

The Best of the South Pacific

Tahiti, Fiji, Samoa, Rarotonga, and Tonga have conjured up romantic images of an earthly paradise since European sailors brought home tales of their tropical splendor and uninhibited people in the 1760s. My own love affair with the South Pacific doesn't go back *quite* that far, but when I did wash ashore, I quickly understood why these remote outposts came to have such a reputation. These are some of the most beautiful islands in the world—if not *the* most beautiful. They are blessed with some of the most gorgeous beaches the planet has to offer, and their lagoons offer some of the globe's most fabulous diving and snorkeling.

Picking the best of the South Pacific is no easy task. I cannot, for example, choose the friendliest island, for these islanders are among the most welcoming folks on earth. Their fabled history has provided fodder for famous books and films, their culture inspires hedonistic dreams, and their big smiles and genuine hospitality are prime attractions everywhere in the South Pacific.

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.

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 of them:

- **The Yasawa Islands** (Fiji): This chain of long, narrow islands off the northwest coast of Viti Levu, Fiji's main island, ranks as the South Pacific's hottest destination of late, and in all price ranges. The Yasawas have some of the region's best beaches. Despite the inroads of tourism, however, the group remains mostly populated by

Fijians, who live in traditional villages. See chapter 5.

- **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,” in chapter 5.
- **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 surrounding waters or forming bays with idyllic beaches. See “Resorts on Qamea & Matagi Islands,” in chapter 6.

- **Moorea** (French Polynesia): I think Moorea is the most beautiful island in the world. Nothing compares with its sawtooth ridges and the dark-green hulk of Mount Rotui separating Cook's and Opunohu bays. The view from Tahiti of Moorea's skyline is unforgettable. See chapter 9.
- **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 a sort of South Seas Disneyland, development hasn't altered the beauty of Bora Bora's basaltic tombstone, towering over a lagoon that ranges in color from yellow to deep blue. See chapter 10.
- **Rarotonga** (Cook Islands): Only 32km (20 miles) around, the capital of the Cook Islands boasts the beauty of Tahiti—with hints of Moorea. See chapter 12.
- **Aitutaki** (Cook Islands): A junior version of Bora Bora, Aitutaki sits at the apex of a colorful lagoon, which, from the air, looks like a turquoise carpet laid on the deep blue sea. See "Aitutaki," in chapter 12.
- **Upolu** (Samoa): Robert Louis Stevenson was so enraptured with Samoa that he spent the last 5 years of his life in the hills of Upolu. The

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 13.

- **Sava'i'i** (Samoa): One of the largest Polynesian islands, this great volcanic shield slopes gently to gorgeous beaches on its eastern and northern sides. There are no towns on Sava'i'i, only traditional Samoan villages interspersed among rainforests, which adds to its unspoiled beauty. See "Sava'i'i," in chapter 13.
- **Tutuila** (American Samoa): A primary reason to go to American Samoa is to see the physical beauty of Tutuila and its magnificent harbor at Pago Pago. If you can ignore the canneries and stacks of shipping containers, this island is right up there with Moorea. See chapter 14.
- **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 15.

2 The Best Beaches

Because all but a few South Pacific islands are surrounded by coral reefs, there are few surf beaches. 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 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:

- **The Yasawa Islands** (Fiji): This gorgeous chain of islands off northwest Fiji has some of the best beaches I've ever seen. One on Yasawa Island, northernmost in the chain, is a long expanse of deep sand broken by a teapotlike rock outcrop, which also separates two Fijian villages. There are other great beaches at Yasawa Island Resort, Oarsmans Bay Lodge, and Nanuya Island Resort. See "The Mamanuca & Yasawa Islands," in chapter 5.

