

# SOUTH SEA WANDERINGS

**Felicity Goldsmith returns to French Polynesia to explore the lesser known of these paradise islands**



## FACT FILE

The different islands and archipelagos can be combined in numerous ways. A typical 16 night itinerary taking in Tahiti, Moorea and Bora Bora and staying in four star accommodation costs from £2,900 per person, including all flights, based on two people travelling. For further details please contact Felicity on 01869 276 265.



There is an air of anticipation as you step off the plane at Tahiti's Faa'a airport to the traditional welcome of a local band and the placing of a flower behind your ear. Can these paradise islands possibly live up to expectations? Having been here before, I already knew the answer but I was returning to delve beyond the well-known Tahiti - Moorea - Bora Bora route in the Society Islands, hoping to make discoveries within the main archipelago as well as in the low-lying Tuamotu atolls and the remote and fascinating Marquesas Islands.

Bora Bora is stunningly beautiful but I found little of the true Polynesian way of life remaining. I preferred Moorea, with its mix of fantastic scenery and genuine Polynesian lifestyle, and the less-visited wild island of Huahine with its unspoilt peaks, beaches, lagoons and some of the best archaeological sites in French Polynesia. There are also superb options for real castaway experiences dotted around Taha'a and Raiatea.

My next stop was the Tuamotus, the largest archipelago with 76 islands extending over 20,000km<sup>2</sup>. Many of these are low-lying atolls with narrow ribbons of sand and coral stretching around massive lagoons. With nothing taller than a palm tree and the land never more than a few hundred metres wide, there is a feeling of absolute remoteness and the spectacular lagoons which teem with manta rays, hammerhead sharks, dolphins and colourful fish create a true diver's paradise.

The introduction of small amounts of tourism to these picturesque islands has encouraged people to remain here instead of seeking employment in Tahiti, and many have opened their homes to guests. These family-run 'pensions' often operate alongside pearl farms (the main industry within the Tuamotus) and your hosts will be happy to arrange a visit or invite you to the lagoon to help fish for your dinner.

The final part of my journey took me to the wild Marquesas Islands, three hours by plane from Tahiti and well off the beaten track. Rugged and mountainous, they are a sharp contrast to the Tuamotus. The focus here is on history, culture, archaeology, and 'green' tourism, with trips into

the lush tropical interior, hiking, horse treks and visits to hidden waterfalls or deserted black sand beaches. Hiva Oa, the main island in the southern group, is the final resting place of artist Paul Gauguin and singer Jacques Brel. Whilst in the Marquesas I also had the opportunity to visit the Aranui, the cargo ship which services this isolated archipelago, and which doubles as a cruise ship for a small number of guests. This is perhaps one of the best ways to visit the islands.

I was keen to look beyond the superb world-class resorts with their ever-popular overwater bungalows to try and find some of the smaller character properties and pensions. Most of the islands feature a range of accommodation options, each with their own atmosphere, but no matter where you stay you will find the hosts welcoming and friendly, proud of their islands and keen to share them with visitors. Even the international hotels have a distinctly Polynesian feel, with extensive use of local materials and rooms fragranced by fresh hibiscus, frangipani and bougainvillea.

You should never miss a chance to sample the local dishes, often cooked in a traditional underground oven and featuring fish, pork, uru (breadfruit), fafa (spinach) and various types of banana. Such feasts are often accompanied by traditional dance shows or handicraft displays, which are an important element of Polynesian society now being enthusiastically displayed after many years of prohibition.

I left with renewed belief that this is a wonderful destination. Here the flowers bloom all year round, the welcome and the weather are always warm, there are few dangerous animals or insects, and whether you choose to relax or be active the scenery is always luscious. French Polynesia definitely lives up to expectations.

**Felicity Goldsmith**

New Zealand & South Pacific Specialist

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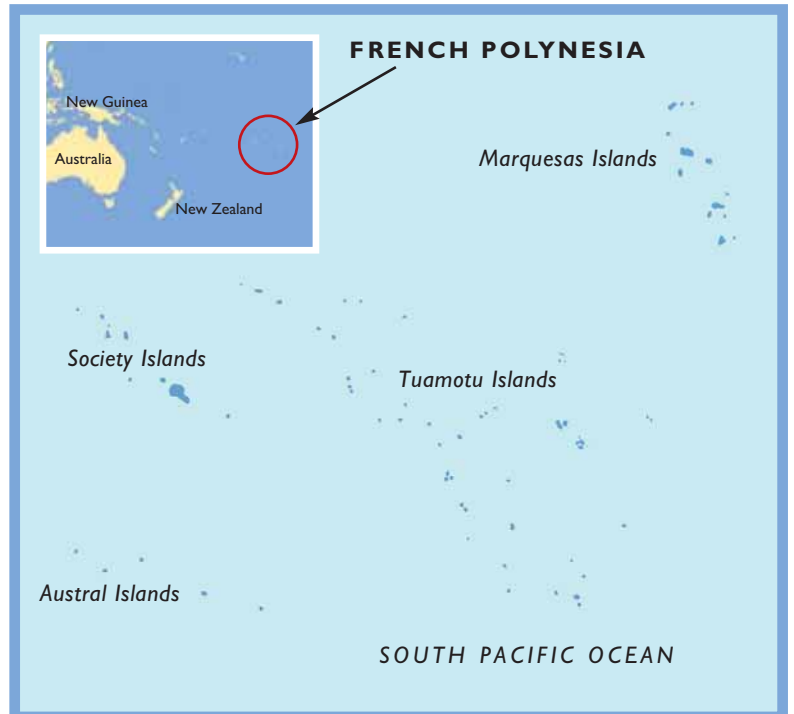
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- 1 The Aranui 3
- 2 Hatiheu village, the Marquesas Islands
- 3 Aerial view of Huahine