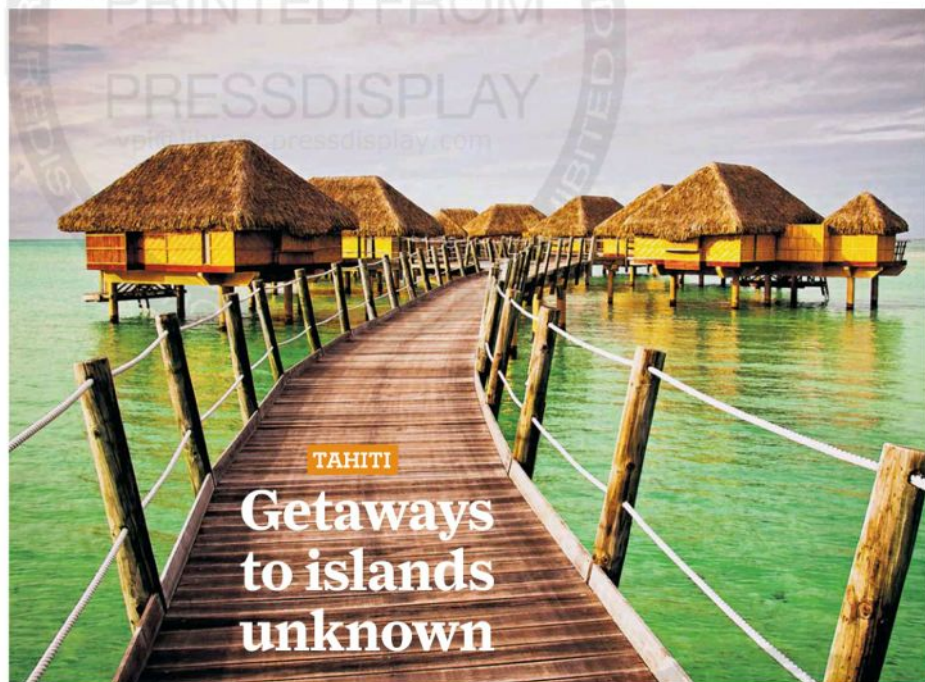


Travel

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Sunday, January 1, 2012 | Section N



Five Places:
Cheesy sites
offer slice of
life — and
cheddar **N2**



TAHITI

Getaways to islands unknown

Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

Suspended above the lagoon, Le Taha'a Resort and Spa's over-water bungalows feature glass floors and a private deck with a ladder to the water.

French Polynesia offers more flavor to those who sail beyond the hot spots

By Mark Sissons
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

When considering the optimal wine-making *terroir* — the unique qualities of the environment that influences the wine it produces — it's a safe bet that a coral atoll in the middle of the Pacific doesn't typically come to mind.

Yet, I'm on Rangiroa, French Polynesia's largest atoll, sipping a lovely Vin de Tahiti blanc de corail produced on a nearby *motu* (islet) by Domaine Dominique Auroy, an award-winning winery.

Surrounding me is the Tuamotu Archipelago, a scattering of more than 100 islands and atolls spread over an area the size of Europe. And serving me is the Paul Gauguin of vintners, perhaps the only man in the world who routinely turns coral into wine — 40,000 bottles annually.

"In the beginning, my friends thought it was a joke when I quit a good wine industry job in France and came out here in just 10 days," says vineyard manager Sébastien Thepenier. He had never been to the South Pacific before responding to the online ad that changed his life.

Islands continues on N4



A freshwater lake filled with water lilies lies at the center of Le Maitai Lapita Village.



Polynesian sea turtles can weigh more than 300 pounds and live up to 80 years.



The Tahitian black pearl is commercially harvested from black-lipped oysters.

FROM THE COVER



Photos by Mark Sissons / Special to The Chronicle

Le Taha'a Resort and Spa offers secluded over-water bungalows and its tiny private islet provides just the spot for a romantic rendezvous.

Lesser-known islands offer taste of Tahiti

Islands from page N1

Who knew you could make fine wines more than 3,000 miles from the nearest continent? Certainly not most visitors to Tahiti, tourist shorthand for the whole of French Polynesia's 118 tiny volcanic islands. In a destination that receives as many tourists in an entire year as Hawaii does in just 12 days, relatively few venture beyond the signature over-water bungalows that have helped make the most popular islands of Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea synonymous with romantic tropical getaways.

Just beyond these emerald-encased islands, however, is another, even more relaxed, authentic and overlooked Tahiti. On islands such as Huahine, Raiatea, Taha'a and the atoll of Rangiroa, the sparkling turquoise lagoon waters are even less paddled and the lush scenery virtually unspoiled. The ruins of ancient Polynesian cultural and spiritual life recall the maritime achievements of a seafaring race that conquered the Pacific

If you go

Temperatures in French Polynesia average a very pleasant 79 degrees all year, although the drier winter (May to October) is the best time to visit.

GETTING THERE

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

WHERE TO STAY

Most hotels have only online booking forms, not toll-free phone numbers. It's best to make inquiries or book through the **Tahiti Tourism** website (see below).

Rangiroa

Hotel Kia Ora: About 5 minutes from the airport, the recently renovated Hotel Kia Ora is Rangiroa's largest resort. Its 25 villas feature private splash pools, while 10 Polynesian-style over-water bungalows include lounges, separate bedrooms and private sun decks. eu.hotelkiaora.com.

Raiatea

Raiatea Lodge: The lodge features Raiatea's largest wine



The white sand beaches of the private islet are surrounded by a lagoon and coral garden.

French Polynesia. As he shows me around Huahine's largest archaeological site — scattered stone remnants of the once taboo royal *marae* near the town of Maeva — Atallah debunks the popular myth that Europeans came here and destroyed paradise.

