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THE BEST OF TAHITI & FRENCH POLYNESIA

Tahiti and her sister islands in French Polynesia 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 these remote outposts doesn't go back quite that far, but when I did wash ashore more than 3 decades ago, I quickly understood why they came to have such a reputation. In fact, I was so smitten that I stayed for 7 months, as long as the gendarmes would allow.

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You may wish to plan a longer trip yourself, for these are the most beautiful islands in the world—an opinion I share with many others, including the late James A. Michener. They are blessed with gorgeous beaches, and their lagoons allow for spectacular diving and snorkeling.

Then there are the Polynesian islanders who live here. Their fabled history has provided fodder for famous books and films, their storied culture inspires hedonistic dreams, and their big, infectious smiles add charm to any visit.

Your choice of where you go and what you do will depend on why you are coming here, and on how much money you have to spend. French Polynesia has a well-earned reputation as an expensive destination. An unforgettable honeymoon spent in a romantic bungalow standing over a lagoon may cost a small fortune. But by foregoing such niceties as air conditioners and televisions, you can have an enjoyable vacation at a small hotel or a charming pension without hocking all of the family jewels.

In this chapter, I point out the best of the best—not necessarily to pass qualitative judgment, but to help you choose among the surprisingly many options in the islands. They're listed here in the order in which they appear in the book. For a preview of the islands, see "The Islands in Brief" in chapter 4.

THE most beautiful ISLANDS

"In the South Seas," the poet 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 here lie some of the world's most dramatically beautiful islands. The best of the lot have jagged mountain peaks plunging into aquamarine lagoons, and often appear on travel posters and brochures.

- **Moorea:** To my mind, Moorea is the most beautiful island in the world. Nothing compares with its saw-toothed 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 6.
- **Huahine:** Although Moorea and Bora Bora get most of the ink, Huahine is almost as gorgeous. Its bays are surrounded by mountains that almost rival Moorea's. But since it is off the well-beaten tourist track, it still retains an air of old Polynesia. Because it hasn't yet been taken over by tourists or the pressures of modern life, its residents still greet you with a big smile and have time to sit and chat. See chapter 7.
- **Bora Bora:** James Michener thought Bora Bora was the most beautiful island in the world. Although tourism has turned this gem into a sort of expensive South Seas Disneyland, development hasn't altered the incredible beauty of Mount Otemanu, the basaltic tombstone towering over Bora Bora's lagoon, which ranges in color from bright yellow to deep blue. See chapter 9.
- **Maupiti:** An unspoiled jewel, Maupiti is like nearby Bora Bora in miniature, but without any modern hotels or resorts. Like Bora Bora, its mountainous central island hovers over a crystal-clear lagoon. See chapter 10.
- **Rangiroa, Tikehau, Manihi, & Fakarava:** These atolls are lumped together because they are equally beautiful. Each has a string of islets enclosing large lagoons, like giant lakes in the middle of the ocean. See chapter 11.
- **Ua Pou:** In the far-off Marquesas Islands, Ua Pou's mountain ridges are topped by stovepipe spires, which inspired Jacques Brel to write his song, "La Cathédrale." See chapter 12.
- **Fatu Hiva:** Virgin's Bay on Fatu Hiva is one of the world's most gorgeous yacht anchorages, especially at sunset when golden light plays off two stone pillars guarding the entrance to the island's gorgelike central valley. See chapter 12.

THE best BEACHES

Because all but a few of the islands are surrounded by coral reefs, there are few surf *plages* here (the French word for "beach" being *plage*). Most of those on Tahiti have heat-absorbing black volcanic sand. Except in the Marquesas, which are almost devoid of coral, most islands (and all but a few resorts) have bathtub-like lagoons that lap on white-coral sands draped by coconut palms. Here are a few that stand out from the many:

- **La Plage de Maui** (Tahiti): Bordering the southern shore of Tahiti Iti, the main island's peninsula, this strip of white sand is far and away the best beach on Tahiti. The lagoon is suitable for swimming, and there's an excellent snack bar beside the beach. See chapter 5.

