

THE TRAVELER'S GUIDE TO INSPIRED PURSUITS

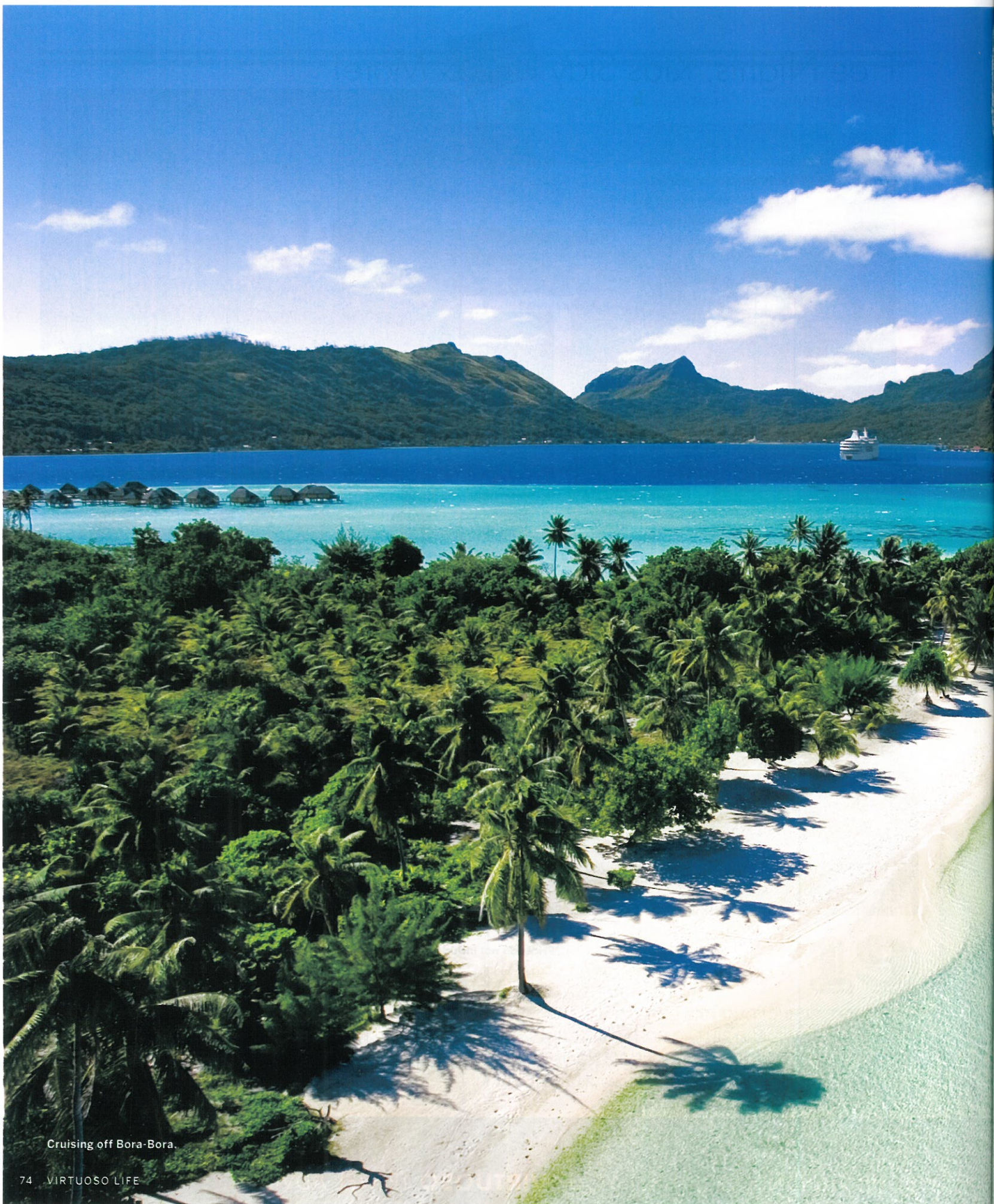
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VIRTUOSO LIFE

\$5.95

WARM WEATHER *Escapes*





Cruising off Bora-Bora.



