

ADVENTURE AWAITS —

French Polynesia: the tropical paradise every cruiser dreams of, and longs for. Or is it just an over-hyped, over-crowded, over-priced destination that will leave you looking for something



ALL PHOTOS ALENE D. RICE & BRUCE BALAN

Traditions run deep in French Polynesia. Both men and women wear tattoos proudly. Aboard 'Migration', a new friend, Pautu, plays his uke.

else, a real paradise?

Our year in French Polynesia is winding down as we sit at anchor in Bora Bora waiting out the *miramu* — reinforced SE tradewinds caused by a big high passing to the south. We'll visit one last island, Mopelia, 100 miles to the west, before our final *au revoir* as we head to the Cooks, Niue, Tonga, and New Zealand.

We're hunkered down aboard our Cross 46 tri *Migration*, as 40-knot gusts tear over and around the island's hills, and the occasional rain squall makes us jump to close the hatches. This downtime gives us a chance to look back on our year here and, we hope, come up with a few useful tips for those planning on crossing the big blue puddle.

Don't Miss . . .

French Polynesia consists of more than 118 islands and atolls. You could spend years cruising here. Unfortunately, unless you arrange for a long-stay visa before leaving the United States, Americans are only allowed three months. A long-stay visa is something we highly recommend, but since most people don't go that route, we'll assume you only have three months. What shouldn't you miss?

1) *Anaho Bay, Nuku Hiva, Marquesas* — Unless you choose a southern route via Easter Island or the Gambiers, you'll probably arrive in French Polynesia in the Marquesas. You, and hundreds of other boats. Sure, it's great to visit with everyone, compare stories of the crossing, and buy some fresh veggies, but get out of town — be it Atuona on Hiva Oa, or Taiohae on Nuku Hiva — as soon as you can. Experience some of the lesser-visited anchorages. It's surprising how many you can find within a short sail of bays chock-a-block with boats.

Baie d'Anaho, on the north side of Nuku Hiva is our favorite. Soaring cliffs and sculpted peaks, fine protection from the trades, a population of only 10 to 20 friendly Marquesans, and the only coral reef in the Marquesas make it a hard place to leave. Manta rays and turtles swim through the bay. The water clarity isn't great but the quality of the coral makes it worth a snorkel every day. The hike along the "mango trail" to neighboring Hatiheu provides fantastic views, and all the mangoes you can carry. Yes, there are mosquitoes and no-see-ums, but that just comes with the territory. Remember to go slow as you approach the shore — the reef lining the beach pops up sooner than you think it should. Even with plenty of warning you'll see boats make speedy U-turns as they suss out the anchorage.

2) *Tumakohua Pass, Fakarava, Tuamotus* — We met a small French boat that spent four months diving dozens of passes in the Tuamotus. Their favorite, and ours, is Tumakohua: Fakarava's south pass. If you have dive gear, you're good to go. If you can't get friends from another boat to follow your bubbles in the dink, tie a 100-foot line to it and tow it along. Wait for the incoming tide when the wind isn't too strong. Start outside the pass and stay a bit to the right as you drift over the amazing coral carpet. Follow the bottom to about 70 feet and remember to keep your cool — and your eyes in their sockets — when you find the two hundred schooling grey sharks.

If you don't have your own gear, you can dive with one of the two outfits that work out of the *pensions* on the *motus* (islets) near the anchorage. If you don't dive, snorkel the pass. You'll still see eagle rays, sharks, and thousands of fish. You'll want a wetsuit because when you finish, you'll head right back out to do it again.

3) *A Week (or Two) Alone in the Tuamotus* — Fakarava is a popular atoll;

great for diving, but not for being alone. There is simply nothing that compares with spending time by yourself anchored in aquamarine waters off of a palm-lined white sand beach. Choose a smaller or less-populated atoll: Katiu, Kauchi, and Tahanea are all quite nice.