- **Mareto Plage Publique** (Moorea): Although it isn't as picturesque as Moorea's Temae Plage Publique (see below), this beach between Cook's and Opunohu bays sits between a coconut grove and the lagoon. See chapter 6.
- **Temae Plage Publique** (Moorea): The northeastern coast of Moorea is fringed by a nearly uninterrupted stretch of white-sand beach that commands a glorious view: across a speckled lagoon to Tahiti, sitting on the horizon across the Sea of the Moon. See chapter 6.
- **Avea Beach** (Huahine): My favorite resort beach is at Relais Mahana, a small hotel on Auea Bay near Huahine's southern 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 chapter 7.
- **Matira Beach** (Bora Bora): Although metal boat lifts in the lagoon now mar its beauty, this fine ribbon of sand stretches around skinny Matira Point, which forms the island's southern extremity. The eastern side has views of the sister islands of Raiatea and Tahaa. See chapter 9.
- **Plage Tereia** (Maupiti): Like Matira Beach on Bora Bora, this white-sand beach wraps around a peninsula on Maupiti's main island. It's so lovely that locals are building homes next to it, so you aren't likely to have this one all to yourself, especially on weekends. Almost as beautiful is the beach at the northern end of Motu Tiapaa, where you have a view of Maupiti's central mountain, and no one seems to care if you discretely skinny-dip. See chapter 10.
- **Les Sables Rose/The Pink Sands** (Rangiroa): At a remote corner of Rangiroa's lagoon, the world's second largest, lies a gorgeous beach made up of pink sand. There is no shade, but it's well worth the hour-long boat ride from Rangiroa's hotels. See chapter 11.
- **Motu Tuherahera** (Tikehau): The eastern half of Tikihau's main island is skirted by a beautiful stretch of white sand, much of it flanked by the atoll's pensions. See chapter 11.

THE best HONEYMOON RESORTS

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

Back in those days, everyone here lived in a proverbial little grass shack by the beach. The modern resorts have elevated that concept into luxurious guest bungalows, many built on stilts out over the lagoons. I've never stayed anywhere as romantic as these thatched-roof overwater units, most with glass panels in their floors for viewing fish swimming below. If their indoor luxuries aren't enough, you can climb down the steps leading from your front deck and go skinny-dipping in the warm waters below. The overwater bungalows help make French Polynesia—especially Bora Bora—one of the world's most famous honeymoon destinations. Naturally, they are the most expensive accommodations here.

One caveat is in order: Many overwater bungalows are relatively close together, meaning that your honeymooning next-door neighbors will be within earshot. ("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, these won't necessarily be your best choice.

The top resorts are variations on the same theme: a beachside central complex with a restaurant, bar, and other public facilities flanked by individual guest bungalows in a coconut grove. From the shoreline, piers reach out to the overwater units. I point out the top resorts island-by-island in the paragraphs below, but please read the reviews in the chapters that follow before making your choice.