THE BLUE

A cruise through French Polynesia quenches a thirst for sun, sea, and the finer things. **BY JESSICA MUELLER**

FROM THE BOW OF THE PAUL GAUGUIN,

you can lean on the smooth teak railing and watch the ship's passage between the islands of Raiatea, Bora-Bora, and Huahine. A thousand shimmering shades of blue lap against white beaches. Sky, water, and land are tinged with a golden glow as the first tentacles of sunset reach down over the South Pacific. And, yes, it's practically perfect.

A few days into an 11-day journey aboard the *Paul Gauguin*, I have already sipped rum punch from a coconut while sidestepping sea cucumbers in the water off Paul Gauguin Cruises' private island, come face-to-snorkel with butterfly fish amid brilliant orange corals, and munched fresh pineapple and pomelo atop one of Bora-Bora's highest peaks, nearly blinded by the endless blue stretching in every direction. Up next: Jet Skiing off Moorea and popping in on a black-pearl farm. All this is made possible, of course, by the area's liquid topography.

In French Polynesia, island and sea are more than just contiguous. In terms of how people work, play, eat, and travel, the water is rather like another type of land. The first humans came to these shores by twin-hulled canoes (called *pahis*) probably around 500 BC. Those remarkable seafarers navigated the Pacific using a keen knowledge of astronomy, currents, winds, animal migrations, and other cues from the natural world.

In 1789 – comparatively recently – the British ship *Bounty* met its well-romanticized mutiny near Tonga, and the mutineers returned to Tahiti. The wooden vessel eventually burned off the coast of Pitcairn Island, but its legacy and legend remain, a reminder that, whether by the stars or by compass, ships have been drawn to these shores for a long time.

TODAY, VIRTUALLY ALL VISITORS COME TO FRENCH POLYNESIA BY PLANE.

Once here, however, there's no more comfortable or natural way to experience the sum of the region's parts than by sea. No turboprops or security lines. Just unpack once and float into a new harbor every couple of days aboard a plush small cruise ship built expressly for sailing these waters.

At 513 feet, with nine decks, three restaurants, a spa, an auditorium, and an onboard water-sports marina, the 335-passenger *Paul Gauguin* feels spacious and grand but easily walkable. The ship's size also means passengers never lose their sense of geography. Following trips to vanilla plantations, scuba-diving lessons, or snorkeling with stingrays, most spend time on board watching the world slip by from a poolside lounge chair or dining alfresco on a breezy deck. Even indoors,

Opposite, top to
bottom: Denizens of
the Polynesian
shallows and the
Gauguin's pool deck.

a window is never far away, and the ocean's sway is discernible. Onboard lectures by naturalists, marine biologists, anthropologists, historians, artists, and other scholars complement the views.

