

Adventures in paradise

The French Polynesian island of Moorea is known for its laid-back, stress-free lifestyle and that's just how the locals – and visitors – like it.

STORY MARGOT BUTCHER

OF THE MANY beautiful islands that make up French Polynesia, Moorea is one of the classics. Sultry, dramatic landscapes rise from a silk sheet of a lagoon. The extinct volcanic peaks are some two million years old, chiselled by waterfalls and abundantly, remarkably, lush. By the coast, the shadows of coconut palms cast starry shapes onto white coral sand. In the gentle shallows of the beach, the light bouncing off the same coral canvas reveals even the tiniest sprats flashing their silver coats. Stunning coloured tropical fish dart right up to you by the shore.

“We are a green island,” says Yvette Léon, a terrifically au fait guide who made Moorea her home years ago because it reminded her of her idyllic childhood in Nuku Hiva, in the more-remote Marquesas. It’s a deliberate play on words. Green slopes, green ideals. “People live here because it is the real life, the old life, how the world used to be.”

Nothing in Moorea is rushed. It’s home to some 18,000 locals, but it frequently feels like you have paradise all to yourself. One of the beauties of Léon’s Moorea VIP Tours (mooreaviptours.com) is that it is a much more enriched, personalised experience

than the usual portals to discovering local history, legends and archaeology – the rainforest of inland hiking hub Belvedere is dotted with the remains of pre-missionary stone marae – that connect the landscape to a thousand years of human culture.

Wrapped in a *pareu*, Léon takes you into that real world of local Moorean culture, turning off the coastal road and into the ancient river valleys where pre-colonial villages were traditionally based. Visiting a family, she prepares lunch in their garden – poisson cru (Tahitian-style marinated raw fish), served with grated coconut, fresh

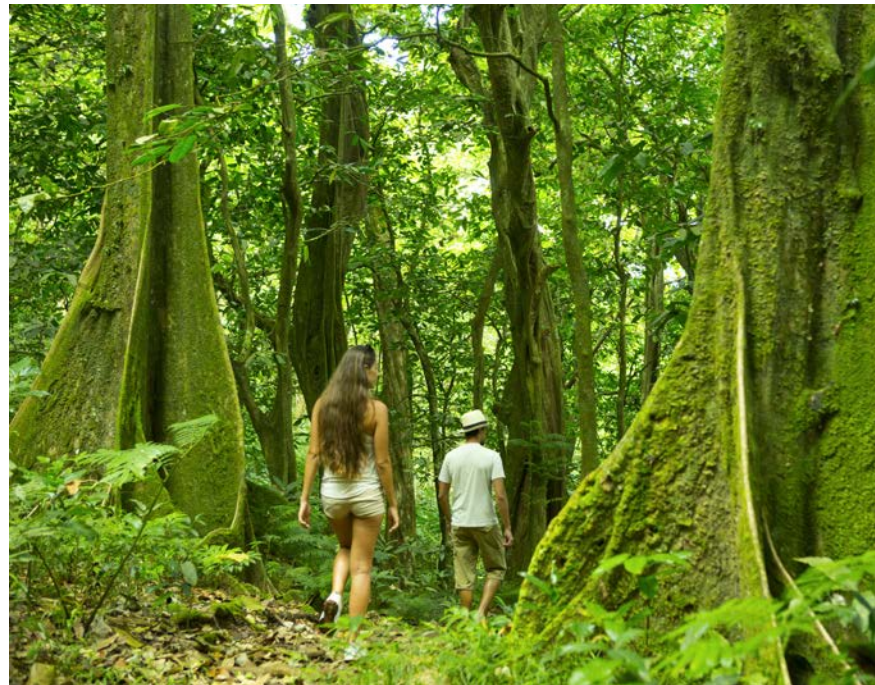
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coconut cream, and delicious taro, uru and lime-drizzled papayas from the local plantation. A deck overlooks a small freshwater river. Below is a wriggle of large, sacred eels, patiently awaiting their daily feed of fish scraps. Centuries ago, Tahitian royalty would eat the eels; now, they’re sacrosanct, protected by the locals like pets.

Their river flows from the Afareaitu waterfall. The tour leads you on a hike to its private rock pools for a refreshing swim, living like the locals. Earlier, Léon has already helped you drink in the essential

history of the W-shaped island. Between its toes are two historic bays, Opunohu and Paopao, the latter also known as Cook’s Bay and one of the small fishing village hubs that dot the coast. Planning to observe the 1769 Transit of Venus, Captain James Cook actually moored in Opunohu, but its name was sacred to the locals so it was to neighbouring Paopao’s harbour that his name was eventually given.

Fishermen traditionally live on the coast, usually with a small boat on a winch in their backyard just metres from the lagoon edge. Bamboo racks await the day’s catch of



parrotfish, mahi-mahi and dozens of other species that are sold fresh on their return from beyond the reef. Taiano Teiho is a young spear-fisherman, but more often you'll find him in the beach bungalow office of Coral Gardeners (coralgardeners.org), an NGO founded by his childhood buddy Titouan Bernicot.

