular in the islands for making dresses or the wraparound skirt known as *pareu* in Tahiti and Rarotonga, *lava-lava* in the Samoas and Tonga, and *sulu* in Fiji. Heat-sensitive dyes are applied by hand to gauze-like cotton, which is then laid in the sun for several hours. Flowers, leaves, and other designs are placed on the fabric, and as the heat of

the sun darkens and sets the dyes, the shadows from these objects leave their images behind on the

finished product. See chapters 3 through 14.

## 10 The Best Diving & Snorkeling

All the islands have excellent scuba diving and snorkeling, and all but a few of the resorts either have their own dive operations or can easily make arrangements with a local company. Here are the best:

- **Rangiroa and Manihi** (French Polynesia): Like those surrounding most populated islands, some lagoons in French Polynesia have been relatively “fished out” over the years. That’s not to say that diving in such places as Moorea and Bora Bora can’t be world class, but the best is at Rangiroa, Manihi, Tikehau, and Fakarava in the Tuamotu Archipelago, all more famous more for their abundant sea life, including sharks, than colorful soft corals. Go to Rangiroa to see sharks; go to the others to see more fish than you imagined ever existed. See chapter 7.

- **Fiji:** With nutrient-rich waters welling up from the Tonga Trench offshore and being carried by strong currents funneling through narrow passages, Fiji is famous for some of the world’s most colorful soft corals. This is especially true of the Somosomo Strait between Vanua Levu and Taveuni in northern Fiji, home of the Rainbow Reef and its Great White Wall. The Beqa Lagoon is also famous for having plentiful soft corals. See “Taveuni” in chapter 11 and “Pacific Harbour” in chapter 10.
- **Tonga:** The north shore of the main island of Tongatapu fronts a huge lagoon, where the government has made national parks of the Hakaumama’o and Malinoa reefs. The best diving in Tonga, however, is around unspoiled Ha’apai and Vava’u. See “Ha’apai” and “Vava’u” in chapter 14.

## 11 The Best Sailing

One would think that the South Pacific is a yachting paradise, and it certainly gets more than its share of cruising boats on holiday from Australia and New Zealand or heading around the world (the region is on the safest circumnavigation route). However, the reefs in most places make sailing a precarious undertaking, so yachting is not that widespread. It has only recently gained a toehold in Fiji. There are only two places where you can charter a yacht and sail it yourself:

- **Raiatea** (French Polynesia): Firms have charter fleets based in Raiatea in the Leeward Islands of French Polynesia. Raiatea shares a lagoon with Tahaa, a hilly island indented

with long bays that shelter numerous picturesque anchorages. Boats can be sailed completely around Tahaa without leaving the lagoon, and both Bora Bora and Huahine are just 32km (20 miles) away over blue water. See “Raiatea & Tahaa” in chapter 7.

- **Vava’u** (Tonga): The second most popular yachting spot, Vava’u is virtually serrated by well-protected bays like the nearby Port of Refuge. Chains of small islands trail off the south side of Vava’u like the tentacles of a jellyfish, creating large and very quiet cruising grounds. Many anchorages are off deserted islands with their own beaches. See “Vava’u” in chapter 14.

## 12 The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences

Some cynics might say that a visit to the South Pacific itself is an offbeat experience, but there are a few things to do that are even more unusual.

- **Getting Asked to Dance** (everywhere): I've seen so many traditional South Pacific dance shows that I now stand by the rear door, ready to beat a quick escape before those lovely young women in grass skirts can grab my hand and force me to make a fool of myself trying to gyrate my hips up on the stage. It's part of the tourist experience at all resorts, and it's all in good fun.
- **Swimming with the Sharks** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): A key attraction in Bora Bora's magnificent lagoon is to snorkel with a guide, who actually feeds a school of sharks as they thrash around in a frenzy. I prefer to leave this one to the Discovery Channel. See "Exploring Bora Bora" in chapter 6.
- **Riding the Rip** (Rangiroa and Manihi, French Polynesia): Snorkelers will never forget the flying sensation as they ride the strong currents ripping through a pass into the lagoons at Rangiroa and Manihi. See "Rangiroa" and "Manihi" in chapter 7.
- **Sleeping in a Beach Fale** (Samoa): Even if you don't like to camp, you'll enjoy every minute spent in one of Samoa's beach fales—little thatch-roof buildings perched beside one of that country's lovely beaches. Forget privacy, since most are open-sided in traditional Samoan fashion. But why block the view with unnecessary walls? And the neighbors you meet could become lifetime friends. See "Where to Stay on Upolu" and "Where to Stay & Dine on Savai'i" in chapter 12.
- **Worshipping with the King** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): It's not every day you get to see a real-life king, but you can in Tonga. In fact, you can even go to church with him on Sunday, or perhaps watch him ride by in his big, black SUV other days of the week. See "Surviving Sunday in Tonga" in chapter 14.
- **Cave Swimming** (Samoa and Tonga): Boats can go right into Swallows Cave on one of the small islands that make up beautiful Vava'u, but you have to don masks and snorkels and follow a guide underwater into Mariner's Cave, whose only light comes from the passage you just swam through. See "Exploring Vava'u" in chapter 14. You also have to swim underwater into the Piula Cave Pool in Samoa. See "Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu" in chapter 12.