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SOME ENCHANTED CRUISE

A charter sail through the Society Islands of Bora Bora and Tahiti casts a magic spell

Bora Bora
Taha'a
Raiatea
Huahine

SOCIETY ISLANDS

Moorea
Pacific Ocean
Tahiti

and taking a four-wheel drive tour of the mountainous interior, where we got to swim beneath waterfalls and sample native fruit fresh off the trees.

After a scenic 45-minute flight from Tahiti we arrived on Raiatea early in the morning of the starting day of our charter to meet up with our shipmates, who all had differing land itineraries, and were met at the airport with fresh floral leis. The beauty of French Polynesia is found in the people as well as in the landscape. They are attractive, proud and happy, always extending a friendly *ia orana* (good day) with a warm smile and *mauruuru* (thank you) after every purchase.

It didn't take us long to provision in Uturoa, Raiatea's main town, load up the boats and set sail for Taha'a for our first night aboard our very comfortable catamaran. This first passage was perfect for getting used to our Sunsail 444 as Raiatea and Taha'a share a reef fringed lagoon, and in less than two hours we were at our first overnight mooring in Haamene Bay.

Approaching Taha'a from leeward, the sweet scent of vanilla and copra enticed us. Nicknamed "The Vanilla Island," Taha'a produces three-quarters of all of French Polynesia's vanilla, about 25 tons per year. Like other members of the orchid family, vanilla grows in the shade. And, as we learned on a tour of these family-run plantations, it is a labor-intensive operation. Each of the mature vanilla flowers must be fertilized by hand since the insects that normally pollinate these flowers are not found here.

Copra, the dried coconut from which coconut oils are extracted has been the trade staple of French Polynesia since the days of Capt. Cook. Mostly done on a small scale, copra drying racks are found throughout these islands.

The waters of the Bora Bora lagoon are crystal clear, left. The cat anchors in the Bora Bora lagoon beneath Mount Otemanu, the island's highest peak, below. The crew relaxes during a passage, below left, with the author at the helm.

French Polynesia was heaven on Earth, with its warm crystal-clear waters, sheltered anchorages, turquoise, reef-protected lagoons, palm-fringed beaches with cloud-tufted mountain vistas, reliable tradewind breeze. Even the names of the islands were magical—Tahiti, Raiatea, Taha'a, Bora Bora. Every sailor dreams of sailing in the South Pacific, but in reality, very few of us will ever have the opportunity to sail our own boats there. Add to that our desire to put a cruising catamaran to the test and the idea for a spectacular vacation was born.

As lifelong monohull sailors, we have been intrigued by the new cats and were considering one for our future cruising plans. Having only experienced them on short sails off of Florida, we wanted to see how they handled in more aggressive seas and experience living conditions aboard. When choosing a destination from

our bucket list, French Polynesia was our first choice. The big cat that we wanted to experience could comfortably accommodate four couples with four staterooms and four heads. When we asked some of our old sailing buddies if they wanted to join us cruising, we not only had four couples, but seven. We needed a second boat.

We chose to charter with Sunsail out of Raiatea in the Society Islands. The islands of Taha'a, Bora Bora and Huahine are all within an easy day sail of each other with the longest passage about 25 nautical miles. Although one-week charters are more common, we decided on two weeks to give us greater flexibility and a more leisurely pace.

All international flights to the Society Islands arrive on the island of Tahiti. We spent a day in Pape'ete, the capital and largest city in French Polynesia, visiting the fascinating central market,





Quiet and with very few tourists, Taha'a provided us with a good introduction to our cruising grounds. Here we enjoyed a four-wheel-drive tour and, in addition to learning about vanilla farming, we visited our first black pearl farm. French Polynesia is noted for its cultured black pearls. The lagoons were dotted with small pearl farms, often just shacks on pilings remotely located on the edge of the reef. The farmers were happy to demonstrate the skill required to produce the lustrous, colorful pearls.

We discovered one of the most beautiful snorkeling spots we would encounter on our trip on the northwest side of the Taha'a lagoon, off the north end of Motu Tau Tau. We anchored in a dozen feet of water, took a short dinghy ride to the beach and walked to the west before entering the water where a gentle current carried us over and through an amazing coral garden, rich with a diversity of colorful fish, live corals and giant anemones.

From Taha'a we enjoyed our first offshore passage to Bora Bora, with its dramatic mountain profile beckoning in the distance. Excitement grew as we approached the famed island and we began to see the sparkling turquoise water of its lagoon up close.

Every sailor should visit the Bora Bora Yacht Club, a crossroads of world cruisers, and our timing proved perfect. As we enjoyed our cold Hinano beers, tropical drinks and an lovely al fresco fish dinner on the dock, we watched the full moon rise over the mountain.