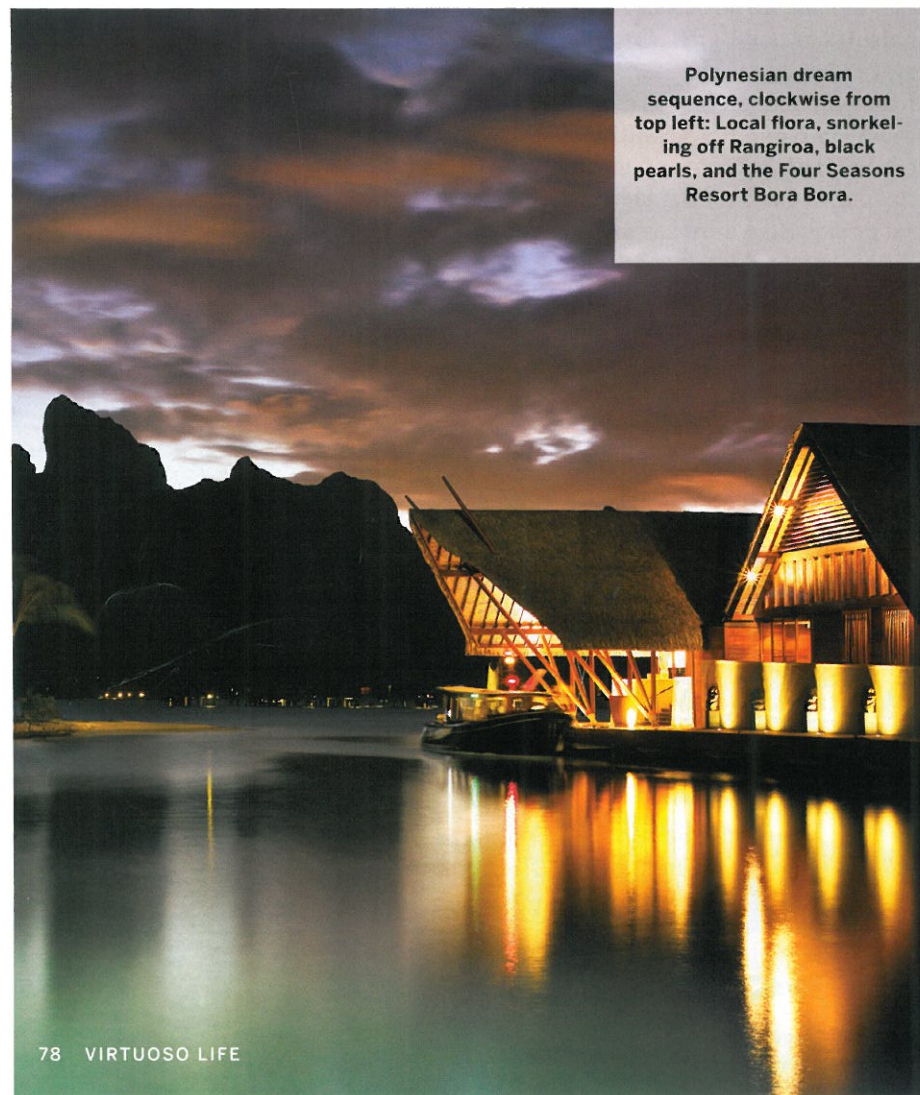
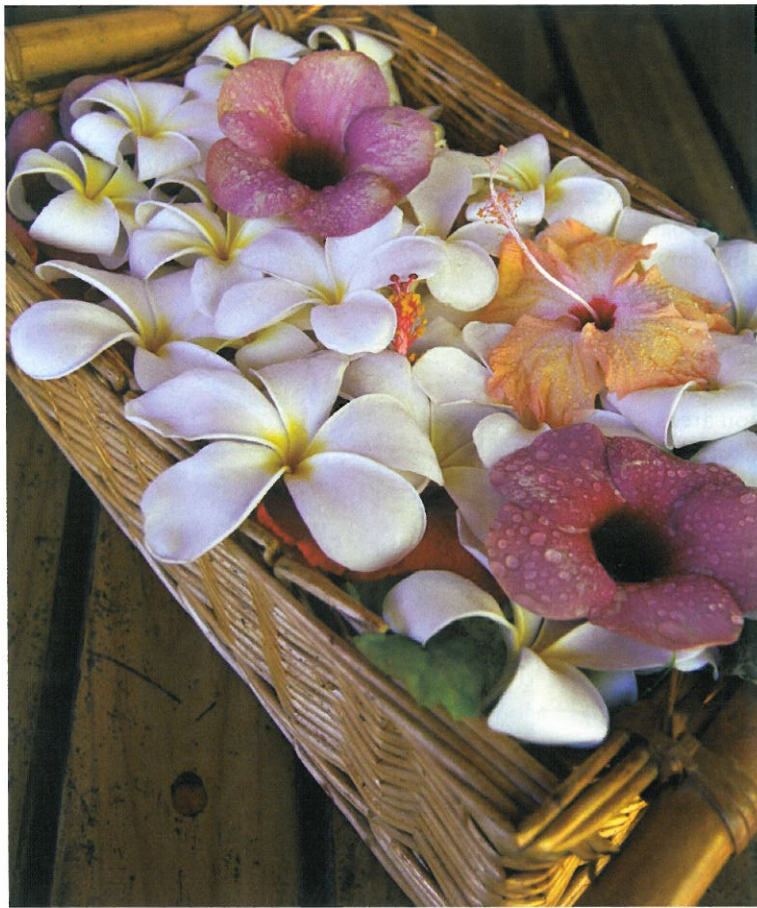
The sea also follows you to your cabin: Along with a queen-size bed, spacious bathroom with a deep tub, sitting area, and capacious closet, my deck-7 stateroom has a balcony. It's big enough for two people to dine together, and anytime I step out onto it, I hear the water lapping against the ship's hull and catch sight of one island or another. Although 51 of the ship's cabins have a window and no balcony, its 115 rooms are like mine – or better. (For a similar configuration but even more space, upgrade from a Balcony stateroom to one of the Veranda suites.)

