



BY BARBARA BECKLEY

## THE BORA BORA EXPERIENCE

This island can best be explored by taking advantage of local tours

On the *motu* picnic tour, a guide prepares traditional raw fish in coconut milk.

Just a 45-minute plane flight from French Polynesia's capital of Papeete, the island of **Bora Bora** offers white-sand beaches, emerald peaks and turquoise lagoons, making it a favorite for romance and relaxation. New excursions, entertaining restaurants, and new and newly renovated resorts—including one with an in-house tattoo artist—make it more inviting and sellable than ever.

A new archaeological tour led by Azdine Oualid, a University of France archaeology professor, is ideal for the growing number of clients who enjoy "learning" travel experiences. Offered by Polynesia Island Tours (the archaeologist is the owner-operator-guide), the half-day or full-day excursion provides a fresh look at the island's ancient culture. Oualid arrived in Bora Bora in 2006, picked up a machete and quickly began making archaeological discoveries—many of which he shares on this trek.

"Have you wondered why there's a single coconut palm growing up from each of Bora Bora's mountain ridges?" he asks as guests get into his jeep for the short ride up to the formerly taboo King's Valley. "Since the ancient Polynesians lived in the mountains, they planted the palms as visual sign posts as they hiked across the island. Today, you'll see 14 such palms pointing the way to now-forgotten destinations."

Walking up the gently sloping path, Oualid points out red hibiscus with long thin spidery-like petals. "This is ethnobiological proof that this truly was the king's valley," he says, "because it's the only place on Bora Bora where you'll find these hibiscus. They were developed for an ancient queen, who wanted

her own special flower."

Deep in the jungle, he points to a three-foot high weathered stone carving centered among the low circular stone walls of a massive, ancient marae (temple). "This is the guardian of the king's spirit—it's believed to be the only one in Polynesia," he says. "I discovered it last year, and soon it's going to be taken to the Museum of Tahiti in Papeete."

Oualid also delights in sharing the ancients' natural food and bathing products. He slices through a thick snake vine with his machete and water flows from it as if he's turned on a tap. Tour participants can drink the fresh water from the vine. Oualid picks a flower bud from a ginger plant and crushes it in his fist. "This was their shampoo," he explains, as a thick white liquid—not unlike manufactured shampoo—flows profusely through his fingers.

The tour's high point—both literally and figuratively—is a massive Banyan tree at the top of the King's Valley. "This is where the kings were buried," Oualid says, hop-scotching over the giant boulders that surround the tree's 30- to 40-foot sprawling trunk. "When a king died, his body was mummified and placed upright within the folds of the trunk. As the tree grew, it engulfed the body." Oualid says a CT scan of the tree revealed five bodies, and there are probably more. His tour can be arranged through the Bora Bora Pearl Resort & Spa and other resorts, or by emailing [polynesiaislandtours@mail.pf](mailto:polynesiaislandtours@mail.pf) or calling 29-66-60 on the island.

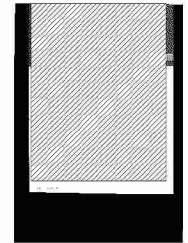
"The *motu* picnic tour is the most popular excursion in all of French Polynesia," says Emily Biotreau, marketing director for Pearl Resorts & Spa, French

Polynesia's only Tahitian-owned resort chain. On Bora Bora, such a tour includes swimming with manta rays—and sharks.

Hibiscus flowers and palm fronds add a festive décor to the covered, 16-passenger motorized outrigger-style boat on the "Motu Picnic Tour" offered by Maohi Nui Excursions ([www.maohinui.net](http://www.maohinui.net)). A 20-minute sail through blue seas, past towering green mountains, white beaches, rustic *fales* (bungalows) and luxury resorts brings the boat to a wide, shallow area between Bora Bora's inner and outside reef. After hopping overboard, Captain Aea Teraimateata, who also serves as guide, begins waving small chunks of fish in the water as the passengers stand around him on the sandy ocean bottom, waist-deep in the warm, transparent seas. Soon, dozens of manta rays, some with wing spans up to four feet, glide into sight. Teraimateata points out the different varieties—spotted eagle rays, sting rays and manta rays—as rays flap about him.

The boat then sails to a deeper area of the inner reef for an encounter with sharks. At first, only brightly colored fish and purple corals are visible to the snorkeling passengers, even though Teraimateata is holding chunks of raw fish under the water. "Sharks are shy by nature," he explains. "It takes a while for them to feel comfortable with us." Eventually, more than a dozen black tip reef sharks, up to five feet long, and one lemon shark are swimming all around. Everyone is eager to get the closest shark photo possible.

Tenanamu motu, a snippet of beach and palm trees, is the tour's final destination, where a traditional feast of pig steamed in a pit, *poisson cru à la*



*Tabitiienne* (raw tuna in coconut milk and lemon juice), and *poe* (a sweet tapioca-like dessert) are served in banana leaves by an idyllic lagoon. After lunch, Teraimateata leads a walk to the motu's rocky Pacific side, where sharks are patrolling in the open water.