- **Tahiti:** Most visitors now consider Tahiti to be a way station to the other islands, but the **InterContinental Resort Tahiti** (p. 114) has overwater bungalows that face the dramatic outline of Moorea across the Sea of the Moon. Some of those at **Le Meridien Tahiti** (p. 116) also have this view.
- **Moorea:** The units at the **Club Bali Hai** (p. 144) are among the oldest—and the least expensive—overwater bungalows in the islands, but they enjoy an unparalleled view of the jagged mountains surrounding Cook's Bay. Some overwater units at the **Sofitel Moorea Ia Ora Beach Resort** (p. 142) actually face Tahiti across the Sea of the Moon, and they're built over Moorea's most colorful lagoon. The **Moorea Pearl Resort & Spa** (p. 142) has a few bungalows perched on the edge of the clifflike reef, making for superb snorkeling right off your front deck. You'll have more of these luxurious cabins at the **InterContinental Resort and Spa Moorea** (p. 146).
- **Huahine:** After a few days on Bora Bora, many couples today are opting to end their honeymoons by decompressing on Huahine or Tahaa (see below). On Huahine, **Te Tiare Beach Resort** (p. 163) is one of the smallest and most intimate retreats in French Polynesia. Its units have some of the largest decks of any overwater bungalows (one side is completely shaded by a thatched roof).
- **Tahaa:** The most charmingly Polynesian of all overwater units are at the **Le Taha'a Private Island & Spa** (p. 177), a luxurious resort on a small islet off Tahaa. Some of these have views of Bora Bora on the horizon.
- **Bora Bora:** This most famous—and crowded—of French Polynesia's honeymoon islands has several hundred overwater bungalows. Some at the superluxe **St. Regis Resort Bora Bora** (p. 194) have swimming pools set in their overwater decks. Not only does the **InterContinental Resort and Thalasso Spa Bora Bora** (p. 193) have overwater units for its guests, but three treatment rooms at its extraordinary spa also extend out over the lagoon (you can watch the fish through a glass floor panel while getting a massage). The **Hilton Bora Bora Nui Resort & Spa** (p. 193) has large, two-room overwater units, but only a few look out to tombstonelike Mount Otemanu, one of the most photographed scenes in the entire South Pacific. You will have that awesome view at the **Sofitel Bora Bora Marara Beach and Private Island** (p. 195), where some bungalows directly face the tombstone mountain. You'll see the mountain from its other side from the **Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora** (p. 192), the newest resort here. Among the most private units are the garden units at the **Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort** (p. 192); you can cavort to your heart's content in their wall-enclosed patios, which have sun decks and splash pools. The smaller but well-appointed overwater units at the friendly **Le Maitai Polynesia Bora Bora** (p. 195) are the least

expensive on Bora Bora. You'll be up on a hillside rather than by the beach, but the three units at the inexpensive **Rohutu Fare Lodge** (p. 196) are the most suggestively decorated in French Polynesia.

- **Tuamotu Archipelago:** Most beaches in the Tuamotu atolls have more coral gravel than sand, but not so at the **Tikehau Pearl Beach Resort** (p. 222), where some overwater bungalows actually sit over the riptides in a pass that lets the sea into the lagoon. Although its bungalows are all ashore, the charming **Relais Royal Tikehau** (p. 222) is a less expensive alternative, and it also has a very fine beach. On Manihi atoll, units at the **Manihi Pearl Beach Resort** (p. 226) are cooled by the almost constantly blowing trade winds.

THE best FAMILY RESORTS

There are no Disney Worlds or other such attractions in the islands. As I point out in the "Family Travel" section in chapter 3 (p. 62), most tourism here is geared toward honeymooners and other couples. In fact, most resorts in French Polynesia are designed specifically for romance. Accordingly, most resorts house their guests in individual bungalows best occupied by two people. That's not to say that children won't have a fine time here, for more and more resorts are making provisions for families as well as honeymooners. Kids who like being around the water will enjoy themselves the most.

Here are a few family-friendly resorts:

- **InterContinental Resort Tahiti** (Tahiti): Tahiti's best all-around resort has a few overwater bungalows, but most units are hotel rooms that interconnect, thus giving families who can afford them two or more units in which to roam. See p. 114.
- **Radisson Plaza Resort Tahiti** (Tahiti): The lagoon off the black-sand beach at the Radisson Plaza is subject to dangerous riptides, but kids can play in the walk-in swimming pool. Parents who don't mind letting their youngsters bunk on the living-room sofa can sleep upstairs in a two-story "duplex" suite. The Radisson occasionally offers special deals for families, such as letting kids stay and eat free. See p. 118.
- **Legends Resort** (Moorea): Sitting high on a mountainside, Legends Resort does not offer a program for kids, but all of its modern villas have fully-equipped kitchens, and some have two and three bedrooms. See p. 146.
- **Bora Bora Nui Resort & Spa** (Bora Bora): This large and swanky resort has a variety of accommodations, including hotel-style units that interconnect. See p. 193.