"Westerners tend to over romanticize pre-European cultures. It was never paradise on these islands," says Atallah as we stand where district chiefs once worshiped their ancestors. "There was constant tribal warfare, human sacrifice, cannibalism in most of the Pacific, and widespread

Taputapuata, 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.

On the morning I visit Marae Taputapuata, the island gods must be angry (or crazy) because a cloudless sky suddenly darkens as I arrive, hammering me with a tropical downpour. Or perhaps the spirits residing on Raiatea's

romance.

"Here on Taha'a, we say that a vanilla bean is just like a woman. The more you caress her, the better she is," he says, smiling.

Pearl of the Pacific

The same principle might also apply to Taha'a's other famous export, the exquisite pearls harvested from within the black-lipped oyster. While visiting a family-owned pearl farm, I learn about the meticulous technique of mother-of-pearl grafting, as well as the many qualities and grades of these prized pearls that are

long before Europeans ventured far beyond their own coastlines.

Rangiroa, "endless sky" in Tahitian, a roughly circular string of over 400 motus and sandbars 220 miles northwest of the island of Tahiti, is famous among scuba divers for the beauty of the coral reefs lining its two ocean passes. One underwater lagoon, called Ile aux Recifs, has raised *feo* (coral outcrops) rising 19 feet above the sea floor, and patrolled by reef sharks and stingrays.

With no nightlife to speak of and a sleepy little main village without even streetlights, Rangiroa feels like the end of the world as you'd like to know it. Especially after the crimson Southern sun sets behind your third glass of Vin de Tahiti.

Huahine

About thirty minutes by air from the island of Tahiti, but worlds away in terms of tourist development, Huahine is actually two islands connected by a bridge. Known as the Garden Isle for its riotous foliage and incredibly fertile soil that yields large crops of vanilla, grapefruit, taro and breadfruit, Huahine is surrounded by a crystal-clear lagoon, has numerous sandy white beaches, and contains only eight small, traditional

selection, a large pool and rooms with private terraces. www.raiateahotel.com.

Opoa Beach Hotel: Located on the southern coast of Raiatea, the Opoa Beach Hotel is set on a white sand beach with a view over the lagoon and the reef. www.hotel-raiatea.com

Taha'a

Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa: Situated on its own private motu off Taha'a, Le Taha'a offers secluded beach villas, over-water bungalows and a spa. www.letahaa.com.

MORE INFORMATION

Tahiti Tourism:
www.tahiti-tourisme.com.

villages scattered across its jungle-like terrain.

"What's nice about the outer islands like Huahine is you can remove yourself from a lot of the globalization you find in the more popular islands. The ambience in Bora Bora is definitely tourism, whereas here it's still traditional Polynesia," says Paul Atallah, an American-born expert in Polynesian anthropology, archaeology, history and religion, who operates Huahine's Island Eco Tours.

Huahine is also home to one of the best preserved *marae* (traditional temple) sites in

infantile. How was that paradise?"

Of course, for early European sailors trading a harsh life in Paris and London for oceans unknown, Tahiti and her islands must have been paradise found. After months at sea under the captain's whip, filthy and facing scurvy, the prospect of carnal relations with native women, endless sunshine and fresh food literally falling from the trees must have felt like divine deliverance.

Even the name Huahine is thought to have come from the profile of a mountain in the shape of a pregnant woman. Tahiti by night, sailor's delight.

Raiatea and Taha'a

Raiatea translates as "far-away heaven" and Taha'a as either "nakedness" or "vagina," depending on the etymological source. Together, these mountainous islands, surrounded by a single continuous coral reef and sharing the same immense lagoon, offer an enchanting combination of ancient mysteries and breathtaking natural beauty.

Lush Raiatea, the second-largest of the Society Islands after Tahiti, is considered the most sacred place in the South Pacific. Among its many archaeological sites is Marae

sacred Mount Temehani ordered the deluge to water the Tiare Apetahi, a flower so rare it grows nowhere else on earth.

(According to legend, the soft crackling sound of its petals opening each dawn represents a common woman's heart breaking because she was not allowed to marry the son of the Tahitian king.)

Across the immense aquarium that binds it to Raiatea, the much smaller and even more tranquil flower-shaped island of Taha'a emits as sweet a scent of tropical romance as the aroma permeating its legendary vanilla plantations. The vanilla plant belongs to the orchid family, of which there are 33,000 varieties in the world. But it is the only variety that bears edible fruit. Aptly nicknamed the Vanilla Island, Taha'a produces 25 tons of the product a year, more than 70 percent of all the vanilla produced in French Polynesia.

"Vanilla beans must be individually massaged daily for up to 15 days," says organic vanilla plantation owner Brian Hansen as we tour his hillside operation. For this retired French Foreign Legion paratrooper, who has been growing vanilla for more than a decade, even agriculture on Taha'a takes on the flavor of

unique because of their naturally dark colors.

A spectrum of an entirely more luminous caliber spans the shallow waters of my last stop, one of the world's most spectacular snorkeling sites, Taha'a's fabled Coral Gardens.

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.

Wading ashore from the Coral Gardens as the sun begins to set over the Tropic of Capricorn, I can see the postcard-perfect backdrop of nearby Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu on the horizon.

The world's most famous romantic tropical getaway may overshadow its less visited neighbors. But Rangiroa, Huahine, Raiatea and Taha'a exude an even more timeless Polynesian ambience, spirituality and genuine tranquility that make exploring them well worth venturing beyond Bora Bora.

And worth a toast with coral wine.

Mark Sissons last wrote for Travel on Zimbabwe. E-mail comments to travel@sfcchronicle.com.