

# Treasures of the South Pacific

When it comes to the ultimate tropical getaway, the islands of French Polynesia in the South Pacific are in a league of their own. No other cruising destination is quite as remote and exotic as these intriguing islands.

BY MIRIAM CAIN





The Tuamato Atolls are a renowned diving destination



The 193' / 58.83m Seawolf

Over two million years ago, a volcanic eruption created the islands of French Polynesia, a group of mountains rising above the surface of the South Pacific surrounded by a barrier reef. Between reef and mountain lie glorious lagoons and coral atolls home to a stunning array of marine life that swims in the gentle, shallow waters.

Made up of five island groups, the Society Islands are at the cultural heart of French Polynesia. From Tahiti and the atolls of Bora Bora, to the islands of Raiatea, Taha and Huahine, they are best discovered by yacht.

The Tuamotu Atolls are the central archipelago, comprising more than 70 low-lying islands and coral atolls. A world-renowned scuba diving destination, these UNESCO islands include Rangiroa, the world's second largest atoll. The Marquesas to the northeast of Tuamotu are comprised of 12 volcanic islands and abound with dense jungle terrain. The final two island groups include the Austral Islands, which straddle the Tropic of Capricorn to the southwest of the Society Islands. The Australs are also volcanic and are inhabited by local tribes living in rural villages; as are the lesser-known Gambiers to the east, which remain in isolation and are largely untouched.

The following itinerary encompasses the Tuamotu Islands and the Society Islands over a two-week cruise, but it can be longer or shorter depending on your interests. The Tuamotu itinerary is best for diving enthusiasts though guests can also enjoy snorkeling in the calm waters of the lagoons. Getting to the Tuamotus from the Society Islands can be difficult as the prevailing winds are against you, so it is generally better to begin your charter in the Tuamotu Islands and cruise or sail downwind to Tahiti and her Society Islands, taking an internal flight from Tahiti to Fakarava and returning to Tahiti at the end of your charter.

**Days 1 & 2: Fakarava (North and South Pass, 32 nautical miles)**

Embark in Fakarava and spend a few days acclimatizing to the gentle pace of life onboard. The island, especially the South Pass, remains virtually untouched and the rich ecosystem is home to rare birds, plants and underwater life with dive sites that are almost undiscovered. Life along the shores of the North Pass is equally unique with quaint villages, old coral churches and welcoming locals.

**Day 3: Fakarava to Toau (12 nautical miles from Fakarava's North Pass)**

A UNESCO-classified biosphere reserve, Toau is a charming coral atoll with a wide lagoon perfect for peaceful anchorages, swimming, snorkeling and diving. Lose track of time as you explore the shallow lagoon.

**Days 4 & 5: Toau to Apataki (70 nautical miles)**

One of the largest of the Tuamotu Islands, Apataki hosts the largest grey reef shark population in the Tuamotu. Here you will also find numerous pearl farms, on which this island's economy is based. You can visit any one of the farms and watch the masters in action as they remove pearls from the oysters and carefully replace the seed for the next cultivation. Later on, discover your own private bay and enjoy watersports followed by a beach barbecue prepared by your crew.

**Days 6, 7 & 8: Apataki to Rangiroa (70 nautical miles from Apataki's North Pass)**

One of the world's great dive destinations, the atoll of Rangiroa (the second largest in the world) is a string of coral encircling a luminous turquoise lagoon. There are 240 tiny islets, each no more than three feet in elevation, laying upon the ocean like a string of pearls for more than 110 miles, completely encircling an infinitely deep lagoon.

Enjoy some snorkeling and diving and be seduced by the huge stingrays and manta rays that gently slide past you. Around the Avatoru Pass you will find silver tip sharks, whilst in the waters of the Tiputa Pass you can dive with bottlenose dolphins, and spot





Cruise and discover sweeping white-sand beaches

hammerhead sharks, eagle rays, barracudas, turtles and more grey sharks.

Spend your days in the water whilst your crew spend the days transforming one of the many deserted white-sand beaches into an alfresco dining room. Step ashore and visit the main villages of Avatoru and Tiputa where you will witness everyday life infused with culture and traditions.

### **Days 11 & 12: Rangiroa to Bora Bora (240 nautical miles to Moorea)**

Cruise from the Tuamotus to the Society Islands in a

24-hour crossing. Dine on the open deck looking out to the foothills covered with frangipani and hibiscus as your yacht cruises the open water and through the Te Ava Nui Pass into the lagoon of Bora Bora.

Bora Bora is as close to the tropical ideal as it gets. Her dark green mountains, known locally as Mount Otemanu and Mount Pahia, appear to hover as they rise up out of a deep lagoon. The reef around the lagoon is clustered with desert islands, known locally as motus. Enjoy swimming, diving or snorkeling during the daytime, and then retire to land and pass leisurely hours drinking

Hinanu beer at the Bora Bora Yacht Club whilst your crew prepare a traditional feast of fish fresh from the lagoon, accompanied by taro root and breadfruit baked slowly in an ahimoa, a traditional Polynesian cooking pit dug into the ground.