Getting Hitched in the Islands

The islands are marvelous places for a honeymoon. Thanks to a recent change in the law, visitors can now get legally hitched in French Polynesia without being here for 30 days beforehand. The rules are a bit complicated, and everything must be done in French, so it's best to let your choice of resort handle the details. Most of them have romantic wedding packages including traditional ceremonies, often right on the beach.

- **Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora** (Bora Bora): Although the swanky Four Seasons attracts mainly couples, during holiday periods a marine biologist is on duty at its "Chill Island" kids club. Some of the resort's villas have bedrooms designed especially for children. See p. 192.
- **Le Meridien Bora Bora** (Bora Bora): Although it doesn't have a children's center, I think this Meridien is the top family resort in French Polynesia. The youngsters can both play and learn in the resort's award-wining sea turtle rescue and breeding program. Family-size units sit beside a shallow, man-made lagoon, a safe haven for kids. See p. 194.

THE best PENSIONS & GUEST HOUSES

I had the great fortune to be accompanied on my research trip for this edition by my dear French friend Muriel Weber, who not only has an extraordinary eye behind the camera but a wonderful nose for sniffing out *bonnes adressees,* which is her way of saying charming places to stay. It's a useful talent in a country whose pensions and guest houses run the gamut from cold-water basic to charmingly comfortable.

Common in Europe, pensions are comparable to bed-and-breakfasts in the United States, to home-stays in other English-speaking countries. Many pensions include breakfast and dinner in their rates, which makes them very good value.

Here are best of those Muriel and I found. Others are in chapters 5 through 12. Also see "Tips on Accommodations" in chapter 3 (p. 73).

- **Hiti Moana Villa** (Tahiti): In rural Papara on Tahiti's south coast, the bungalows at this little pension sit beside the lagoon. There's also a swimming pool. See p. 117.
- **Fare Suisse** (Tahiti): This modern home with motel-style rooms is just 3 blocks inland from the Papeete waterfront. See p. 120.
- **Fare Vaihere** (Moorea): The owner of this 4-bungalow bed-and-breakfast on the shores of spectacular Opunohu Bay is a dive instructor. His wife is a terrific cook. See p. 145.
- **Fare Manuia** (Moorea): More of a cottage rental place than pension, the fully-equipped units here are beside a very good beach. See p. 147.
- **Pension Mauarii** (Huahine): Built of thatch, bamboo, and tree trunks, Pension Mauarii's rustic bungalows sit beside one of French Polynesia's best beaches. The restaurant is both good and charming. See p. 165.
- **Sunset Beach Motel** (Raiatea): This collection of Western-style cottages occupies a coconut grove skirting Raiatea's lagoon. Every unit has a kitchen and a view of Bora Bora. See p. 177.
- **Rohutu Fare Lodge** (Bora Bora): On a hillside overlooking the Bora Bora's fabulous lagoon, this little charmer's bungalows are cleverly—and suggestively—designed. See p. 196.
- **Le Kuriri** (Maupiti): This small hotel is the most charming and sophisticated accommodation on a beautiful island whose residents have rejected big resorts. See p. 206.
- **Poe Iti Guest House** (Maupiti): They lack the Polynesian charm of Le Kuriri's, but Poe Iti's bungalows have TVs and air conditioners, a rarity for a French Polynesian pension. See p. 207

- **Les Relais de Josephine** (Rangiroa): You can watch the dolphins frolic in Tipua Pass from the Mediterranean-style villa and three of the six bungalows of this little charmer. See p. 217.
- **Raira Lagon** (Rangiroa): The bungalows are air-conditioned at this pension beside Rangiroa's huge lagoon. See p. 219.
- **Relais Royal Tikehau** (Tikehau): Unlike most accommodations in the atolls of the Tuamotu Archipelago, this small hotel has a great beach of pinkish sand. See p. 222.
- **Pension Kiria** (Fakarava): On an island with several good pensions, this one stands out for its bungalows built entirely of native materials. See p. 230.