- **Horseshoe Bay** (Matagi Island, Fiji): Home of one of the region's best 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. See "Resorts on Qamea & Matagi Islands," in chapter 6.
- **Temae Plage Publique** (Moorea, French Polynesia): The northeastern coast of Moorea is fringed by a 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 9.
- **Matira Beach** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): Beginning at the Hotel Bora Bora, this fine ribbon of sand stretches around Matira Point, which forms the island's southern extremity, all the way to the Club Med. The eastern side has views of the islands of Raiatea and Tahaa. See "Exploring Bora Bora," in chapter 10.
- **Avea Beach** (Huahine, French Polynesia): My favorite resort beach is at Relais Mahana, a small hotel on Avea Bay near Huahine's southern end. Trees grow along the beach, which slopes into a lagoon deep enough for swimming at any tide. It's 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 11.
- **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 12.
- **One Foot Island** (Aitutaki, Cook Islands): The sands on the islets surrounding Aitutaki gleam 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 stretch runs out to a sandbar known as Nude Island—a reference not to clothes but to a lack of vegetation. See "Exploring Aitutaki," in chapter 12.
- **Lalomanu Beach** (Upolu, Samoa): On the southeastern corner of Upolu, a clifflike mountain forms a dramatic backdrop to the deep sands of Lalomanu Beach, which faces a group of small islets offshore. This is a great place to stay in an open-air beach *fale*. See "Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu," in chapter 13.
- **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 filmed here. See "Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu," in chapter 13.
- **Manase Beach** (Savai'i, Samoa): The long stretch of white sand fronting Manase village on the north shore of Savai'i is another extraordinary place to spend a night in an open-air beach *fale*. See "Savai'i," in chapter 13.

3 The Best Honeymoon Resorts

Honeymooning 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 18th-century European explorers.

I've never stayed anywhere as romantic as a thatch-roof bungalow, especially one built on stilts over a lagoon, with a glass panel in its floor for viewing fish that swim below you, and steps leading into the warm waters. You'll find lots of these in French Polynesia—especially on Bora Bora, the South Pacific's most famous honeymoon destination—and a handful more in Fiji, the Cook Islands, and Samoa.

One caveat is in order: Many overwater bungalows are relatively close together, meaning that your honeymooning next-door neighbors will be within earshot if not eyeshot. Therefore, if you're seeking a high degree of privacy and seclusion, they won't be your best choice. Look instead to a growing number of super-private honeymoon "villas"—many with their own swimming pools and hot tubs.

Also, many of the South Pacific's small, relatively remote offshore resorts fall into another category: 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 her honeymoon a diving vacation. Most resorts in this book are aware of such desires, and they offer wedding packages complete with traditional ceremony and costumes (see the "Getting Hitched in the Islands" box, later in this chapter).

Here's my choice of the best honeymoon resorts. With few exceptions, they all have full-service spas.

FIJI

Fiji has one of the world's finest collections of small offshore resorts. These have two advantages over their French Polynesian competitors. First, many have fewer than 20 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 hotels in the Mamanuca Islands off Nadi appeal to honeymooners. Tops is the exquisitely designed **Likuliku Lagoon Resort**, the first in Fiji with overwater bungalows (p. 123). **Tokoriki Island Resort** has five bungalows with their own plunge pools (p. 124). It's less luxurious, but **Matamanoa Island Resort** caters exclusively to couples and is a good choice for cost-conscious honeymooners. See p. 126.

Yasawa Island Resort and Spa sits on one of the prettiest beaches and has a low-key, friendly ambience. It has large bungalows, the choice being the secluded honeymoon unit sitting by its own beach; it even has its own pool. See p. 128.

Also in the Yasawa Islands is the less expensive **Navutu Stars Resort**, which has a spa and yoga sessions in addition to fine food. See p. 129.

In central Fiji off Suva, **The Wakaya Club** is generally considered Fiji's top resort. It has the country's largest bungalows, plus a palatial mansion with its own pool, perched high atop a ridge. You might see a movie star or two relaxing at Wakaya. See p. 157.

At Savusavu in northern Fiji, **Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort** is the South Pacific's best family hotel, but a beautiful villa with its own swimming pool is hidden away from the kids. See p. 169. Motivational speaker Anthony Robbin's luxurious **Namale Resort** also has private, pool-equipped villas plus a bowling alley, golf simulator, and a ton of other toys. See p. 171.