We arranged to pick up one of the moorings off Bloody Mary's, a well-known restaurant located just past the main town of Viatape at the south end of the island in Povai Bay. The moorings in the Society Islands are often found in 80 to 100 feet of water due to the steep drop off from the shores of these volcanic islands—certainly not easy anchoring depths. While some moorings are marked private, most are either placed by the charter companies or local businesses and restaurants that waive the fee in return for your

patronage. Upon stepping onto Bloody Mary's sand floor, there is a shoe check and a large iced table for displaying the local fish of the day—a true over-the-top tropical restaurant experience.

From here, a short dinghy ride to the southern end of Motu Toopua brought us to a snorkeling spot loaded with friendly, colorful fish and all varieties of corals. As we experienced at all of our anchorages, the end of each day brought out the outrigger canoes in every variety, color and size, in a spirited race, a wonderful way that the younger generation is keeping their traditional culture alive.

Even though it is the most touristy of all the islands we visited on our charter, the natural beauty and landscape of Bora Bora, highlighted by its exquisite lagoon and ever-changing views of its distinctive mountain peaks, far outweigh the countless over-water bungalows of the pricey resorts that claim a good portion of the coastline, prohibiting access to the public.

Our sail from Bora Bora back to Taha'a was another catamaran learning experience. The 20-mile course put us directly into the southeasterly trade winds that piped up into the 20-knot range. Our two identical catamarans headed out the Bora Bora pass at the same time. On our boat, where we were all experienced monohull sailors and racers, we set a full main and jib, but found that after we cleared the protection of the reef we couldn't sail much closer than 50 degrees off the wind and maintain any speed as we crashed into the active seas. After our first tack found us farther from Taha'a than when we started, we rolled up the jib and tried motorsailing with just the mainsail, before we gave up and dropped it, motoring directly toward our destination.

Meanwhile, the crew on the other boat, captained by Michael, an experienced catamaran sailor, never set a stitch of sail. They pushed both throttles down and arrived two hours earlier than our boat. That is how cruising catamarans go to windward.

Another exciting passage came a little later in our trip between Ra'iatea and Huahine. This windward leg, with winds gusting to more than 30 knots, had our two hulls diving into the tradewind-generated swells. This was just one of the numerous times that one of us would declare, "Imagine what this would be like in a monohull?"