THE best HISTORICAL & CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

The people of Tahiti and French Polynesia are justly proud of their ancient culture, as well as the unique modern history that sets them apart from all other Pacific Islanders. Below are the best ways to learn about the people, their lifestyle, and their history.

- **La Maison de James Norman Hall/James Norman Hall's Home** (Tahiti): The coauthor of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and other books set in the South Pacific lived most of his adult life on Tahiti. His family maintains his former home as a fascinating museum. See p. 93.
- **Marché Municipal/Municipal Market** (Tahiti): Papeete's large, teeming market is a wonderful place to examine tropical foodstuffs as well as to buy handicrafts. It's especially busy before dawn on Sunday. See p. 94.
- **Musée de Tahiti et Ses Isles/Museum of Tahiti and Her Islands** (Tahiti): This terrific lagoonside museum recounts the geology, history, culture, flora, and fauna of French Polynesia. It's worth a stop just for the outstanding view of Moorea from its coconut-grove setting. See p. 94.
- **Musée Gauguin/Gauguin Museum** (Tahiti): The great French painter Paul Gauguin lived and worked on Tahiti's south coast from 1891 until moving to Hiva Oa in the Marquesas Islands, where he died. This museum has a few of his original works, but is best at tracing his adventures in French Polynesia. See p. 95.
- **Tiki Theatre Village** (Moorea): Built to resemble a pre-European Tahitian village, this cultural center has demonstrations of handicrafts 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 p. 137.
- **Maeva Maraes** (Huahine): The ancient Tahitians gathered to worship their gods and hold other ceremonies at stone temples known as *maraes*. More than 40 of these structures have been restored near the village of Maeva and are a highlight of any visit to Huahine. See p. 158.
- **Taputapuatea Marae** (Raiatea): French Polynesia's largest and most important *marae* sits beside the lagoon on Raiatea. Archaeologists have uncovered bones apparently from human sacrifices from beneath its 45m-long (150-ft.) grand altar. See p. 171.
- **Tohua Papa Nui/Paul Gauguin Cultural Center** (Hiva Oa): This small museum recounts Paul Gauguin's last days on Hiva Oa, where he died in 1903. It's worth a visit to see the exact replicas of his original paintings executed by a team of French artists. See p. 257.

THE best OF THE OLD SOUTH SEAS

The islands are developing rapidly, with modern, fast-paced cities like Papeete replacing what were once sleepy backwater ports. But there are still remnants of the old South Seas days of coconut planters, beach bums, and missionaries.

- **Huahine:** Of the major French Polynesian islands, Huahine has been the least affected by tourism, and its residents are still likely to give you an unprompted Tahitian greeting, *"Ia orana!"* Agriculture is still king on Huahine, which makes it the "Island of Fruits." There are ancient *maraes* (temples) to visit, and the only town, tiny **Fare,** is little more than a collection of Chinese shops fronting the island's wharf, which come to life when ships pull in. See chapter 7.
- **Tahaa:** With no towns and barely a village, Tahaa is still predominately a vanilla-growing island—as sweet aromas will attest. One of French Polynesia's top resorts is on a small islet off Tahaa, but otherwise this rugged little island takes you back to the way Moorea used to be. See chapter 8.
- **Maupiti:** Not long ago, residents of Maupiti voted down a proposal to build an upscale resort on their gorgeous little island, thus leaving it as a day trip from Bora Bora or as an unspoiled retreat for those who can do without maximum luxuries—or the English language. Maupiti looks like Bora Bora; locals boast that it's how Bora Bora used to be. See chapter 10.
- **The Tuamotu Archipelago:** Whether you choose to visit Rangiroa, Tikehau, Manihi, or Fakarava, you will find modern Polynesian life relatively undisturbed by modern ways, except for the many black-pearl farms in their lagoons. See chapter 11.
- **The Marquesas Islands:** Best visited on the cruise ship *Aranui 3*, the Marquesas hearken back to the early 19th century, when Herman Melville and others jumped off whaling ships and disappeared into the islands' haunting valleys. See chapter 12.

