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# travel&escapes



POSTMEDIA NEWS

## Coral wine? Don't mind atoll

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By Mark Sissons

When one considers the optimal winemaking terroir, or the unique qualities of the environment that influence the wine it produces, a coral atoll in the middle of the Pacific Ocean doesn't normally come to mind.

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

With more than 800 species of fish, plus lagoons, reefs and ocean surrounding it, French Polynesia's 118 islands teem with amazing sub-aquatic sights.

Surrounding me is the Tuamotu Archipelago, a string of more than 100 islands and atolls scattered over an area the size of Europe. Serving me the wine is the Paul Gauguin of vintners, perhaps the only man in the world who routinely turns coral into wine. 40,000 bottles annually, to be precise.

From unique libations to scuba-diving vacations, French Polynesia's lesser-known islands delight, even if it is the vanilla beans that get the daily massages

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

Who knew you could make fine wines nearly 5,000 kilometres from the nearest continent? Certainly not most visitors to Tahiti, touristic shorthand for the whole of French Polynesia's 118 tiny volcanic islands. In a high-end 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 the epitome of romantic tropical getaways.

Yet, just beyond these emerald-encased paradisiacal icons is another, even more relaxed and authentic "hidden" 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. Impressive ruins of ancient Polynesian cultural and spiritual life recall the astounding maritime achievements of a seafaring race that conquered the Pacific long before Europeans ventured far beyond their coastlines. **Huahine** About 30 minutes by air

from the island of Tahiti, but worlds away in terms of tourist development, lies Huahine (actually two islands connected by a bridge).

Known as "The Garden Isle" for its riotous foliage and 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 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," explains Paul Atallah, a U.S.-born expert in Polynesian anthropology, archeology, history and religion who operates Huahine's Island Eco Tours.

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

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 & Taha'a** Raiatea translates as "faraway 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 Taputapuatea, Polynesia's most revered and well-preserved religious site.

On the morning I visit Marae Taputapuatea, the island gods must be angry (or crazy) because a cloudless sky suddenly darkens as I arrive, hammering me with a torrential tropical downpour. Or perhaps the spirits residing on Raiatea's 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 smaller and 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 around 25 tons a year, accounting for more than 70% of all the vanilla produced in French Polynesia.

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

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 unique in the world because of their naturally dark colours.

A spectrum of a more luminous calibre spans the shallow waters of my last stop, one of the world's most spectacular snorkelling sites, Taha'a's fabled Coral Gardens. Propelled by a brisk current along a winding, shallow, coral-lined corridor, I float a few centimetres above this kaleidoscopic undersea maze of whimsically shaped chromatic formations, home to 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 iconic backdrop of nearby Bora Bora's Mount Otemanu looming on the horizon.

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## IF YOU GO

**When to go** Although year-round temperatures in French Polynesia average a pleasant 28C, the drier winter season (May to October) is the best time to visit. The warmer and more humid summer season (November to April) receives much more rainfall. Peak tourist season runs from June to mid-November, and during Christmas holidays.

**Getting there** Air Tahiti Nui features daily non-stop service from Los Angeles to Tahiti (eight hours). Domestic airline, Air Tahiti, offers numerous inter-island flights and holiday packages.



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