All of the *Gauguin's* cabins – plus the restaurants, the bars, and common areas – have just emerged from a \$7 million renovation, with new carpets and flooring, refinished furniture, and fresh window treatments throughout the entire ship. The new look is bold and contemporary, with clear blues and sunny yellows that capture the feel of the islands and the water.

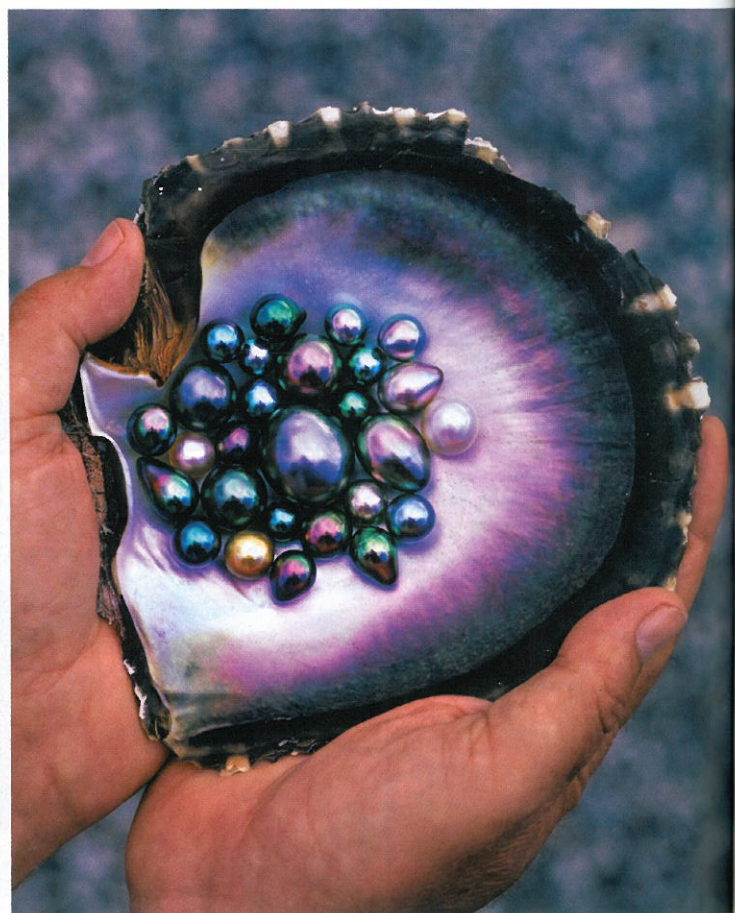
One thing that hasn't changed on board the *Gauguin* is the quality and variety of its food. Chef Jean-Pierre Vigato of Paris' two-Michelin-starred Apicius designed the menu for La Veranda, the ship's top restaurant. Many of his creations are purely Continental, such as asparagus salad with white truffle, or veal with potato béarnaise. Others reflect the Polynesian trend of applying French techniques to native ingredients, such as a chocolate-passion fruit mille-feuille or a delicately gingered tower of *poisson cru*.

As the sun dips below the horizon one evening, a waiter asks if he can freshen my Champagne. I smile and accept, even though it's time to head to dinner for more of everything good in the world: raw tuna, French wine, and an endless blue view of this stunning corner of the globe.





Polynesian dream sequence, clockwise from top left: Local flora, snorkeling off Rangiroa, black pearls, and the Four Seasons Resort Bora Bora.





(WOMAN) KEN KOCHEY, (FLOWERS) SIME/ALDO PAVAN/ESTOCK PHOTO.
(SNORKELERS) DOUGLAS PEEBLES/ESTOCK PHOTO, (PEARLS) LOUIE PSIHOFOS/SCIENCE FACTION/CORBIS

SHIPS HAVE
BEEN DRAWN
TO THESE
SHORES FOR
A LONG TIME.