Before arriving in Moorea, Bernicot grew up on an atoll in the Tuamotu archipelago to the north. As a small boy he watched his pearl-farmer father dive waters dizzy with manta rays, turtles, sharks and spectacular schools of fish. "My friend and I are also into free-diving and bodyboarding," says Teiho. "Growing up, the ocean was our playground. As a fisherman, it is also my food garden. I care about my food garden."

So Teiho was one of the first on board when Bernicot founded Coral Gardeners in

response to local coral bleaching and everyday damage to Moorea's lagoons. It will warm the cockles of your heart to visit them. Book an experience (ecotour@coralgardeners.org) and "the coral kids" will show you their ops and take you on a guided snorkel to plant your own rescued coral. You can also help from afar by sponsoring a coral.

With marine biology expertise, they have developed a process by which broken pieces of living coral are rescued before they die, fixed onto a bamboo spike and painstakingly nurtured until the spikes can be "planted out" to grow back in damaged areas of the reef or lagoon.

Stay in an overwater bungalow at Sofitel Moorea and you may spot floating trays suspended under the suites; these are among the intermediary "gardens" on which the rescue corals are regrown.

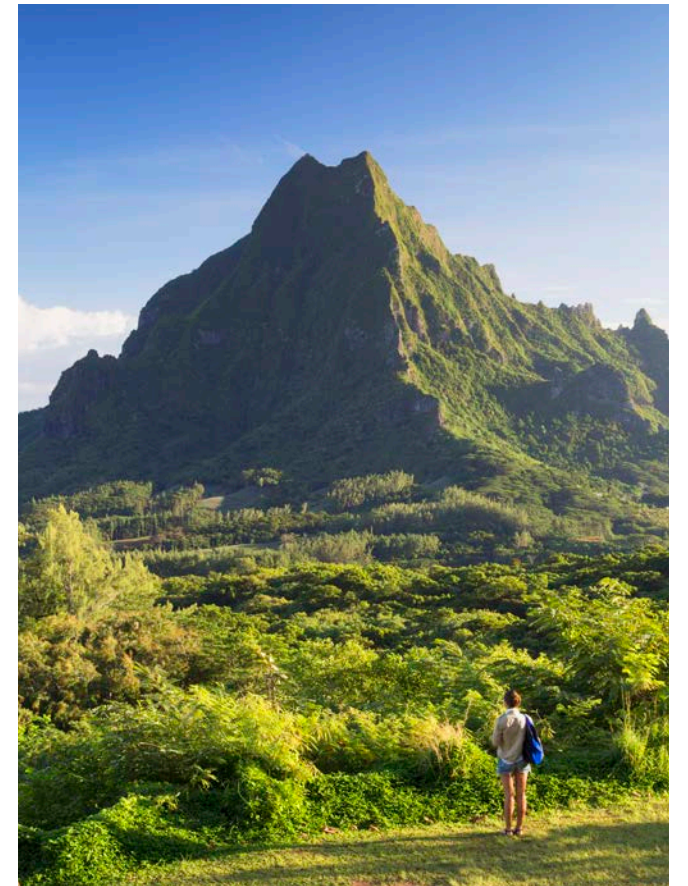
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The snorkelling right off the doorsteps of the luxury bungalows is stunning – parrotfish nibbling algae from the coral rocks, a clownfish nestling in an anemone that has found a sheltered spot to thrive between the corals, a stunning, gentle blue starfish with arms a foot long.

Sofitel Moorea is one of the classiest spots on the island and utterly relaxing in the same breath. That's an art. It sits on an uncommon geographical feature, a flat swathe of limestone that has, over the millennia, accreted around and attached itself to Moorea's basalt-based coastline. It sports a private sandy beach – Temae, the longest on the island – with a beautiful green backdrop formed by the slopes of Mount Fairurani. Walk to the small point at the end of Temae beach and at low tide a dozen small, gentle rays mill together, stroking each other with their wings.



Clockwise from top: A walk through native vegetation on Moorea; local fruits on sale at a roadside stall; spinner dolphins are among the marine species seen on Rodolphe Holler's private expeditions. Previous pages: Exploring a Moorea lagoon.



"Tahiti is all about the big animals," says Rodolphe Holler, whose Tahiti Private Expeditions (tahiti-private-expeditions.com) business is surely as good as it gets: travelling the world providing guided diving expertise to superyacht owners. "The manta rays, spinner dolphins, sharks, whales, the leatherback turtles – we see them all here."

Originally from St Tropez, Holler has lived in French Polynesia for the past two decades and, of all the world's pearls, it was Moorea he chose to make home. Few people realise that humpbacks also travel to these waters. Between August and October, Holler also provides whale-watching trips – and if the weather isn't right or the whales are hiding on the day, your ticket remains good for any of the subsequent four days, so your chances of spotting a cetacean are high.

