

Winnipeg Free Press

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TRAVEL

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*Island-hopping
 aboard a luxury
 private catamaran
 in French Polynesia*

By Mark Sissons

LOUNGING on deck under a nocturnal canopy of twinkling constellations, I consider the unimaginable hardships Captain Bligh and the mutinous crew of the HMS Bounty endured navigating these once uncharted waters more than two centuries ago.

Then I take a long sip of champagne and silently salute the infamous English naval tyrant for knowing a good thing when he sailed it. Cruising amid the lush emerald islands and fragile coral atolls of French Polynesia has become immeasurably more comfortable since the Bounty's days of weevil-infested hardtack, rat-infested holds and gut-rotting navy rum.

I may feel the same crack of the sail, enjoy the same warm wind on my face and smell the same salty spray in the air that sailors have tasted for centuries. But aboard this sleek, luxurious 55-foot, state-of-the-art, carbon-infusion catamaran, with its air-conditioned cabins and gourmet French cuisine, sailing the southern seas is anything but a hardship posting.

Truth be told, navigating the neon-blue waters of French Polynesia is about as good as it gets without having to cross an ocean. Tahiti and many of the other islands that make up this string of archipelagos spanning an area the size of Europe have well-formed atolls surrounding volcanic peaks that offer sheltered anchorages. Year-round temperatures ranging from 25 C to 26 C and easterly trade winds averaging between 15 and 20 knots virtually guarantee warm, calm waters behind the reefs and generally smooth sailing on open-water passages between the islands.

Continued
 Please see **HEAVEN E2**

IF YOU GO**Getting there**

Air Tahiti Nui offers daily non-stop service from Los Angeles to Tahiti. The domestic airline, Air Tahiti, offers inter-island flights. www.airtahitiniui.com

Catamaran cruises:

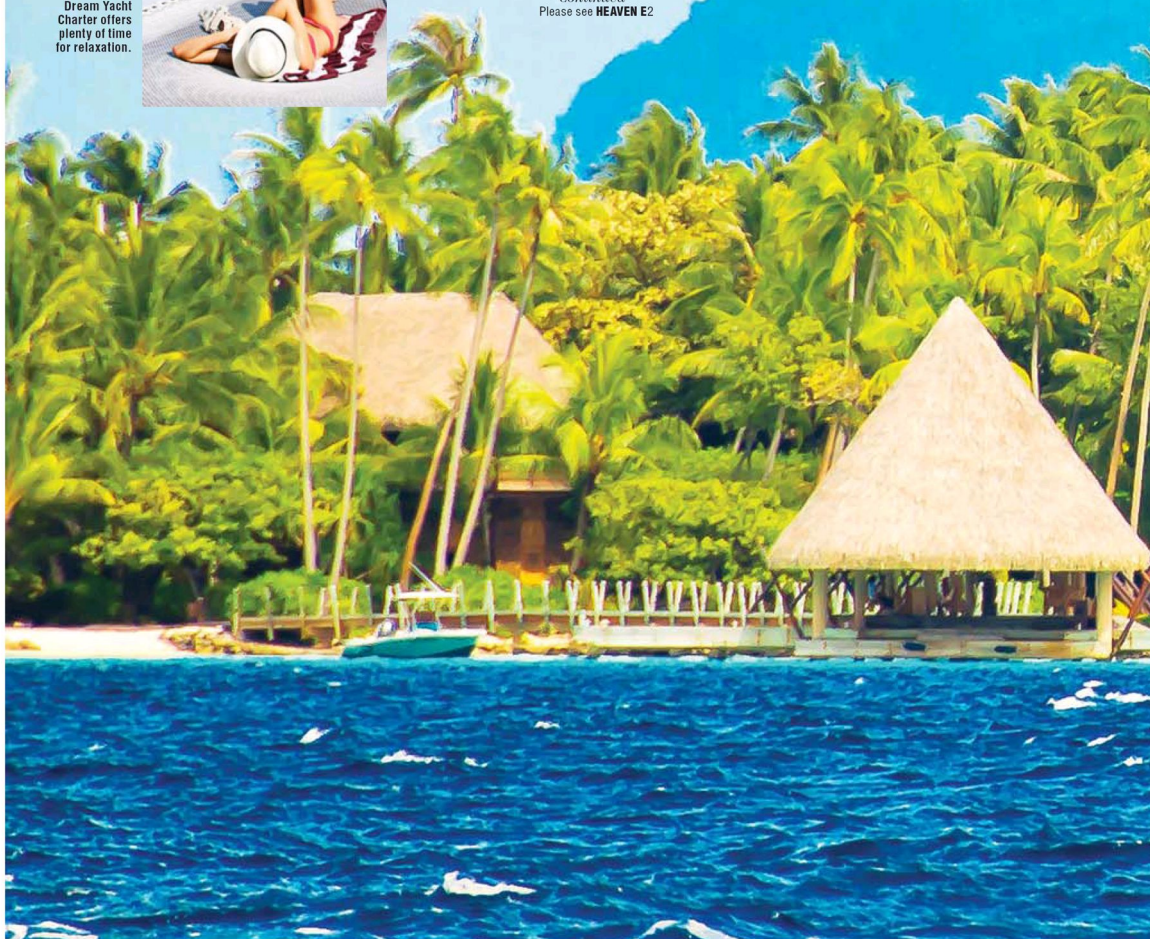
You can rent a fully crewed 55-foot, six-cabin catamaran that sleeps up to 12 passengers from Tahiti Dream Yacht Charter for around US\$2,000 per day, inclusive of meals and drinks. Customized itineraries are available. www.dreamyachtcharter.com

Where to stay:

Most hotels and resorts have only online booking forms, not toll-free phone numbers. It's best to make inquiries and book through the Tahiti Tourism website. www.tahiti-tourisme.com

Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu looms over the shallow waters of one of the world's most spectacular snorkelling sites.