Wherever the wind is coming from, that's where you want to head. That usually means the east or southeast. Tacking through the lagoon usually makes for great sailing with steady winds and flat water. Just go in good light and keep a constant and sharp eye out for *karenas* — the large coral heads that dot the insides of the lagoons. They're easy to see as long as the sun is overhead or behind you. Find a *motu* that looks inviting — *motus* are islets that line most



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reefs. Then search for a sandy spot as free from coral heads as possible, and drop the hook. Spend your week swim-

Tacking through the lagoon usually makes for great sailing with steady winds and flat water.

ming, snorkeling, spearfishing, collecting shells, exploring the outer reef, cooking the fish you catch on a fire on the beach, and getting rid of all your tan lines.

4) *Coral Garden, Ilot Tautau, Taha'a, Society Islands* — Some of the best snor-

keling you'll find outside of the Tuamotus is at Taha'a. You won't be alone as this is charter boat heaven, but never mind. Hundreds of species of tropical fish, gorgeous coral, only 3 to 5 feet of water, and the peaks of Bora Bora rising on the horizon. Go on the end of the incoming tide for the clearest water and the extra foot of depth.

5) *Get to Know the Polynesians* — Yep, it can be tough with the language. But you had all those weeks on the crossing to study your French tapes, right? Learn a few words of Marquesan or Tahitian. Be friendly. Smile. Shake hands. Kiss cheeks (right first, then left). Share what you have. Invite new acquaintances aboard. Take them for a sail. Ask to go fishing with your new friends. If you are

around during the *Heiva* celebrations in the middle of July, plan on being in a small village for some great dancing, food, and camaraderie.



Bruce, about to enjoy a free lunch. If you could live on mangoes and bananas, you'd never starve in the Society islands or Marquesas.

Don't Forget. . .

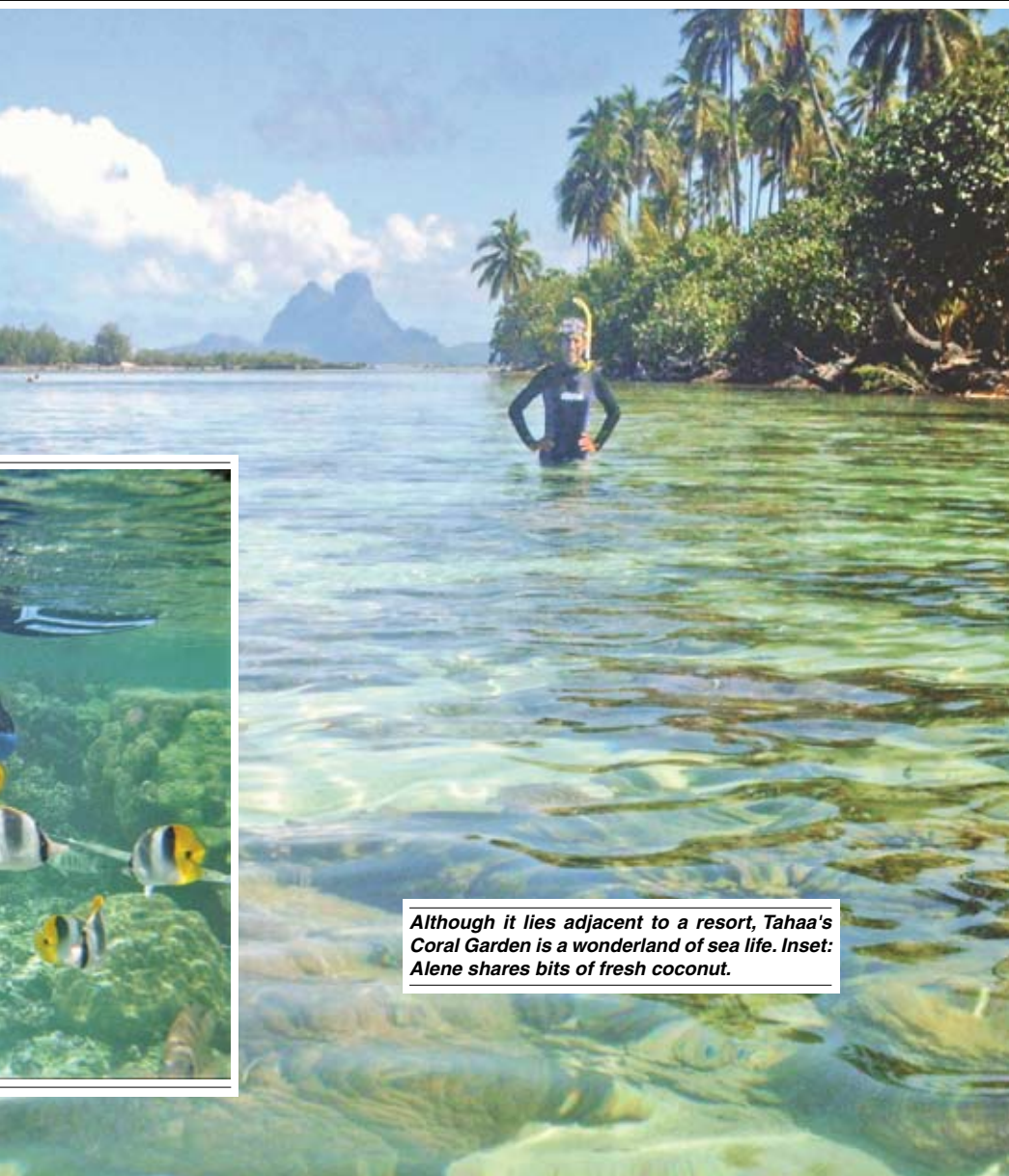
We made lists, read articles, talked to other cruisers. Still, there were a few things we wished we had, or had more of.

