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Just me in Tahiti

by Jenny McIver

As the ferry passes between the breakers of the Vaiare Pass and I get my first look at Moorea's stunning lagoon, I immediately realize why I left Tahiti for the solitude of its sister isle. The distance between islands may be only 12 miles but arriving at the ferry port in Moorea is like entering another world. Ringed by a coral reef enclosing a narrow lagoon, Moorea boasts hues of translucent teal I'm not sure I've witnessed in all my globetrotting days. This is, quite possibly, the most beautiful place on earth.

I had arrived in the bustling town of Papeete, Tahiti late the night before with two goals in mind: 1) enjoy a few days of R & R to celebrate the end of an arduous trip around the world; and 2) to experience Polynesian island life from the balcony of my own Bali Hai-style overwater bungalow. After spending my first night in relative chaos on the island of Tahiti, I was more than ready to move on to the real object of my affections ... Moorea.

As the ferry docked, I knew I had made the right decision. Leaving Tahiti for the seclusion of this nearby gem was a no-brainer. Though lavish French Polynesia is a known budget-buster, I decided to splurge on a rental car so I could explore the

island on my own schedule. Moorea is much smaller than Tahiti, only 36 miles around the perimeter coastal road; easy to traverse in a single day with your own wheels.

I arrived at my hotel, the Hilton Moorea, in no time and was swiftly escorted to my "spa bungalow," half over the water and half over the beach. The lagoon beneath my bungalow was a brilliant crystalline blue and alive with darting tropical fish and brightly colored coral. Moorea is believed to be the inspiration for James A. Michener's mythical isle of Bali Hai and is also considered to be the birthplace of the legendary overwater bungalow. As the story goes, the trio later known as the Bali Hai boys came to the island from California in the 1950's. They developed several hotels and are credited with dreaming up the idea for the signature hotel rooms over the lagoon. To this day, the islands of French Polynesia are known worldwide for this exotic style of accommodation.

When I enter my bungalow, it is all that I dreamt it would be and more. From the viewing window in the floor (known locally as "Tahitian television") to the private dock allowing direct access to the lagoon, this was truly a unique experience. Tiare

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and plumeria flowers placed discreetly throughout the bungalow gave it the scent of a luxuriant garden. Though the bungalows are not large, every inch of space is efficiently utilized and each is luxuriously well appointed. It was my own little slice of heaven in the middle of the South Pacific.

The star attraction of the Hilton resort is, without a doubt, the lagoon. Extending for what seems like miles in every direction, it is a 4ft-deep dazzling aquarium filled with vibrant coral and tropical fish. In fact, the water is so clear you can see the fish just as well from your deck as from underwater with snorkel gear. It would be easy to spend days snorkeling, kayaking or simply walking around in it and that was, by far, the most popular activity. The convenience of your own private dock to enter the water—complete with snorkel gear and a freshwater shower—made it almost impossible to stay out of the lagoon. But who would want to? I spent as much time as I could there but eventually had to tear myself away to explore the rest of the island. After all, I did splurge on a rental car.

I took a drive inland to the Belvedere "lookout point," the island's highest point accessible by car. The views were breathtaking and definitely worth leaving the lagoon. Next, I hopped back on the coastal road and took a self-guided tour around the island stopping to appreciate every flawless view. I wrapped up my day with an afternoon dip in the lagoon and a Tahitian sunset viewed "Michener-style," with a tropical cocktail from the balcony of my own private bungalow. It was just another perfect day in paradise.

While French Polynesia is, without question, one of the world's ultimate romantic destinations, I found it to be ideal for the solo traveler as well. There are few resorts in the world where you can attain the kind of indulgent solitude offered by an overwater bungalow. No neighbors and no communication with the outside world if you so choose. It was the ideal place to wrap up my travels and an isolated refuge to which I already long to return. ✈

To read more from Jenny McIver visit RTWin30Days.com