

Paradise

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only Tahiti but two of its near neighbors — Huahine, a relatively un-touristed island, and Bora Bora, a popular vacation spot for the rich and famous.

One of the first things that struck me was the open-air lifestyle. And a lack of air-conditioning. With their tropical climate, the islands are warm all year round — in the 80s when we were there in December. But most public places aren't air-conditioned. Even the international airport in Papeete is mostly open-air, the air running only in select areas of the airport. Where travelers are seated, fans mounted on the walls swing back and forth, or twirl from the ceiling to generate a much needed breeze. Open to the outside as it is, the ubiquitous chickens occasionally wander into the airport, surprising the newly-arrived international traveler. At Bora Bora's airport, you can walk to the beach from the waiting area.

Tahiti, Huahine, and Bora Bora are all volcanic islands, covered with a layer of such lush green loveliness that the interior offers a beauty to compete with the seaside. We drove around all the islands we visited looking for what they had to offer away from the tourist beaches.

On the northeastern side of Huahine, around the village of Maeva is a remarkable concentration of the remains of marae, the prehistoric Polynesian sacred spaces. Originally rectangular enclosures surrounded by a stone wall and paved with basalt rock, a rock ahu or altar at one end, most of these ancient temples — once the site of sacrifices, even human sacrifices — are now in ruins. Preservation efforts in the last fifty years, however, have led to many being reconstructed and one of these is situated outside of Maeva. A traditional Polynesian open house next to it contains examples of traditional handicrafts and artifacts that give us a sense of how Polynesian peoples lived for hundreds of years — woven mat floors, dugout canoes, mortar and pestles, and pearl shell fishhooks.

On Bora Bora we saw reminders of the more recent past in the island's interior. Far up on the hillside on the western side of the island, we found a gun emplacement and ammunition bunkers, reminders that the US occupied Bora Bora during the Second World War. From here, we could see the opening in the reef created by the U.S. Navy that still allows ships to enter the lagoon surrounding the island.

In fact, the airstrip on which we landed had also been built by U.S. soldiers.

Our venture into the interior of Tahiti allowed me to fulfill a very specific ambition. As we followed the Papenoo Valley into the center of the island, past groves of breadfruit trees, plantain groves and taro plants, I lost count of the number of waterfalls slicing through the jungle brush, spilling straight down, swollen with recent rainfall. Finally, our guide stopped the jeep in front of the river and pointed to a natural pool, dug out in the river bed. Plunging into the fresh, cold water, I felt like I was living out a scene from "Swiss Family Robinson."

We didn't, however, ignore the call of the ocean. Bora Bora had much the best snorkeling we'd ever experienced. Swimming near the reef in one morning we saw a manta ray, black-tipped reef sharks, and lots and lots of brightly colored coral. On the site rightly known as "the Aquarium," so many brightly colored tropical fish swam around us — and so close to us — that we could have easily imagined ourselves in a giant fish bowl.

On Huahine, our guides managed to combine water and cultural experiences. After a morning of drift snorkeling, our out-rigger canoe landed us on a motu — an islet off the main island — and our guides treated us to a cookout. They demonstrated how to make poisson cru, a local specialty of raw fish cooked by lime juice with coconut milk, which we enjoyed to the accompaniment of a Polynesian guitar player and singer.

As justly famous as the islands of Tahiti and Bora Bora are, I found Huahine the most charming.

With a population of just 6000, it's mostly rural. We stayed just outside the village of Pape. The main street along Haamene Bay is lined with restaurants, a supermarket, a few tourist shops, and the tiny mobile food vans called roulettes that despite their modest appearance serve up the most delicious fare.

Amidst the tropical beauty that seems so picturesquely beautiful to us that it doesn't seem quite real, the residents of Huahine carry on their ordinary lives. School was out for the Christmas holidays, and school children were all over the place, riding bikes and ignoring the sign that forbade swimming to dive off the docks; dogs ran freely. It reminded me in many ways of my own childhood.

French Polynesia, too, is like home in that everyone was getting ready for Christmas. Holiday decorations were everywhere. But it was a bit hard for me to get into Christmas spirit in the tropical atmosphere; the Frosty the Snowman display in the sweetwarring, un-air-conditioned supermarket was just too incongruous.

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