At the other extreme, Taveuni's low-key, three-unit **Coconut Grove Beachfront Cottages** is one of Fiji's best bargains. See p. 179. Most bungalows at **Maravu Plantation Beach Resort & Spa** come equipped with hot tubs, and a honeymoon unit is built up in a tree. See p. 180.

So is one of the widely spaced bungalows at **Matangi Island Resort**, off Taveuni, where two more are carved into the side of a cliff. They all have outdoor bathrooms. See p. 184. Among my favorite places are the charming, old South Seas-style bungalows and the stunning central building at **Qamea Resort and Spa**. Lanterns romantically light the 52-foot-high thatched roof of Qamea's main building. See p. 185.

FRENCH POLYNESIA

The resorts in French Polynesia have the region's widest selection of overwater bungalows.

On Tahiti, which most visitors now consider a way station to the other islands, the **InterContinental Tahiti Beachcomber Resort** has overwater bungalows that face the outline of Moorea across the Sea of the Moon. See p. 239. Some of those at **Le Meridien Tahiti** also have this view. See p. 239.

On Moorea, the overwater units at the **Club Bali Hai** are the among the oldest—and the least expensive—in the islands. They lack most modern amenities, but they enjoy an unparalleled view of the jagged mountains surrounding Cook's Bay. See p. 263. Some overwater units at the **Sofitel Moorea Beach Resort** face Tahiti across the Sea of the Moon, and they're built over Moorea's most colorful lagoon. See p. 264. The **Moorea Pearl Resort** has a few perched on the edge of the clifflike reef, making for superb snorkeling right off your front deck. See p. 264.

Bora Bora has several hundred overwater bungalows. The newest and largest are at the super-luxurious **St. Regis Resort Bora Bora**, where Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban spent their honeymoon in the enormous Royal Estate (p. 284). Also huge are the units at **InterContinental Resort and Thalasso Spa Bora Bora**, where you can watch fish swim beneath

your overwater treatment room while getting a massage in the South Pacific's top spa (p. 282).

Units at the **Bora Bora Nui Resort** also are large and luxurious, although they don't look out to pillarlike Mount Otemanu rising across the famous lagoon (p. 280). For that signature vista, you can stay at the **Sofitel Motu** (p. 283) or at the venerable **Hotel Bora Bora** (p. 281). The Hotel Bora Bora also has luxurious bungalows boasting 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 in their wall-enclosed patios, which have sun decks and splash pools. See p. 280. The smaller, but well-appointed, overwater units at the friendly **Hotel Maitai Polynesia** are the least expensive on Bora Bora. See p. 284.

On Huahine, units at the **Te Tiare Beach Resort** have some of the largest decks of any overwater bungalows (one side is shaded by a thatched roof). See p. 296.

The most charming of French Polynesia's overwater units are at the **Le Taha'a Private Island & Spa**, a luxurious resort on a small islet off Tahaa. Some of these espy Bora Bora on the horizon. See p. 304.

Out at the huge atoll known as Rangiroa, in the Tuamotu archipelago, **Hotel Kia Ora** has bungalows over the world's second-largest lagoon. See p. 309. On the adjacent atoll, overwater bungalows at the **Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort** sit over the rip tides in a pass that lets the sea into the lagoon. See p. 311. 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 Tikehau and Manihi more closely approximate the privacy of Fiji's remote offshore resorts than any others in French Polynesia. See p. 312.

Getting Hitched in the Islands

These romantic islands are marvelous places to get married, although getting *legally* hitched is relatively easy only in Fiji, the Cook Islands, and Samoa. It's impractical in French Polynesia and American Samoa, which require 30-day residencies prior to getting a marriage license, and more difficult in Tonga, which requires 6 months. Legal or not, many couples still opt for island wedding ceremonies during their honeymoons. Many resorts will take care of the formalities and organize traditional ceremonies, on the beach as you prefer. Their wedding coordinators will tell you what documents you will need to bring (or send in advance) and what local formalities you will need to execute. Do not even think of making the arrangements yourself.