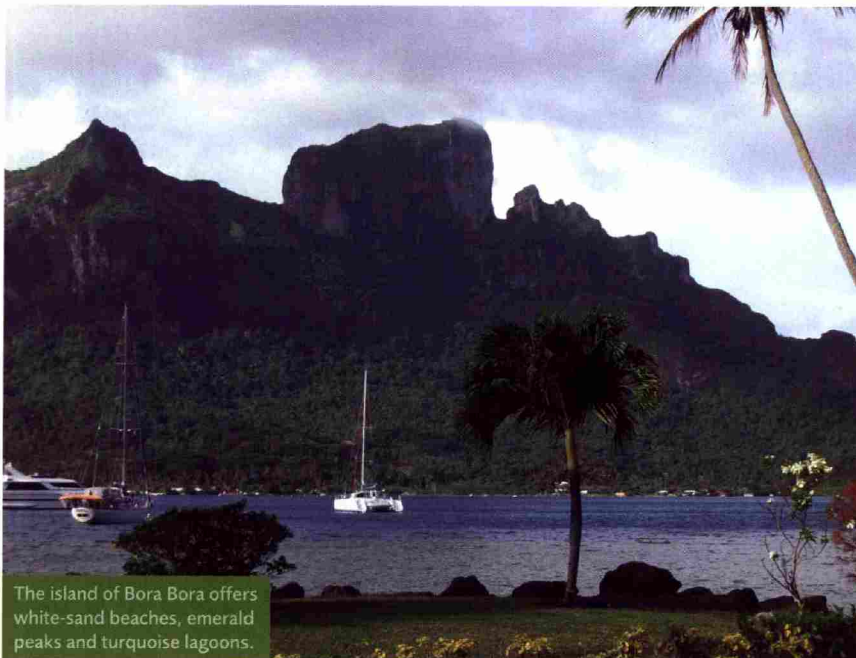
"Water sports are the main activities, but Bora Bora offers a million other things to do," says Xavier Bessou, general manager of the **Bora Bora** Pearl Beach Resort & Spa. For example, if your clients are too shy to swim with marine life in the open ocean, they can enjoy a tamer experience at the Lagoonarium. Carved from a natural lagoon, visitors can wade into large, shallow pens to see exotic reef fish, small rays and small sharks, and observe rescued turtles at this locally owned attraction. For more information, visit ([www.boraboraisland.com/lagoonarium](http://www.boraboraisland.com/lagoonarium)).

Also available are Jet-ski tours, a 16-passenger yellow submarine ride, four-wheel jeep excursions with Tapuna Safari 4X4 and VaVau 4X4 Adventures, helicopter tours over Bora Bora and to neighboring islands, and even horse riding and ATV tours on individual motus. For more information, visit [www.boraboraisland.com](http://www.boraboraisland.com).

A must for any visitor to Bora Bora is dinner at the legendary Bloody Mary's restaurant. Named after the Bloody Mary's bar in James Michener's novel "South Pacific," the bar features huge 1960s-style tikis that welcome diners into a vast, open-air, sandy-floored American-style bar-and-eatery. A sign tells guests to "check your shoes at the door" and a huge wall of business cards chronicles 30 years of global visitors. The ladies' semi-open-air bathroom is a sight to see—pull the chain and a waterfall gushes over rocks in place of a faucet and basin. The Bloody Marys are good and the menu ranges from fresh-catch fish to hamburgers.

Bora Bora locals also recommend the romantic Bamboo House for continental cuisine, Manta Restaurant ([www.mantabora.com](http://www.mantabora.com)) at the Bora Bora Yacht Club, and the Kaina Hut ([www.kainhut.com](http://www.kainhut.com)) for French dishes with a Polynesian flare. All these restaurants offer free transportation from the resorts.

Black pearls are a major shopping item, and the island's black pearl farms and jewelry boutiques offer some of the finest. But if top quality isn't required, the craft market by the pier in the main town of Vaitape has large black pearls for \$40 each. A necklace with 57 sizable



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black pearls can be purchased for \$120.

Bora Bora's newest luxury resort is the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora ([www.fourseasons.com/borabora](http://www.fourseasons.com/borabora), 800-819-5053). The property is expected to open in September 2008 with 100 over-water bungalows and seven two- and three-bedroom beachfront villas.

Another new luxury over-water and spa experience awaits your clients at the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa ([www.pearlresorts.com](http://www.pearlresorts.com), 800-65-PEARL). Following a recent renovation and the opening of its new Manea Spa in May 2006, this Tahitian-owned property is now a member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World and Leading Spas of the World.

with glass-walled architecture, punctuated with polished wood, offers an Eden-like vibe. Open-air corridors lead to eight treatment rooms and relaxation areas, including the Royale Pomare Suite, ideal for couples. Under the direction of Anthony and Kamala Nayeli, a U.S. husband-and-wife team, the Manea Spa incorporates authentic Polynesian treatments with holistic philosophies and features its own line of spa products.

The Bora Bora Pearl Beach is also the island's only spa with an in-house tattoo artist—ready to give guests permanent, ink tattoos. "At first, we hired him as a novelty. We didn't think guests would really get tattoos," says Bessou.

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— XAVIER BESSOU, BORA BORA PEARL BEACH RESORT & SPA

Located on a private motu, it has elegant Polynesian-style décor throughout its 50 over-water bungalows, 30 beach and garden bungalows, three restaurants, two bars and picturesque pool.

A landscaped path past lily ponds takes resort guests to the edge of a forest, where the new 6,460-square-foot spa,

"But at least one guest gets a tattoo every day. Recently, an 80-year-old California couple each had a sting ray tattooed on their ankle." @

For more information on Bora Bora, contact Tahiti Tourisme at 310-414-8484 or visit [www.tahiti-tourisme.com](http://www.tahiti-tourisme.com).

[www.agentathome.com](http://www.agentathome.com)