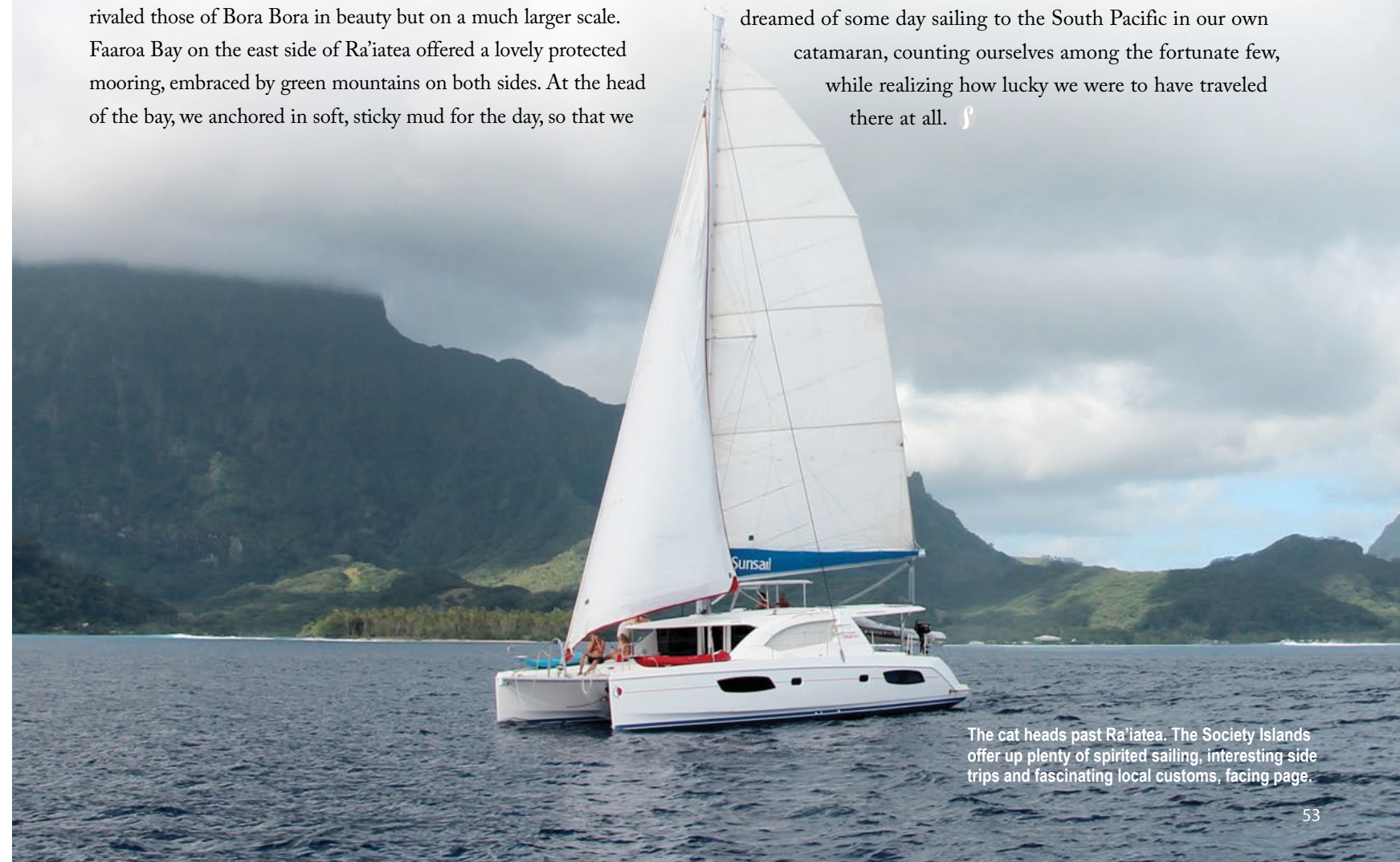
We found Huahine to be the least developed of all of the islands we visited. Greeted by dolphins soon after entering the lagoon, we anchored at the south end of Huahine Iti, (the southernmost of this two-island archipelago) off of one of the best beaches on the island. From there we rented a car and explored this unspoiled and genuinely Polynesian island with its beautiful mountain vistas, deep bays, good snorkeling, interesting marae (pre-European religious sites), ancient stone fish traps that are still being used, and 5-foot-long sacred blue-eyed eels. The sleepy, block-long main town of Fare boasted the most amazing big-box-sized grocery store with a public dock across the street. The Huahine Pearl Farm provided an outrigger canoe ride across the lagoon to its thatch-roofed building, shingled with oyster shells that is perched on pilings in 6 feet of water at the edge of the reef. The front side of the dock dropped straight down into 80 feet of deep blue lagoon. Inside the shop were displays of hundreds of loose and mounted pearls for every budget.

Back on Ra'iatea, after a much less boisterous passage, we circumnavigated this majestic island, exploring the lagoon rimmed with high, steep mountain peaks laced with waterfalls. The mountains rivaled those of Bora Bora in beauty but on a much larger scale. Faaroa Bay on the east side of Ra'iatea offered a lovely protected mooring, embraced by green mountains on both sides. At the head of the bay, we anchored in soft, sticky mud for the day, so that we

could adventure up the Faaroa River, the only navigable river in French Polynesia. We explored the river in dinghies and kayaks snaking our way a mile and a half under a canopy of trees, bordered by banana, papaya and pineapple plantations. We learned to tell time by the wild hibiscus trees—at 3 p.m. every day they began to drop their lovely golden flowers. These perfect flowers dotted the water surface every few feet as they flowed gently down the river to the bay.

Ra'iatea is the second largest of the Society Islands and manages to take care of a good number of tourists (mostly from France) without losing its genuine nature. Its traditional Marae Taputapuatea temple is the most important in French Polynesia and the spiritual center of the Polynesian religion. Uturoa is French Polynesia's second largest town. It's a bustling little place with two large grocery stores, a busy harbor (where it is also possible to bring in your boat for provisioning), and an interesting covered market selling produce and local handicrafts. We were lucky enough to be there at around the time that they celebrate Mothers' Day for which they set up a fabulous, additional handicraft market under a tent on the main square. We watched the women weaving pandanus leaves into elaborate hats and lovely handbags. There were homemade crafts that these islands are famous for, including monoi and tamanu oils for skin and hair care, shell jewelry, wood carvings, handmade ukuleles and colorful cotton dresses.

We reluctantly left at the end of the charter, having thoroughly enjoyed our catamaran experience. The allure of French Polynesia had cast its spell. On our long journey back to Florida we dreamed of some day sailing to the South Pacific in our own catamaran, counting ourselves among the fortunate few, while realizing how lucky we were to have traveled there at all.



The cat heads past Ra'iatea. The Society Islands offer up plenty of spirited sailing, interesting side trips and fascinating local customs, facing page.