THE best DINING EXPERIENCES

Wherever the French go, fine food and wine are sure to follow, and French Polynesia is no exception. You will get good food everywhere here, but these are a few of the best places to sample fine fare.

- **Le Coco's** (Tahiti): On Tahiti's west coast, you'll have a fine view of Moorea from the patio at Le Coco's, specializing in light nouvelle cuisine. See p. 122.
- **Le Lotus** (Tahiti): The most romantic setting of any French Polynesian restaurant is in this overwater dining room at the InterContinental Resort Tahiti. The food is gourmet French and the service highly efficient and unobtrusive, but even if they weren't, the view of Moorea on a moonlit night would still make an evening here special. See p. 122.
- **Restaurant Pink Coconut** (Tahiti): Also with a spectacular view of Moorea from Marina Taina, the Pink Coconut is my favorite place for a romantic lunch. See p. 122.

- **Le Belvédère** (Tahiti): The fondue isn't worth writing home about, but the spectacular view of Papeete and Moorea from high in the hills above the city is worth a postcard. See p. 123.
- **L'O a la Bouche** (Tahiti): This stylish bistro, emphasizing fusion cooking and fine wines, serves the best food in downtown Papeete. See p. 123.
- **Les Roulottes** (Tahiti): Dining in a parking lot is far from romantic, but the meal wagons on the Papeete waterfront after dark are the best food value in French Polynesia. The carnival-like scene itself is worth seeing. See p. 125.
- **Le Mahogany** (Moorea): After 30 years at the former Hotel Bali Hai, Chef François Courtien now works his magic at Le Mahogany, one of the best food values on Moorea. See p. 150.
- **Le Mayflower** (Moorea): Mainly locals in the know frequent this roadside restaurant, Moorea's best. The sauces are delightfully light, as are the prices for such good food. See p. 153.
- **Painapo (Pineapple) Beach** (Moorea): This beachside pavilion is my favorite place for an authentic Sunday buffet of traditional Tahitian food. It's one of French Polynesia's best values, too. See p. 153.
- **Bloody Mary's Restaurant & Bar** (Bora Bora): A fun evening at French Polynesia's most famous restaurant is a must-do when on Bora Bora. That's because Bloody Mary's provides 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. 198.
- **La Villa Mahana** (Bora Bora): Corsican chef Damien Rinaldi Dovio also provides relief from traditional French sauces at his romantic little restaurant, where he uses "exotic" spices to enliven fresh fish and beef dishes. See p. 199.

THE best ISLAND NIGHTS

Don't come to the islands expecting opera and ballet, or Las Vegas–style floor shows either. Other than pub-crawling to bars and nightclubs in Papeete, evening entertainment here consists primarily of feasts of island foods followed by traditional dancing—and whatever else you and your companion can concoct in these extraordinarily romantic islands.

Of course, the Tahitian 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; see "A Most Indecent Song & Dance" (p. 36).

Every hotel will have at least one dance show a week. The best are on Tahiti, especially the thrice-weekly performances at the InterContinental Resort Tahiti that feature one of the best troupes, the **Grande Danse de Tahiti** (p. 126).

Moorea has one of the best shows at **Tiki Theatre Village,** where the dancers wear traditional costumes (p. 137). Among Moorea's hotels, the **InterContinental Resort and Spa Moorea** (p. 146) stages a spectacular beachside show on Saturday nights, and the **Club Bali Hai** (p. 144) has a free performance at 6pm on Wednesday, followed by an à la carte barbecue, making it also a very good value.

If you want to see the very best Tahitian dancing, come here in July during the annual ***Heiva Nui*** festival, when the top troupes compete on the Papeete waterfront. Plan early, since tickets can be hard to come by if you wait until the last minute. See the "French Polynesia Calendar of Events" (p. 42) for details.

