

## TRAVEL

Bali Ha'i remains mythical, but French Polynesia still charms

# ELUSIVE PARADISE

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Rays are a common sight in the southern Pacific Ocean around French Polynesia.

BETH PARKS  
PHOTO  
A pair of Polynesians play a native song.



WALTER KOPPLINGER  
PHOTO  
A clown fish frolics in the sea.



Blame it on Rossano Brazzi. Brazzi played the role of handsome French planter Emile DeBecque in the 1958 film "South Pacific." He charmed Navy nurse Nellie Forbush into giving up everything to live with him on a verdant hillside in French Polynesia during World War II.

And when he crooned "Some Enchanted Evening" to her, I knew I would give everything up as well if he were singing it to me.

I was an idealistic teen-ager then, full of bright dreams and romantic fantasies. Just one short year after seeing the movie, I headed to Washington, D.C., for nursing school and life in what became known as the Kennedy era.

It was the mid-'60s when my husband was sent to Vietnam. Within a few months Uncle Sam begged qualified operating room nurses to volunteer their services. With Brazzi's dubbed songs ringing in my ears and the powerful magnet of adventure tugging at my naive brain, I followed my husband into war.

That part of Vietnam in which I served was nothing like French Polynesia. Cu Chi was brutally hot, flat and — thanks to the effects of Agent Orange on what had been a peanut plantation — almost completely devoid of vegetation. The mass casualties that inundated our dusty little M\*A\*S\*H hospital left precious time for other things.

But dreams of paradise die hard, and I vowed I would someday visit the South Pacific. It finally happened this April.

April is the beginning of autumn in French Polynesia, a group of tiny islands positioned south of the equator and north of the Tropic of Capricorn. You'll find it south of Hawaii, west of Chile and east of Australia. Its flecks of land, along with the islands of Melanesia and Micronesia, lie sprinkled across the vast region of the Pacific known as Oceania.

It is here that I looked for Bali Ha'i, the mythical,

mist-shrouded island of romance and intrigue suggested by James Michener in his novel, "Tales of the South Pacific."

If you are like most Westerners, your vision of paradise coincides with the reality of French Polynesia. It includes white sands, palm-fringed beaches, knife-edged peaks, cloud forests, lush tropical vegetation, and lagoons that range in color from ice blue, cobalt and azure to turquoise and molten emerald.

You'll find no winter here, no poisonous snakes, no venomous insects, and no animals that will harm you. However, you'll find beautiful people who, in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, are "God's best, at least God's sweetest work."

Can you picture brilliant orange hibiscus or scarlet bougainvillea? Or snowy white star-shaped tiara, a type of fragrant gardenia laced into garlands or worn over the ear? They adorn the islands.

Would you take pleasure in the heady scents of jasmine, ginger or sun-warmed vanilla? Their perfumes fill the air.

Do you like to snorkel or scuba dive? You'll find a dazzling array of tropical fish and mollusks along the bright coral gardens and barrier reefs. Or perhaps you'd rather swim with a stingray, a marine cross between a friendly puppy and an animated portabella mushroom.

Care to sample the mangoes, coconuts, bananas or ripe, salmon-colored papayas? You'll find them en masse in French Polynesia, fresh, juicy and ripe for the taking.

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## Bali

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The problem with paradise is that when we find it, we also help to destroy it.

Explorers in the 1700s such as Captains Cook and Bligh, the latter of "Mutiny on the Bounty" fame, found paradise when they sought profit. But they introduced measles, influenza, pneumonia, smallpox and other diseases to which the islanders had no resistance.

Sex-hungry sailors traded iron for women's affections to the extent that they lacked nails from which to suspend their own hammocks. They left syphilis in their wake.

Whalers exchanged weapons for food, encouraged prostitution and

built stills to produce alcohol. Alcoholism still remains a problem for the island people.

Missionaries in the 1800s put an end to the natives' dancing, indiscriminate sex and the singing of certain traditional songs. Church attendance and silence on Sundays became mandatory, and long, hot, Western-style clothes replaced loose-fitting pareus better suited to the weather.

Americans used the island of Bora Bora as a supply base in World War II to thwart Japan's movement into the Pacific. The GIs left behind a flock of light-skinned children, along with rusted guns that still sit high on the mountainside above the bay.

Time continues to engender change. Today, tourists sip cocktails at Bloody Mary's or lounge at mod-

ern resorts that bear such names as Sofitel or Club Med. Fishermen tend to abandon their outrigger canoes in favor of cable TV and cars for which, a few short years ago, they had no need.

If paradise itself is elusive, so is Bali Ha'i. Some say it is Bora Bora, the island that author James Michener called the most beautiful in the world. Others say it is nearby Moorea. Still others claim it is Aoba, far away in Melanesia. No one really knows for sure.

You led me astray, Rossano Brazzi.

I found neither paradise nor Bali Ha'i in French Polynesia, but I enjoyed the search.

Beth Parks lives in Corea. For more of her photos, visit [www.geocities.com/tomsruises](http://www.geocities.com/tomsruises).