1) *Provisions* — You won't want to bring more of everything, just those things that are *tres cher* in French Polynesia. Beer, wine and alcohol are heavily taxed. A bottle of Absolut costs \$50-\$70. Snacks (chips, crunchies, nuts, dried fruits) tend to be expensive as well. If you're leaving from Mexico, bring lots of canned Mexican goodies (refried beans, jalapeños, salsa, etc.) so you don't have to go into withdrawals too soon.

2) *Gifts* — Polynesians are big givers. Be careful. If you admire something in someone's house, you may be forced to take it away with you. It's nice to have good stuff for trading and to give as gifts. Sunglasses, flip-flops, perfume, nail polish, fishing gear, rope, surf shorts, all come in handy. Save your pencils and school supplies for farther down the line; the French have created a well-supplied school system in French Polynesia.

3) *Engine Oil* — It's expensive, if you can find the kind you like to use. And don't forget transmission oil and outboard oil.

4) *Fish Book* — If you like being in the water and enjoy knowing what you're looking at, get a couple of good South Pacific reef fish identification guides. They won't ensure you'll figure out what that crazy, orange-and-neon, blue paisley thing is that's nipping at your mask, but guides will expand your knowledge of, and admiration for, these remarkable



Although it lies adjacent to a resort, Taha'a's Coral Garden is a wonderland of sea life. Inset: Alene shares bits of fresh coconut.

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ecosystems.

5) *Plan Ahead* — Time your travel to maximize your time in French Polynesia. Don't leave so late that you can't even spend your entire 90 days before rushing off to get to New Zealand before mid-November. Many skippers think it's fairly safe to arrive in the Marquesas during the cyclone season in February or March — especially during La Niña years. Think about being someplace interesting for *Heiva* in mid-July, or Autonomy Day in late June. It's hard not to be rushed with

only 90 days. Better to really get to know a few places than move around fast and miss the subtleties. If you can swing it, get a long-stay visa (up to one year) in the U.S. so you have all the time you need.

Don't Believe. . .

When we were in Panama and Ec-

uador, we listened to the SSB nets and read posts on the Internet. There were so many opinions and rumors flying around. We started making a rumor list so we'd remember them and find out for ourselves what was true or not.

1) *French Polynesians Don't Like Americans* — We heard this a lot and it

Clockwise from upper left: Tuamotu tug-of-war during the 'Heiva' festivities; Alene strikes a pose with Marquesan dancers; traditional moves; 'Migration' lies in Anaho Bay, Marquesas; all ages dance; hiking always yields grand vistas; Tuamotu kids dive off the tri's deck; javelin throwing contest.



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ALL PHOTOS ALENE D. RICE & BRUCE BALAN

couldn't be farther from the truth. The French Polynesians were welcoming and warm. If kids knew any English at all, they loved to try it out on us — even just counting to ten. If adults could say "Have a nice day," they always would. We heard over and over how locals wished more Americans spoke French so they could get to know them better.