BLUE HEAVEN GAME PLAN

BEST BETS FOR A FRENCH POLYNESIA GETAWAY.

GETTING THERE **Air Tahiti Nui**

offers nonstop flights from Los Angeles to Papeete – which is closer than you might think, with flight times just over eight and a half hours.

GO Sail through French Polynesia's shallow lagoons and small harbors as only **Paul Gauguin Cruises'** 335-passenger *Paul Gauguin* can. Along with scheduled stops in the Society Islands and low-lying Tuamotos, spend one day during the 11-day sailing on the cruise line's Motu Mahana. *Departures: March 14, May 23, July 11, and September 12; from \$9,495. May 23 and July 11 departures*

feature onboard lectures and dive outings with environmentalist and oceanographer Jean-Michel Cousteau.

Board **Oceania's** 684-passenger *Regatta* to explore the Society Islands as well as the lesser-known Marquesas (including Paul Gauguin's home of Hiva Oa). The intimate ship makes full-day stops at seven different islands, including two days in Bora-Bora. *Departure: April 22; from \$3,799.*

The *Ocean Princess* visits five of the Society Islands plus Rangiroa on **Princess Cruises'** ten-day journey through paradise. There's also plenty to do on board the 680-passenger ship, with a pool and spa, golf practice range, jogging track, and an art gallery and auctions. *Departure: December 18; from \$2,195.*

a mountain and the island's pristine lagoon, is a good spot for guests with nature in mind. The 144-room property features beachside and overwater bungalows, but the garden bungalows are some of the most charming. The property has an on-site turtle rehabilitation center and a dolphin refuge. *Doubles from \$272, including breakfast daily, one dinner for two, and a \$70 beverage credit.*

Tucked away on a private *motu* off the "vanilla island" of Tahaa, **Le Taha'a Island Resort & Spa** has just 45 overwater suites and 12 villas. Le Taha'a can't be beat for privacy, and its expansive coral garden offers some of the area's best snorkeling. *Overwater suites from \$780, including a bottle of Taittinger Champagne on arrival, breakfast daily, and one 30-minute massage per person.*

The 13,000-square-foot spa at the 91-villa **St. Regis Bora Bora Resort** is set on its own private island, providing an added layer of bliss. Following Cyclone Oli last year, a renovation gave the 44-acre property resanded beaches and new species of fish in the "Lagoonarium." *Overwater villas from \$1,000, including breakfast daily and discounts on airport transfers and spa treatments.*



Overwater respite at The St. Regis Bora Bora Resort.

STAY Located on a private *motu* (small island) in the famously beautiful Bora-Bora lagoon, the **Four Seasons Resort Bora**

Bora is a classic teak-and-thatch Polynesian escape. All 100 rooms and suites are overwater bungalows, with an additional seven villas on a stretch of semiprivate beach. *Overwater bungalows from \$800, including breakfast daily and a \$100 spa credit.*

The **InterContinental Moorea Resort & Spa**, located between

Dive into the endless blue during **Tahiti Nui Travel's** four-hour guided snorkeling expedition off Bora-Bora. A private speedboat conducts travelers from one site to the next, covering the must-do "Aquarium," sites for viewing manta and eagle rays, and a secluded coral garden, where the only company snorkelers will find are denizens of the deep. *From \$583 for two people, including boat, guide, diving instructor, beverages, and equipment.*

(ST. REGIS BORA BORA) KEN KOCHET, (LE TAHA'A) ANNIE MARIE MUSSELMAN



Jet lag, be gone!
Le Taha'a's spa.

ADVISOR TIPS

"Don't miss **La Villa Mahana** on Bora-Bora, where owner Damien Rinaldi Dovio creates stunning prix fixe menus featuring local ingredients and traditional fare. The restaurant only seats a handful of guests and will provide transportation to and from any destination on the island. Reservations are required.

"The *Paul Gauguin's* **best suites** are deck 8's Veranda class (with butler service); the forward cabins on that deck are very quiet and private. Also, the Owner's Suite on deck 7 (room 701) has a large veranda and superb space for entertaining."

— Gary Johnson, Seattle VI


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