THE best BUYS

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

See "Shopping," in chapter 5, for an overall discussion and the "Shopping" sections in the individual destination chapters for the best shops on each island.

- **Black Pearls:** Few people will escape French Polynesia without buying at least one black pearl. That's because the shallow, clear-water lagoons of the Tuamotu Archipelago 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.
- **Handicrafts:** Although many of the items you will see in island souvenir shops are actually made in Asia, locally produced handicrafts are among the best buys. The most widespread are hats, mats, and baskets woven of pandanus leaves or other fibers, usually by women who have maintained this ancient art to a high degree. Woodcarvings are also popular, especially those from the Marquesas Islands. Many carvings in some large stores, however, tend to be produced for the tourist trade and often lack the imagery of bygone days; some may also be machine-produced these days.
- **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*. Many *pareus* are hand-painted, some almost works of art. Others are produced when heat-sensitive dyes are applied by hand to gauzelike 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.

THE best DIVING & SNORKELING

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

The lagoons in French Polynesia are known less for colorful soft corals than for the wide variety of sea life they contain. Both the number and variety of colorful tropical fish are astounding. Stingrays and manta rays are prevalent, and some in the Society Island lagoons are quite friendly to humans, the result of having been hand-fed (you'll see them hanging around the waterside restaurants after dark, hoping for handouts).

Rare is the diver who doesn't encounter sharks here, though most will be of the relatively harmless reef varieties—blacktip, silvertip, whitetip, and gray. The most

visited islands now have shark-feeding encounters (see "The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences" at the end of this chapter). Hammerheads and other large sharks live outside the reef and in the passes leading into the lagoons.

Most dive sites are along or just outside the barrier reefs and within short boat rides of the resorts.

If you like to snorkel, you're in for a few treats, whether on a shark-feeding excursion with other tourists or just swimming off your hotel beach. In some cases, snorkelers can go out with scuba divers.

The best diving and snorkeling are at **Rangiroa, Tikehau, Manihi,** and **Fakarava** in the Tuamotu Archipelago, where the huge lagoons harbor an incredible variety of fish and sharks. Go to Rangiroa to see sharks; go to the others to see more fish than you ever imagined existed. See chapter 11.

The atolls are also home to heart-stopping "ride the rip" dives and snorkeling trips, on which you literally ride the tidal current through the passes into the lagoons. See "The Best Offbeat Travel Experiences," below.

THE best SAILING

Sailboats based on Tahiti and Moorea will take you out for a spin, or even to the late Marlon Brando's island of Tetiaroa, but the best sailing here is among the Leeward Islands of Raiatea, Tahaa, Bora Bora, and Huahine. Having arrived here originally via yacht from the East Coast of the United States, I can say without qualification that the sailing among the Leeward Islands is world-class.

French Polynesia's center for charter-yacht sailing is **Raiatea,** where rentals are available from several companies (including The Moorings, the outstanding American company).

Raiatea shares a lagoon with **Tahaa,** its rugged sister island. Tahaa is indented with long bays sheltering numerous picturesque anchorages, and you can sail completely around it without leaving the lagoon.

If you are reasonably skilled at "blue water" offshore sailing, both Bora Bora and Huahine are just 32km (20 miles) away, albeit in opposite directions. Most of the charter-boat companies will let you leave the boat in either Huahine or Bora Bora, so you won't have to beat back to Raiatea after your week or so of knocking around the islands.

Details are in "Sailing" under "The Active Traveler" in chapter 3.

THE best OFFBEAT TRAVEL EXPERIENCES

Some cynics might say that a visit to French Polynesia itself is an offbeat experience, but there are three things to do here that are really unusual.

- **Getting Asked to Dance** (everywhere): I've seen so many traditional 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): 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 p. 188.
- **Riding the Rip** (Rangiroa and Manihi): Divers and snorkelers will never forget the flying sensation as they ride the strong currents ripping through passes into the lagoons at Rangiroa and Manihi. See "Rangiroa" and "Manihi" in chapter 11.