2) *It's Expensive* — Obviously this depends on the exchange rate. Dur-

ing our year here it varied from 72 to 94 Polynesian francs to the dollar — a huge difference. French Polynesia is not cheap, but you can get by quite easily if you don't eat out and don't buy strawberries flown in from New Zealand. Some items are surprisingly inexpensive. You can get frozen Tyson chicken legs for only about 15% more than the cost in the U.S. Look for the red PPN labels on staples like flour, sugar, canned meat,

and milk; these are all subsidized by the government. Baguettes are about 60 cents. One cruising couple complained that they dropped forty bucks at the McDonald's in Papeete. Our solution to that: don't go to McDonalds. In the public market you can get a big sandwich — a baguette stuffed with chow mein — for less than two dollars.

3) *Arrive with Lots of Cash* — Not true. There are banks and ATMs in most towns (although not in the smaller villages), including all three of the ports of entry



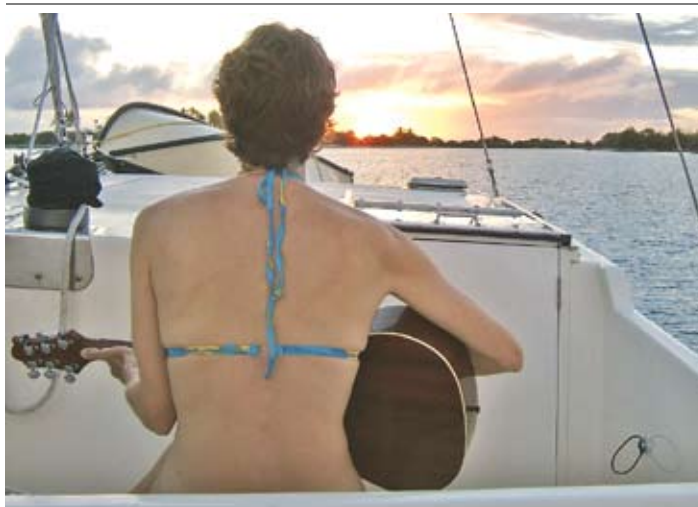
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in the Marquesas. You can post your bond using your credit card (there are fees associated with this), or buy a fully-refundable one-way airline ticket instead. In the larger towns, many grocery stores accept credit cards. If you are planning on spending a lot of time in the less-visited islands of the Marquesas or the Tuamotus, you'll want to get your Polynesian francs in the towns before you head out.

4) *It's Difficult To Anchor*

— It's true that sand bottoms in twenty feet aren't as common as they are in the Sea of Cortez. And there are some spots that are pretty tough; you'll certainly have the chance to learn how to deal with coral heads. But there are still plenty of nice anchorages. And don't rely only on the cruising guides. A popular guide to the Marquesas says never ever anchor at Hatiheu. We spent three great nights there.

Everything changes. The easterlies



BRUCE BALAN

It's easy to find solitude in the Tuamotus. Alene serenades the sun as it descends beyond a motu. Just another day in paradise.

are more northerly in the early part of the year and southerly later on. That makes an anchorage that's perfect in March, awful in August. Look at the charts. Ask other cruisers. Ask locals. Find your own spots — especially in the atolls where you can pretty much anchor anywhere you find good protection from the trades and a nice patch of sand. A lot of chain

certainly helps. Though it's a lot of weight in the bow, we were never sorry to have our 250 feet of high-test 3/8".

5) *Don't Believe Everything You Hear* — Everyone has an opinion, except cruisers — they have three or four. The perfect bay where we spent two heavenly weeks might be pure hell if you're there in a nasty blow. Take everything you hear or read — including this article — with an ocean of salt.

To the west there are thousands of islands waiting for us to explore. Old-timers say that French Polynesia is ruined. The real unspoiled Pacific lies in Vanuatu, or Tuvalu, or Papua New Guinea. . . but that doesn't matter. To get to those places you have to sail right through here. And, unless you like sailing upwind, chances are you won't be back again until you've gone all the way around. So enjoy every minute of it. It really is paradise.

— **bruce balan**



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