From inky-blue herons patrolling the beach to exquisite fish seen while diving, the wildlife around Moorea is naturally abundant, but a trip to French Polynesia would not be complete without swimming with black-tip reef sharks and the big rays. It's not scary, honest. Motu Ahi, a very small traditionally owned islet off Afareaitu (a 10-minute drive south of Moorea's ferry terminal) is one of the places you can do it. Bring your reef shoes or Crocs, because the



Clockwise from top left: Pareus drying on a beach; the 899m-high Mount Rotui; the Catholic church at Haapiti; a statue on a hillside; myriad species abundant in the waters around Moorea.





Lagoonarium (lagoonarium.e-monsite.com) adventure begins by wading out through the shallows to a small water taxi. There, your host Juan waits to whisk you across to the motu and your own hut for a day-stay – or you can return to the mainland any time.

The Lagoonarium itself is a network of anchored buoys and guide ropes that you follow, kitted up with your snorkel and fins, to safely and easily explore the wondrous world below. It's family-friendly (a fresh fish lunch is an optional inclusion), and the excitement of seeing a stingray settling down to rest on the seabed below – flipping coral sand onto its back with its wings until, in a matter of seconds, it is almost completely camouflaged – is only exceeded by seeing your first shark. This is all a leisurely prelude to the main event: 11.30am fish-feeding time, when the (tamed) local rays and school of some two dozen metre-long reef sharks, and even frigate birds, take fish morsels from Juan's experienced hands. All the snorkellers form a semi-circle around the guide ropes for the unforgettable underwater show before Juan signals that it's safe to swim in and interact with the creatures. "I am the lucky one," says Juan. "This is my office."

tahititourisme.nz

An overwater bungalow (top) and a garden bungalow at Sofitel Moorea.

Play

TICKET TO RIDE

Take the leisurely Aremiti ferry from Papeete (on the main island of Tahiti Nui) to Moorea; you can also fly and connect to Bora Bora.

PICK-UP LINE

Albert Transport's door-to-door pick-ups and drop-offs make getting about Moorea easy, or hire a rental car to circumnavigate the island. albert-transport.net

PEDAL POWER

Rent an e-bike, with free delivery to your hotel making it a cinch to set off to explore the beautiful coastline. ebikemoorea.com

SHELL BE RIGHT

The romance of black pearls is synonymous with French Polynesia. Browse market-style roadside family businesses for bargains or head to luxury boutique Herman Perles at Le Petit Village, a small shopping hub near the village of Papetoai, for the most exquisite strings.

BLUE LAGOON

No trip to this part of the world is complete without a lagoon tour. Captain Taina offers full-day cruising and snorkelling expertise from a glass-bottom boat, lunch on a motu included. glass-bottom-boat-moorea.com

Eat

MOOREA BEACH CAFE

French chic meets island cuisine at this cafe in Maharepa village – think salade nicoise studded with the local variety of purple urenika potatoes. A great waterfront spot to just idle away your time, with or without a bucket of Veuve Clicquot. mooreabeachcafe.com.

LE MAHOGANY

The Maharepa restaurant offers a wide-ranging menu traversing French Polynesia's Tahitian, French and Chinese influences.

K

For a fine-dining experience don't go past Sofitel's K restaurant – chef Guillaume Burlion is at the top of his game and the candlelit, beachside location with a white-sand floor is unique. sofitel-moorea-iaora.com

Sleep

SOFITEL MOOREA IA ORA BEACH RESORT

Choose from luxury garden, lagoon view, beach or magical overwater bungalows (being able to snorkel right off your doorstep is hard to top). Highlights of the ever-changing entertainment and activities include Tahitian dance shows, fire-dancing and a Maa Tahiti buffet from the garden's ahimaa (earth oven). Bar Vue packs an impressive range of wines and cocktails and a cafe vibe, while adjoining restaurant Pure reaches peak chill-out on Sundays with an island-time brunch (noon to 3pm) and ukulele orchestra. sofitel-moorea-iaora.com

TAHITI IA ORA BEACH RESORT MANAGED BY SOFITEL

Beautiful Moorea is just 17km across the water from Tahiti Nui. Your launching pad on the main island is this resort on the Puna'auia coastline, a short drive from the airport at Faaa towards the Musée Paul Gauguin. Enjoy a sundowner watching the sun set over the beach. What do you get when you combine vodka, cream of banana, lemon, fresh pineapple juice and a streak of red cranberry juice? A Tahiti Sunrise, of course. sofitel.accorhotels.com

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies non-stop to Tahiti from Auckland with connections across the domestic network. Connections to Moorea are available with partner Air Tahiti.



Contact Centre
0800 737 000

Holidays Travel Brokers
0800 737 767

airnewzealand.co.nz

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