THE COOK ISLANDS

Generally you will spend less on your honeymoon in Rarotonga and the Cook Islands than in nearby French Polynesia.

Up in Aitutaki, you can stay in an overwater bungalow at the **Aitutaki Lagoon Resort & Spa**, which has one of the most cleverly designed "villas" in the islands (you roll off your daybed into your own pool and swim to your own hot tub!). See p. 355. The stunning **Pacific Resort Aitutaki** has bungalows down by the beach and hidden away among old-growth forest on a headland. **Etu Moana Beach Villas** lacks a restaurant, but its bungalows are within walking distance of one. See p. 355.

The most luxurious digs on Rarotonga are at **Rumours of Romance Luxury Villas & Spa**, where one unit has its own movie theater. They are not, however, individual bungalows. See p. 340. Nor are those at **Sea Change Villas**, but the beachside units have their own pools. See p. 342. My favorite bungalows are the spacious and charming units at **Rarotonga Beach Bungalows**, sitting beside the island's best beach and lagoon. See p. 342. Nearby, the **Little Polynesian** now has 10 spacious beachside bungalows and a pool (see p. 341), as does **Royale Takitumu Villas** (see p. 342). The best family

resort in the Cooks, the **Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa**, also has a luxurious honeymoon villa with pool hidden from the throngs. Even more private villas are across the road. See p. 344. **Crown Beach Resort**, the top small full-service hotel on Rarotonga, has hot tubs in the porches on its beachside units and has added 16 private villas with pools. See p. 343.

SAMOA

Often overshadowed by its South Pacific neighbors, independent Samoa has much to offer honeymooners, especially those without unlimited funds.

On Upolu's south coast, **Coconuts Beach Club & Spa** has Samoa's only overwater bungalows, and three villas with rock-wall bathrooms. See p. 388. Nearby, **Sinalei Reef Resort & Spa** has a spa, a 9-hole golf course, and individual bungalows. The honeymoon units sit beside their own beach. See p. 390.

Although it does not have bungalows, **Aggie Grey's Lagoon, Beach Resort & Spa** does sport a full-service spa, and it's surrounded by the sea and an 18-hole golf course. See p. 388.

On Savai'i, **Le Lagoto Beach Resort** has a dozen Samoan-style *fales* with intricately lashed ceilings. An infinity pool augments the fine beach. See p. 395.

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, for more resorts are making provisions for families. Kids will enjoy themselves most if they like being around the water.

A family can vacation in style and comfort at resorts like the big resorts on Denarau Island in Fiji, or Shangri-la's Fijian Resort on the Coral Coast, but here are some of the best smaller establishments that welcome families.

- **Castaway Island Resort** (Mamanuca Islands, Fiji): One of Fiji's oldest resorts but thoroughly refurbished, 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. 123.
- **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 educated and entertained from sunup to bedtime. See p. 169.
- **Le Meridien Bora Bora** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): Most resorts in French Polynesia are designed for romance, not children. The notable exception is Le Meridien Bora Bora, which has a shallow, lakelike lagoon where children can safely swim with young sea turtles bred in the resort's conservation program. See p. 282.
- **St. Regis Resort Bora Bora** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): Well-heeled children will feel right at home playing in the St. Regis's state-of-the-art *Hono Iti* (Little Turtle) kids' club, where computers come equipped with high-speed Internet access and educational software. See p. 284.
- **The Rarotongan Beach Resort & Spa** (Rarotonga, Cook Islands): Rising like a phoenix after years of neglect, this is now the best international-standard resort on Rarotonga. Although it caters to everyone from honeymooners to families, the children's program is tops in the Cook Islands. See p. 344.

5 The Best Cultural Experiences

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

- **Fijian Village Visits** (Fiji): Many tours from Nadi and 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 "Sightseeing Tours" in chapter 5.
- **Tiki Theatre Village** (Moorea, French Polynesia): Built to resemble a pre-European Tahitian village, this cultural center has demonstrations of crafts 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 9.
- **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, and their traditional uses, **Pa's Cross-Island Mountain Trek** cannot be topped. See "Exploring Rarotonga" in chapter 12.