Life aboard a fully crewed 55-foot Tahiti Dream Yacht Charter offers plenty of time for relaxation.





Sheltered turquoise lagoons surrounding lush, mountainous islands make French Polynesia a tropical dream destination.



Each evening, our private catamaran dropped anchor in the tranquil waters of one of French Polynesia's lagoons.

Heaven

Continued from E1

Factor in the unique opportunity that a private boat affords you to experience the most unaffected parts of these fairy-tale islands with their lush green peaks, sheltered bays and sweeping white beaches, and this paradisaical patch of Pacific offers the ultimate pleasure cruise.

My three-day, all-inclusive excursion aboard the aptly named Tahiti Dream Yacht charter embarks from the marina at Uturoa on the island of Raiatea, the second-largest of the Society Islands after Tahiti. Raiatea (which translates as "faraway heaven") is traditionally considered the South Pacific's most sacred island and the cultural epicentre of French Polynesia.

Among Raiatea's many archaeological sites is Marae Taputapuatea, Polynesia's most revered and well-preserved religious site. A thousand years ago, Polynesian priests and navigators gathered here to offer sacrifices to the gods and share their considerable knowledge of topics as diverse as the origins of the universe and oceanic navigation.

I ask our veteran skipper, Gilles Crespo, if he plans on sacrificing any fowl to ensure a safe trip. After he mentions twice delivering new catamarans to French Polynesia from France, each tempestuous crossing lasting more than three months, I'm assured that our 72-hour sojourn through the turquoise lagoon linking Raiatea and Taha'a and then across 40 kilometres of open ocean to Bora Bora will be comparatively serene.

Also welcoming us aboard is chef Noeline Mauri, a Raiatea native who has been cooking on private yachts for years. She shows us to our double cabins, each with its own ensuite, then begins preparing dinner as we stow our belongings. Meanwhile, Captain Crespo sets course for Motu Ceran, a tiny patch of white-sand beaches and lush coconut groves on the southeastern edge of the neighbouring island of Taha'a.

Famed as the "Vanilla Isle," Taha'a annually produces more than 70 per cent of all the vanilla produced in French Polynesia. As we drop anchor off Motu Ceran for the night and feast on grilled marlin dappled with vanilla sauce, served with sides of fresh green beans and rum-fried bananas and washed down with chilled French Sauvignon Blanc, I can almost smell

that sweet scent of tropical romance wafting from the nearby shoreline.

Taha'a's other famous export is the exquisite pearl harvested from within the black-tipped oyster. During a shore excursion to a family-owned pearl farm the next morning, I learn about the meticulous technique of mother-of-pearl grafting, as well as the many qualities and grades of these prized gems, which are considered unique because of their naturally dark colours.

A spectrum of an entirely more luminous calibre spans the shallow waters of our next stop, one of the world's most spectacular snorkelling sites, the fabled Coral Gardens off Motu Tao Tao, home of the ultra-luxurious Le Taha'a Island Resort and Spa. Propelled by a brisk current along a winding, shallow, coral-lined corridor, I float just feet (and sometimes mere inches) above this kaleidoscopic undersea maze of whimsically shaped formations, home to scores of intensely hued tropical fish and otherworldly sea creatures.

As the sun dips beneath the post-card-perfect backdrop of nearby Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu, we say adieu to the tranquillity of our enormous inter-island aquarium. Widely praised in luxury sailing circles for its comfort and performance, our Catana 55 catamaran skims effortlessly across the open, blue-water crossing to Bora Bora, where we anchor just off the Bora Bora Yacht Club in time to make last call for Mai Tais at its legendary

thatched-roof bar.

That's when the grand style of this aquatic adventure starts to really hit home. Here I am, floating around the fabled South Pacific in my own private yacht — fully equipped — with my own skipper and chef dedicated to fulfilling my every whim. I can snorkel and swim off the stern with the rays and black-tipped sharks whenever I want. Dine on sumptuous fare such as tuna sashimi, chicken and couscous and (of course) fresh baguettes. Sunbathe on the bow. And never worry about anything more than keeping my glass of champagne filled.

The decadence reaches a whole new level the next morning. After a breakfast of fresh kiwi fruit and warm croissants, we set out to circumnavigate French Polynesia's most fabled island, cruising past row upon row of the signature overwater bungalows that have made Bora Bora synonymous with once-in-a-lifetime romantic escapes.

As we dock at our final destination, the ultra-luxurious St. Regis Bora Bora Resort, my thoughts again drift back to those early European sailors such as the crew of the Bounty, who traded a harsh life in England for high adventure on oceans unknown.

For them, as for me, navigating the world's most beautiful collection of far-flung exotic islands must have felt like paradise found.

— Postmedia News

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