### **Day 13: Bora Bora to Taha'a (16 nautical miles)**

Take the tender to discover the lagoon's underwater world before an early-evening aperitif onboard as you set sail. For those wishing to simply lounge on the beach, Matira Beach on the southern end of the main island

The 226'4/69m *Tia Moana*The 178'/54.27m *Tiara*





French Polynesia offers plenty of opportunity to explore beautiful and unspoilt shallow lagoons

is said to be the best beach in all of French Polynesia. Stretching more than two miles along, the sandy-bottom lagoon remains shallow right out to the coral reef.

From Bora Bora it is a short hop back through the Te Ava Nui Pass and through the Pai Pai Pass to the lagoon that surrounds the island of Taha’a, which lies silhouetted against the magnificent Polynesian sunset. Next morning, float amid a rainbow of fish, including vibrant parrotfish, striped snapper, emperor angelfish and butterfly fish.

**Day 14: Taha’a to Raiatea (15 nautical miles)**

Lying in the same lagoon as Taha’a, neighboring Raiatea’s rugged interior is as impressive as its surrounding beaches. The island is home to French Polynesia’s most

sacred temple, Marae Taputapuatea, the focal point of religious ceremonies, where the main shrine was dedicated to Oro, the god of war. Step ashore and hike up the Tapioi Mountain for spectacular views over Raiatea and her neighboring islands.

Alternatively, the less energetic can kayak up the Faaroa River and visit the island’s tropical interior. Here you will also find the island’s horticultural gardens which are worthy of a visit. Spread over four acres, the land is abundant with ylang-ylang and cocoa trees and other tropical species.

**Day 15: Raiatea to Huahine (25 nautical miles)**

Cruise through the lagoon and through the Iriru Pass

and on to Huahine. Formed of two islands, Huahine Nui in the north and Huahine Iti in the south, the island is the perfect place to absorb some culture. Step ashore to the island’s pearl farm. Later on, your crew can organize for locals to perform a special farewell ceremony followed by an evening of Tahitian dance and music around a campfire.

From Huahine, you can sail overnight onboard to Tahiti, or take an internal flight.

**Days 16, 17 & 18: Huahine to Tahiti (88 nautical miles)**

On Tahiti, as with many of the Society Islands, you will find cosmopolitan luxury combined with local culture as many of the world’s top resorts have premises here. There are also countless monuments and ruins, and the natural landscape remains relatively unspoilt. Papeete is the capital of Tahiti and is where you will find most restaurants, bars and markets.

From doing nothing on Tahiti’s beautiful beaches to immersing yourself in Polynesian culture, spending a few days ashore in Tahiti is a must. The best beaches on the island are occupied by the luxury resorts, but they are still accessible. Alternatively, there are many public beaches.

For a spot of culture, and a brief look at the islands’ history visit the Museum of Tahiti and its Islands, the Gauguin Museum or the home of James Norman Hall, author of *Mutiny on the Bounty*. After a dose of culture, dive into Papeete’s pearl shops where you can pick the naturally created pearls for your own necklace threaded or set on site.





From waterfront cafés and restaurants to local bars and clubs, Papeete covers the entire spectrum. Tahitian cuisine blends South Pacific staples with French culinary flair, the specialty dish of the island being the Poisson Cru (raw fish marinated in coconut milk and lime juice). Many of the cabanas on the coast serve simply prepared fresh shrimp and lobster, but for a more sophisticated evening, head to Restaurant Dao for French cuisine, Coco's or Le Lotus for gourmet French dishes and fresh seafood accompanied by spectacular views over the lagoon, or Fare's Restaurant for sunset cocktails. Finish off the evening with live music and cocktails at Le Tamure Hut at the Royal Pape'ete Hotel.

## Yachts for charter

**Tia Moana**, 226'4/69m, 32 guests, US\$350,000 per week. *Contact: Charter Broker Christopher Craven at Edmiston and Company, +377 93 30 54 44, cec@edmistoncompany.com, www.edmistoncompany.com.*

**Seawolf**, 193'/58.83m, 12 guests, US\$180,000 per week. *Contact: Charter Broker Jan Henry at Fraser Yachts Worldwide, +1 954 522 3344, jan.henry@fraseryachts.com, www.fraseryachts.com.*

**Tiara**, 178'/54.27m, 10 guests, €180,000 per week (Tiara will be available for charter in French Polynesia throughout the autumn only). *Contact: Charter Broker Christopher Craven at Edmiston and Company, +377 93 30 54 44, cec@edmistoncompany.com, www.edmistoncompany.com.*

**Asteria**, 160'9/49m, 12 guests. Please enquire for prices. *Contact: Charter Broker James Graham-Cloete at Ocean Independence, +44 1273 831 010, james@ocyachts.com, www.oceanindependence.com.*

**Odyssey**, 134'1/41.4m, 11 guests, US\$125,000 per week. *Contact: Charter Broker Barbara Dawson at Camper & Nicholsons International, +1 561 655 2121, bd@pal.cnyachts.com, www.camperandnicholsons.com.*

**Silent World II**, 120'/36.58m, eight guests, US\$50,000 per week. *Contact: Charter Director Jeni Tidmarsh at Luxury Charter Group, +64 21 777 173, charter@luxurychartergroup.com, www.luxurychartergroup.com.*

**Margaux**, 117'1/35.7m, six guests, US\$59,000 per week. *Contact: Charter Broker Barbara Dawson at Camper & Nicholsons International, +1 561 655 2121, bd@pal.cnyachts.com, www.camperandnicholsons.com. ■*