- **Samoa:** The entire country serves as a cultural storehouse of *fa'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 13.

- **Tongan National Cultural Centre** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): Artisans turn out classic Tongan crafts, 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 Cook reputedly gave to the king of Tonga in 1777, which lived until 1968. The center has island-night dance shows and feasts with traditional food. See "Exploring Tongatapu," in chapter 15.

6 The Best of the Old South Seas

Many South Pacific islands are developing rapidly, with modern, fast-paced cities replacing 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.

- **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. Levuka looks very much as it did when the government moved to Suva in 1882, with a row of clapboard general stores along picturesque Beach Street. See "A Side Trip Back in Time to Levuka," in chapter 5.
- **Taveuni Island** (Northern Fiji): Like Savai'i, Fiji's third-largest and lushest island has changed little since Europeans started coconut plantations in

the 1860s. With the largest remaining population of indigenous plants and animals in the South Pacific, Taveuni is a nature lover's delight. See "Taveuni," in chapter 6.

- **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 11.
- **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 farming and fishing for a living. The crystal-clear lagoon is something to behold. See “Aitutaki,” in chapter 12.

- **Apia** (Samoa): Despite a sea wall along what used to be a beach and two high-rises sitting on reclaimed land, a number of clapboard buildings and 19th-century churches make Apia look much as it did when Robert Louis Stevenson settled here in 1889. See “Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu,” in chapter 13.
- **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 13.

- **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 15.

7 The Best Dining Experiences

You won’t be stuck eating island-style food cooked in an earth oven (see “Tips on Dining,” in chapter 2), for the islands have some restaurants of remarkably high caliber. Here are a few of my favorites.

- **Nadina Authentic Fijian Restaurant** (Nadi, Fiji): Most resorts serve native food on buffets at their island night feasts, but this little restaurant serves great Fijian fare all the time, including *miti*, the tender young shoots of the wood fern, served with coconut milk. See p. 118.
- **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. 141.
- **Old Mill Cottage** (Suva, Fiji): Diplomats and government workers pack this old colonial cottage at breakfast and lunch for some of the region’s least-expensive local fare. Offerings range from English-style roast chicken with mashed potatoes

and peas to Fijian-style *palusami* (fresh fish wrapped in taro leaves and steamed in coconut milk). See p. 160.

- **L’O a la Bouche** (Papeete, Tahiti): The chefs at this sophisticated bistro in the heart of Papeete range far from traditional French fare to items from Spain, Italy, and other countries. They’re also good at coming up with creative spins using local ingredients. It’s one of the best restaurants in French Polynesia. See p. 246.
- **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 and the service weren’t efficient and unobtrusive, the view of Moorea on a moonlit night makes an evening here special. See p. 245.
- **Les Roulettes** (Papeete, French Polynesia): The Papeete waterfront turns into a carnival when meal wagons set up shop after dark, offering char-grilled steaks with french fries and a variety of other inexpensive fare. Most other islands have them, too. See p. 244.

- **Le Mayflower** (Moorea, French Polynesia): You'll want to write home about the lobster ravioli in cream sauce at this moderately priced roadside restaurant, Moorea's best. It's excellent value in expensive French Polynesia. See p. 269.
- **Bloody Mary's Restaurant & Bar** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): A fun evening at the South Pacific's most famous restaurant is a must 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, and 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. 287.
- **La Villa Mahana** (Bora Bora, French Polynesia): Corsican chef Damien Rinaldi Devio also offers relief from traditional French sauces at his little

restaurant, where he uses exotic spices to enliven fresh fish and beef dishes. See p. 288.

- **Tamarind House Restaurant & Bar** (Rarotonga, Cook Islands): Noted restaurateur and cookbook author Sue Carruthers brings the seasonings of her native Kenya to this charmer in a seaside colonial house. See p. 349.
- **Sails at Mulinu'u** (Apia, Samoa): Ian and Lyvia Black own one of the South Pacific's best casual restaurants beside Apia Harbour on the Mulinu'u Peninsula. Most likely your table will be under the stars. See p. 392.
- **Seaview Restaurant** (Nuku'alofa, Tonga): In a country where restaurants come and go, this Austrian-owned establishment, in an old waterfront home, has long provided Nuku'alofa's best cuisine. Tonga is the last island nation with a reliable supply of spiny tropical lobsters, so have one here. See p. 437.

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 to see Tahitian dancing. 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 8 through 10.

- **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 many of the old movements. They turned to the Cook Islands, where dancing was—and still

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 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.

is—the thing to do when the sun goes down. 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. See “Island Nights on Rarotonga,” in chapter 12.

- **Samoa:** Among the great shows in the South Pacific are *fiafia* nights in the main building at Aggie Grey's Hotel & Bungalows in Apia. The

show culminates in a fire dance around the adjacent pool. See “Island Nights on Upolu,” in chapter 13.

- **Tonga:** The shows at the Tongan National Cultural Centre are unique, with 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 15.

9 The Best Buys

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

For the locations of the best shops, see the shopping sections in chapters 5 through 15.

- **Black Pearls:** Few people will escape French Polynesia or the Cook Islands without buying at least one black pearl. That's because the 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, and they're being harvested in Fiji, too. See chapters 8, 9, 10, and 12.
- **Handicrafts:** Although many of the items you will see in island souvenir shops are actually made in Asia, locally produced handicrafts 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 5, 13, and 15.

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, known as *tapa*, is another preserved art in Tonga, Samoa (where it is called *siapo*), and Fiji (where it is known as *masi*). The cloth is painted with dyes made from natural substances, usually in geometric designs that have ancestries dating back thousands of years. Tapa is an excellent souvenir because it can be folded and

brought back in a suitcase. See chapters 5, 13, and 15.

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 can lack the imagery of bygone days, and some may be machine-produced. 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 Fiji and the Marquesas Islands of French Polynesia are the

best of the lot. See chapters 5 and 8 through 12.

- **Tropical Clothing:** Colorful hand-screened, -blocked, and -dyed fabrics are 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 hand-applied to gauzelike cotton, which is 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 on the finished product. See chapters 5 through 15.

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 make arrangements with a local company. Here are the best:

- **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 Somo-somo 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 chapters 5 and 6.
- **Rangiroa and Fakarava** (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 and Fakarava in the Tuamotu Archipelago. They are more famous for their sea life, including sharks, than colorful soft corals. Go to Rangiroa to see sharks; to Fakarava for more fish than you ever imagined existed. See chapter 11.

- **Tonga:** The north shore of the main island of Tongatapu fronts a huge lagoon, where the government has made national parks of the Hakau-mama'o and Malinoa reefs. The best diving in Tonga is around Ha'apai and Vava'u. See "Ha'apai" and "Vava'u," in chapter 15.

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 anchorages. Boats can be sailed completely around Tahaa without leaving the lagoon, and Bora Bora and Huahine are just 32km (20 miles)

away over blue water. See “Raiatea & Tahaa,” in chapter 11.

- **Vava'u** (Tonga): The second most popular yachting spot, Vava'u is virtually serrated by such well-protected bays as the Port of Refuge. Chains of small islands trail off the south side of Vava'u like the tentacles of a jellyfish, creating large, quiet cruising grounds. Many anchorages are off deserted islands with their own beaches. See “Vava'u,” in chapter 15.

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 10.
- **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 11.
- **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 thatched-roof buildings beside one of that country's lovely beaches. Forget privacy, since most are open-sided in traditional Samoan fashion. But why block the view? 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 13.

- **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 “How To Survive Sunday in Tonga,” in chapter 15.
- **Cave Swimming** (Samoa and Tonga): Boats can go into Swallows Cave on one of the small islands that make up 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 15. You also have to swim underwater into the Piula Cave Pool in Samoa. See “Exploring Apia & the Rest of Upolu,” in chapter 13.